

# SUNSPOT LITERARY JOURNAL

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**CHANGING THE WORLD  
THROUGH WORDS AND ART**

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**COVER: The Nesting Troll Quartet / Robin Young**

## Grocery List

Elizabeth Gunn

and casually we mention cornbread  
    though neither of us like sweet  
and casually we mention another coffee  
    although it is getting late  
and casually we mention breakfast  
    although neither of us will eat

and we talk about cornmeal and recipes  
and we talk about moments and thoughts and years  
and we talk about all this like it has been here before

as if today were a warm offering  
as if today were happening again  
as if today were happening again

and someone near us is playing the slots  
and someone near us is playing it safe  
and someone near us is taking a risk

as we count the grains  
as we count the ingredients  
as we count the odds

and casually you mention  
    exhilaration  
and casually you mention  
    presence  
and casually you mention  
    sustenance

while our server asks if the eggs are good  
while our server asks if the toast is okay

while our server asks again for sure

and I look at you  
    in unexpectedness  
and I look at you  
    in delirious want  
and I look at you  
    in more and more

and casually you mention  
    the hour  
and casually you mention  
    the year  
and casually you mention  
    the time

while hour counts the grains  
while year counts the ingredients  
while time counts the odds

and someone takes the unfinished dishes  
and someone takes the unfinished drinks  
and someone takes the unfinished risk

and we hint  
    about our ingredients  
and we hint  
    about our dreams  
and we hint  
    about our spheres

as we casually leave the restaurant  
as we casually leave the moment  
as we casually leave the odds

all the while I yearn  
    to reach for you  
all the I yearn

to feel you breathe  
all the while I yearn  
to taste your mind

as if you were  
infrangible ingredients  
as if you were  
always here  
as if you were  
all the odds

yet somewhere it is happening  
yet somewhere you stand this close  
yet somewhere I find your soul

where you sweetly  
make the cornbread  
where you sweetly  
make me laugh  
where you sweetly  
make delirious love

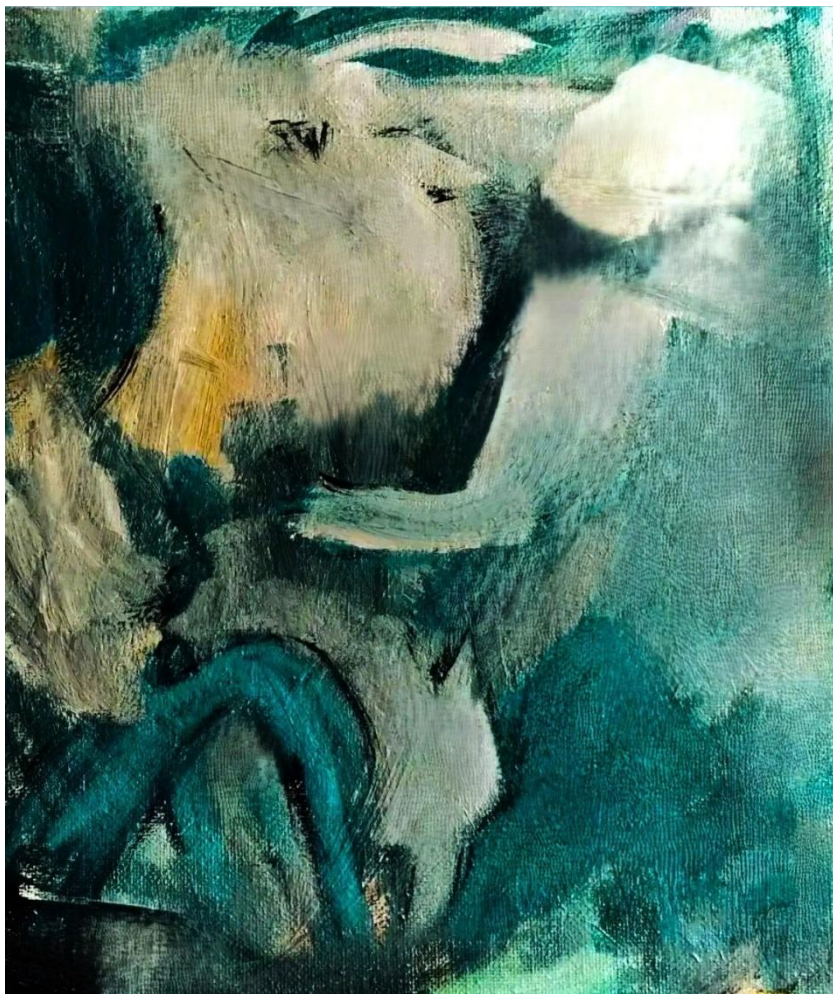
and somehow  
we are here plus there  
and somehow  
we are holding hands  
and somehow  
this is real



**Unbroken** / J.C. Henderson



**The Human Condition / J.C. Henderson**



**X Ray** / J.C. Henderson

## Measuring the Blues

Paul Flippen

THE TATTOO.  
 THE ONE ON HIS HAND,  
 A SAILOR JERRY SWALLOW.  
 CURVES AND  
 CARTOON CLARITY.  
  
 BEAK IN STANDARD  
 BLUE-BLACK-GREEN,  
 REGULATION  
 RESTING HUE  
 OF A WORN TATTOO.  
  
 BREAST FADES,  
 SUNBURN SIENNA.  
 SCISSOR-SPLIT TAIL  
 LINES CURL BACK.  
 DARTING, SLY QUICKNESS,  
  
 FOREVER SOARING,  
 FOREVER STILL.  
  
 SHE CHOSE FROM  
 MARITIME THEMES.  
 HE AGREED.  
 NOT KNOWING,  
 AT JUST EIGHTEEN,  
 WHAT IT WOULD MEAN.  
 ENLISTING  
 IN THIS MAN'S NAVY.  
  
 INK NESTED ON HAND,  
 "SO YOU'LL SEE."  
  
 (SHE LEFT UNSAID  
 'AND THINK OF ME.')



AND HE DOES.

THINKING NOW  
OF FRAGILE WINGS,  
KEPT ON HAND.

HOLDING  
SUBWAY POLES.

IN FLICKERING  
FLUORESCENCE.

BLUE-WHITE LIGHT.

INDIFFERENT  
STATIONS,

PATCHWORK  
PLATFORMS,

SCREECHING BRAKES,  
WALLS OF NOISE.

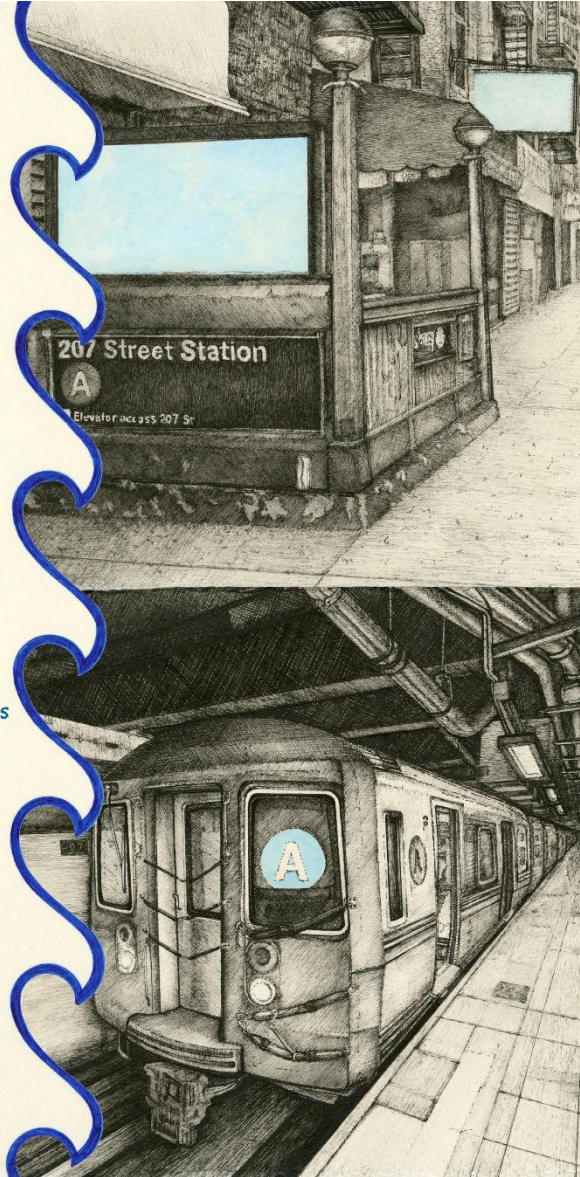
HEAD-DOWN PASSENGERS  
NAVIGATE ASH ISLANDS.

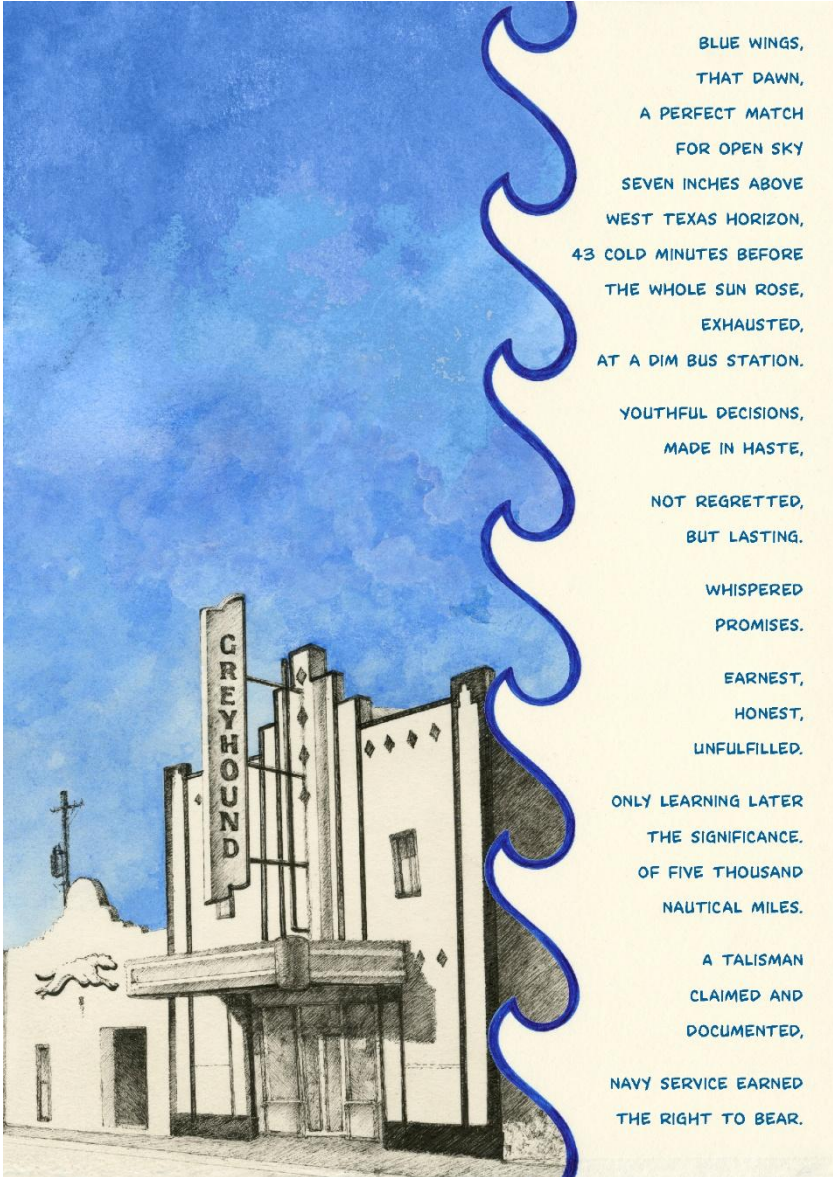
CROWDING CLOSE.  
INTIMATE.  
ALONE.

FADED FEATHERS  
MAPPING THE DAYS,  
AND THE DISTANCE.

TWENTY-ONE YEARS,

THAT MORNING  
WITH HER.





BLUE WINGS,  
THAT DAWN,  
A PERFECT MATCH  
FOR OPEN SKY  
SEVEN INCHES ABOVE  
WEST TEXAS HORIZON,  
43 COLD MINUTES BEFORE  
THE WHOLE SUN ROSE,  
EXHAUSTED,  
AT A DIM BUS STATION.

YOUTHFUL DECISIONS,  
MADE IN HASTE,  
NOT REGRETTED,  
BUT LASTING.

WHISPERED  
PROMISES.

EARNEST,  
HONEST,  
UNFULFILLED.

ONLY LEARNING LATER  
THE SIGNIFICANCE.  
OF FIVE THOUSAND  
NAUTICAL MILES.

A TALISMAN  
CLAIMED AND  
DOCUMENTED,

NAVY SERVICE EARNED  
THE RIGHT TO BEAR.

NOW,  
ON A BLUE LINE,  
UNDER TIDAL ESTUARIES.

DOORS OPEN,  
AND A SEAT,  
EMPTY PLASTIC BECKONS.

HE LEAVES IT  
FOR OTHERS  
MORE TIRED.

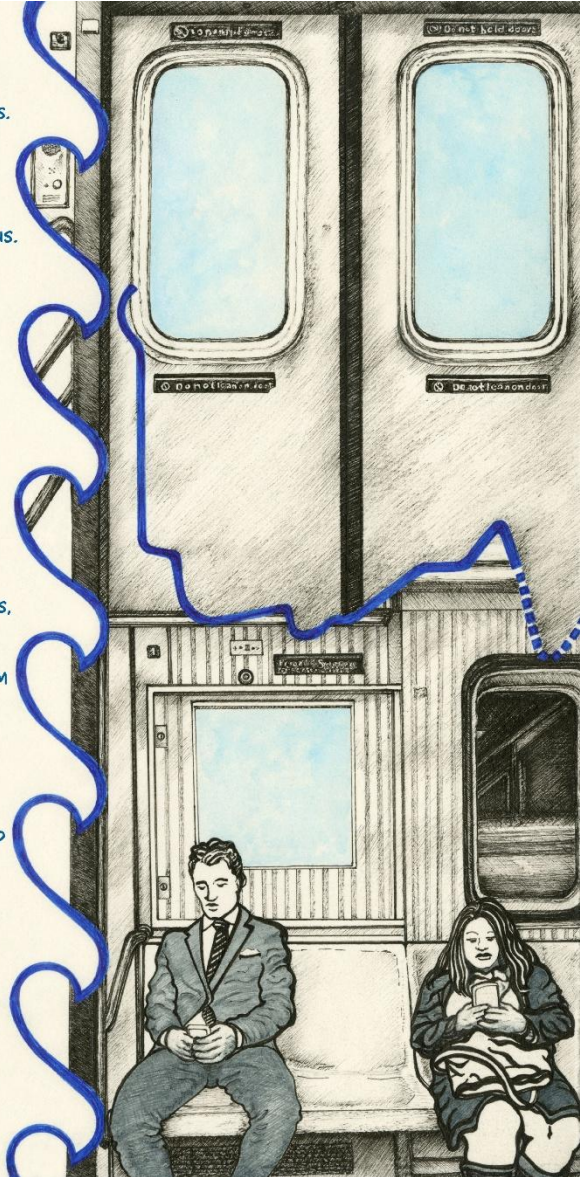
STANDS RELIEVED  
AGAINST THE DOORS,  
IN NAVY-BLUE COAT,  
COLLAR FADING.

FLASH AND FLAP  
OF UNBUTTONED LAPELS,  
MARKING TIME  
IN UNCONSCIOUS RHYTHM  
WITH THE TRAIN.  
HE STANDS CLEAR  
THE CLOSING DOORS.

REVISITS WELL-CHARTED  
THOUGHTS,

MEMORIES  
OF DEPARTURE.  
CLEAR BLUE DAWN.  
BUS DEPOT DIESEL.

HE NEVER HAD  
THE WORDS.





SHE TRACED LINES  
OF TENDER INK,  
"SWALLOWS FIND  
THEIR WAY HOME,"

(5,000 MILES,  
OVER SEAS,  
MATE FOR LIFE.)

A QUICK KISS.  
A HAND RAISED.  
WINDOW GLASS  
REFLECTED

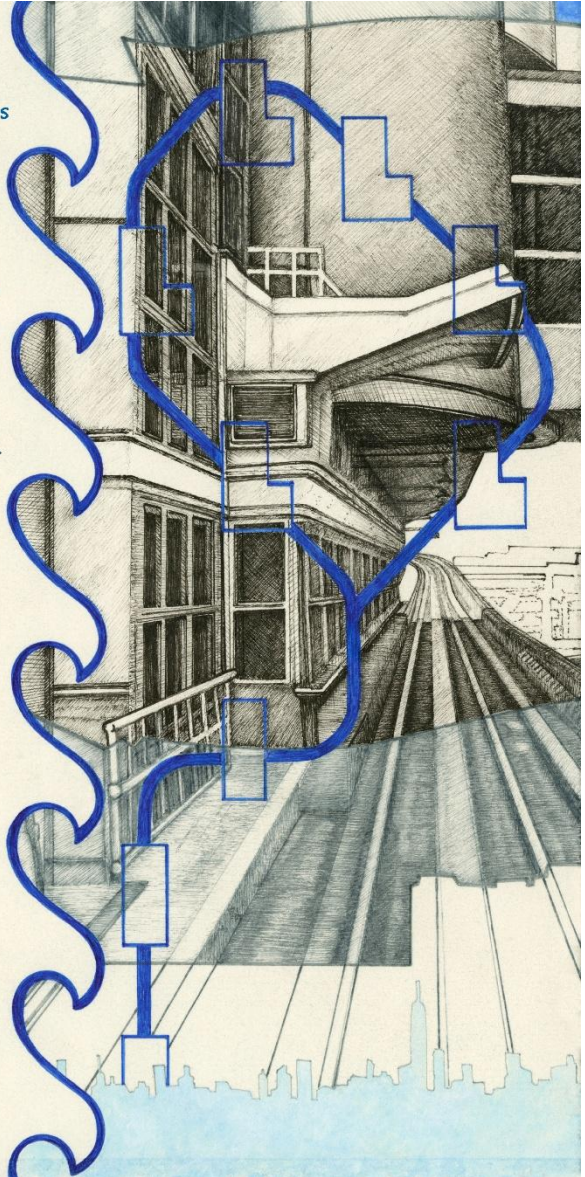
HER SAD SMILE.

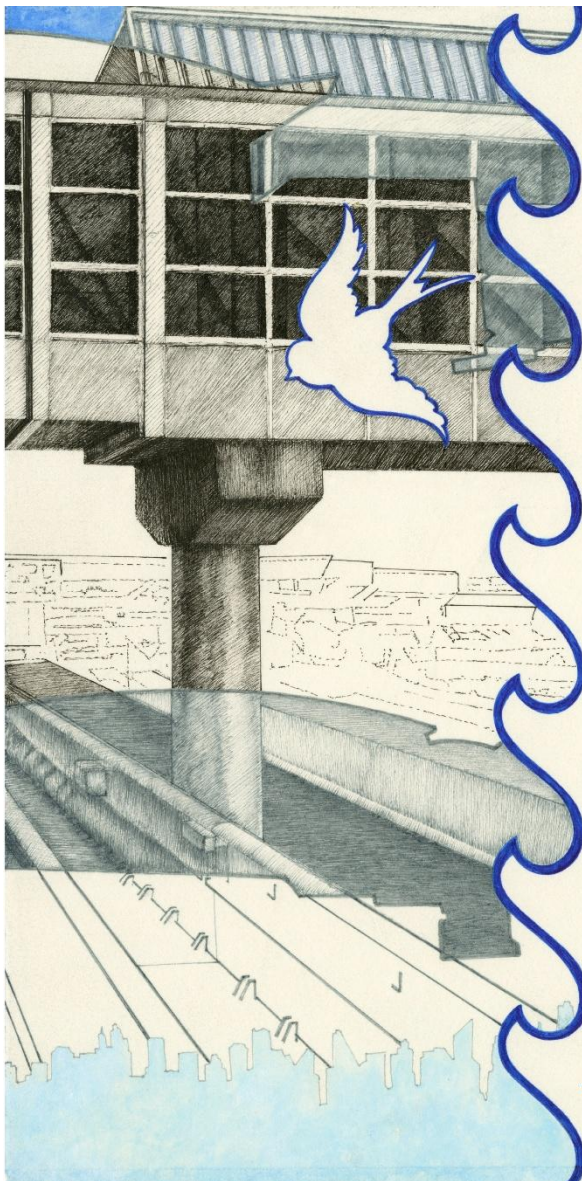
HE WAS UNPREPARED,  
TO SEE THE WORLD  
THAT LOOKS  
THE SAME  
INSIDE ENGINE ROOMS  
AROUND THE GLOBE.

NAVY-ISSUE SOAP,  
PUMPED OUT  
OF GALLONS,  
ERODED INK.  
SCRUBBED AWAY  
WITH SCHEDULED  
MAINTENANCE

AND IMPATIENT  
EXPERIENCE.

HE FINDS HIMSELF,  
DISEMBARKED.  
SUBMERGED IN REUNIONS  
AND DEPARTURES,  
THE EBB AND FLOW  
OF TRAVEL.  
PASSENGERS SCROLLING  
THROUGH TELEPHONES  
AND TIMETABLES.  
IN SILENCE,  
HE LISTENS TO ECHOES.  
LONG DISTANCE STATIC.  
SHORE-LEAVE  
LAND LINES.  
DISCONNECTED  
MEMORIES  
OF HER LAUGHTER  
AND HER SIGHS.  
A BETTER LIFE.  
SOME FUTURE HOME.  
BLOWN OFF COURSE  
BY TIME AND  
APPARENT WINDS.  
HE FOLLOWED  
MIGRATORY PATHS,  
GUIDED BY  
MAGNETIC FIELDS,  
AND SIREN CALLS.





SHE WAS MARRIED.  
AND THEN SHE WASN'T.  
HER OWN SON,  
NOW GROWN AND GONE.

THERE HAD BEEN  
OTHER GIRLS,  
AFTER A TIME.  
A FEW WOMEN  
HE TRIED TO LOVE.

NONE LEFT HIM  
DREAMING OF HOME.

AT AN AIRPORT.

DISCHARGED  
FROM A CITY  
WITH A SKYLINE  
BUT NO HORIZON.

WHOSE BUILDINGS  
OVERWHELM,  
BLUE-WHITE  
IN DAWNING LIGHT,  
ANY GLIMPSE OF SKY.

NURTURING A  
FLEDGLING HOPE  
OF FOLLOWING SEAS,  
AND EFFORTLESS AIR.

HARBORING  
THE SPACE TO BREATHE,  
AND TIME TOGETHER.

**His Eyes Shined Like a Mirror**

Nick Courtright

The butterfly has yet to emerge  
from its cocoon the caterpillars  
wave after wave of them  
chew the leaves down to their nubs

and when I say nub all I can think of  
is shaking the amputee's arm  
when he offers it to me in Vietnam  
so smooth and soft and warm.

He wanted money but I was out  
of my element there in Ho Chi Minh  
City at the War Crimes Museum  
where it was all my fault

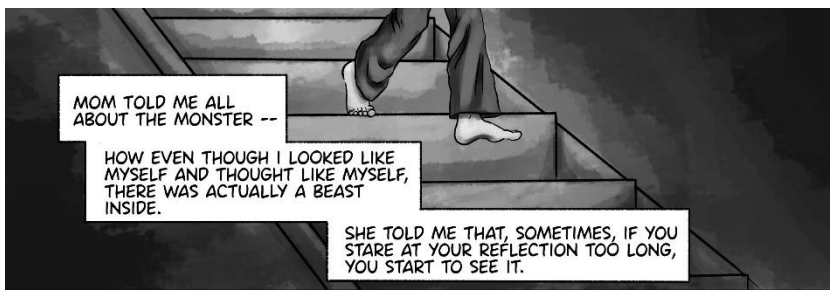
and my wife said it was his eye  
that was most scary as she saw it  
how the color was blue  
where it shouldn't have been blue—

Land mine he said after the war  
1978 and here he is now 2023  
and I didn't mention it was both hands  
gone because how could I

# Reflections

Isaac Grimaldi

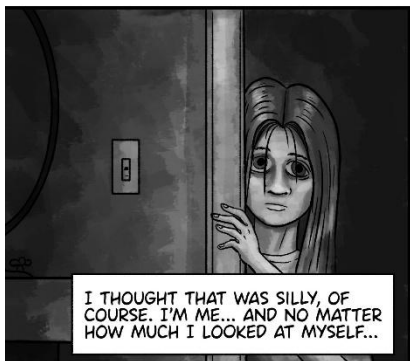




MOM TOLD ME ALL ABOUT THE MONSTER --

HOW EVEN THOUGH I LOOKED LIKE MYSELF AND THOUGHT LIKE MYSELF, THERE WAS ACTUALLY A BEAST INSIDE.

SHE TOLD ME THAT, SOMETIMES, IF YOU STARE AT YOUR REFLECTION TOO LONG, YOU START TO SEE IT.



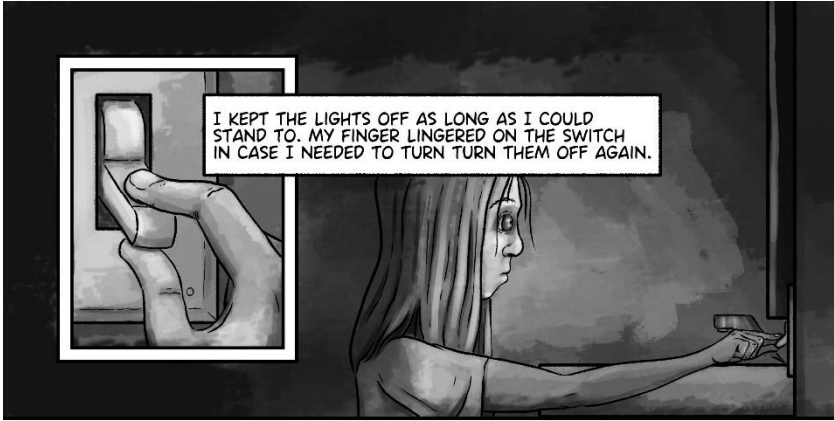
I THOUGHT THAT WAS SILLY, OF COURSE. I'M ME... AND NO MATTER HOW MUCH I LOOKED AT MYSELF...



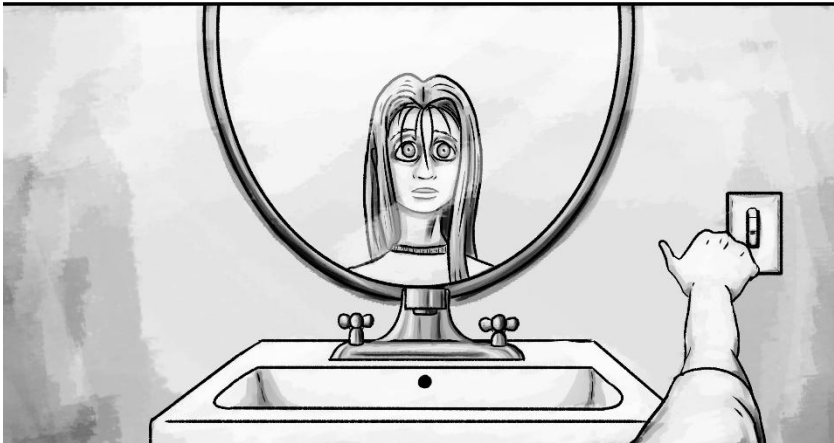
...I WOULD ALWAYS BE MYSELF.

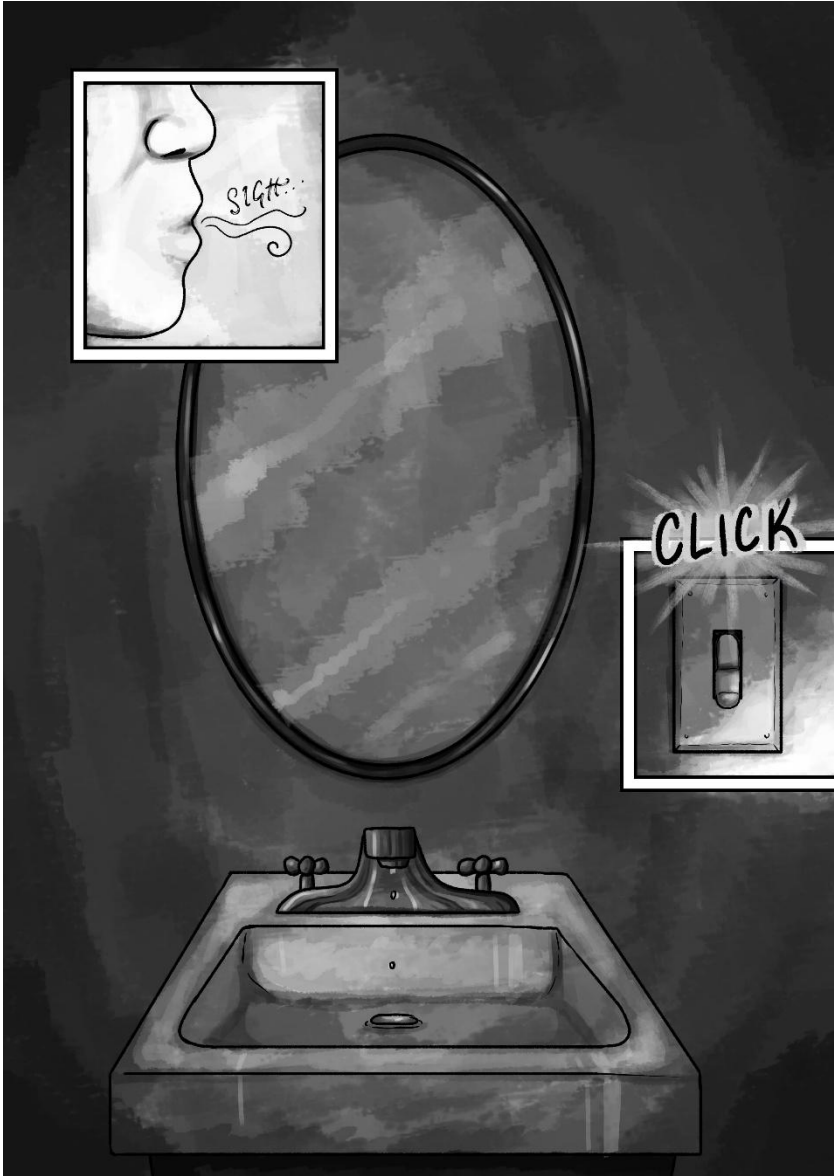


I NEVER TOLD MY MOTHER ABOUT HOW I SNUCK DOWN TO THE BATHROOM THAT NIGHT.



click

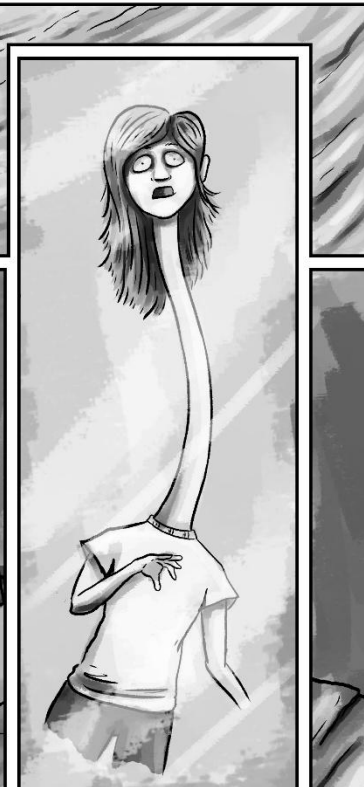
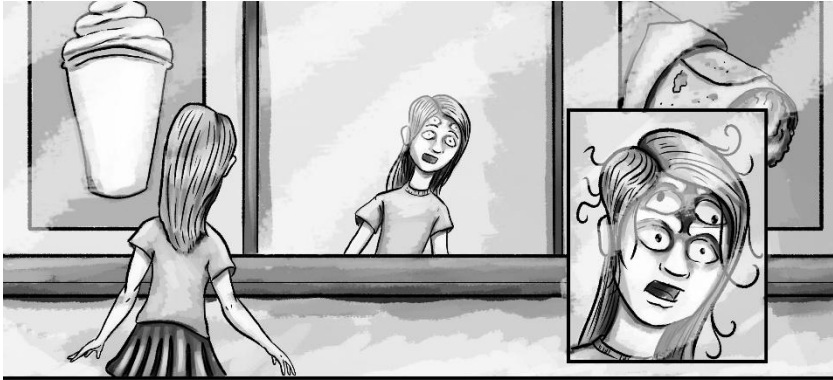


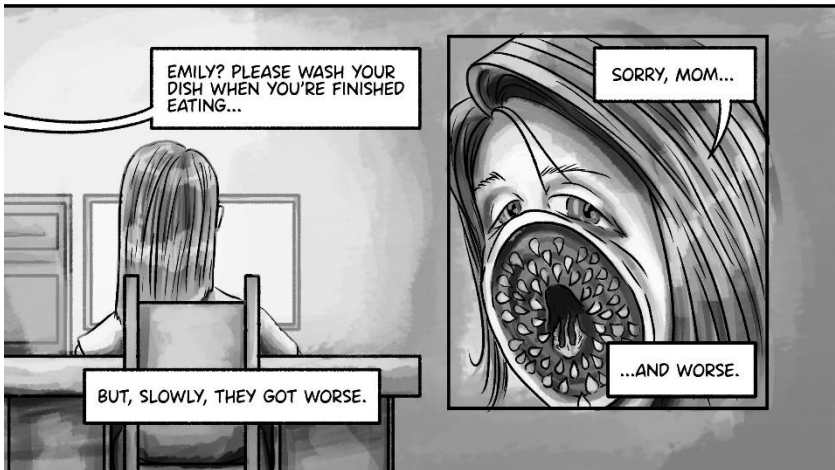


EVEN THOUGH SHE WAS ONLY TRYING TO SCARE ME --  
EVEN THOUGH I KNEW IT WASN'T REAL --  
I STOPPED LOOKING AT REFLECTIONS THAT DAY  
WHenever I COULD HELP IT.



BUT EVEN THEN... SOMETIMES I SLIPPED UP.





I WOULD NEVER HAVE IMAGINED THIS FORM FOR MYSELF.

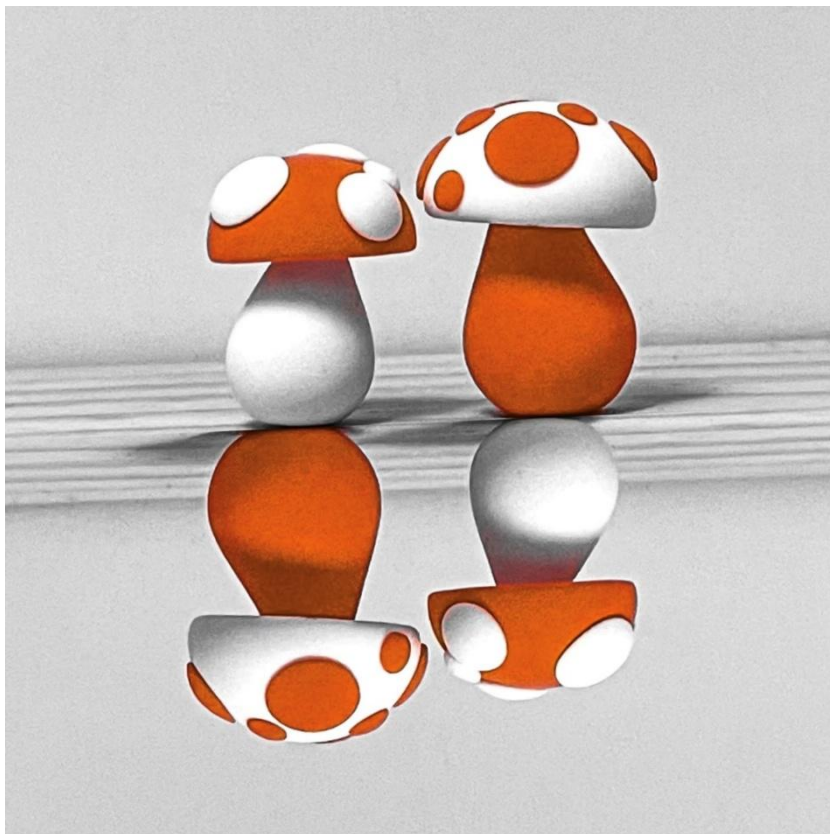








Mushroom jellyfish 1 / Tianyagenv



**Mushroom jellyfish 2 / Tianyagenv**



Mushroom jellyfish 3 / Tianyagenv

## Homecoming

Seán Kelly

(i)

Mother, all that time with an ocean between us—  
the on/off boyfriend I never told you about—  
I never thought I'd come back so easily.  
But here we are—me eating  
discount raspberries at the kitchen table,  
you in a wheelchair in the back yard,  
*Sunday World* folded in your lap.

I always made you wait on Sundays—  
driving in silence,  
creeping in late to the back pew.  
You in that tweed coat.

So now what?

(ii)

Smoking in the back yard.  
It's that time of night,  
closing time in the pub the end of road.  
Laughter, shouts, a glass breaks.  
Someone sings:  
*Start spreading the news ...* then tails off.

Seems almost natural now—fixing your pillows,  
moving a lock of hair from your forehead.

I think often of that eighteenth birthday—  
you frying steak in bare feet,  
me drinking beer at the table.  
I made you watch *The Searchers*.

We ate carrot cake.  
You said the captive angels, in their rags and chains,  
were mine to burn. Or something like that.

(iii)

The skip in the front yard  
is piled high with your junk,  
a harvest for the dead.

I'm standing in your room—  
wardrobe empty, bed stripped.  
All I've really learned  
is that I was wrong about everything.  
Not that it matters—the shadows  
in this place want what they want.

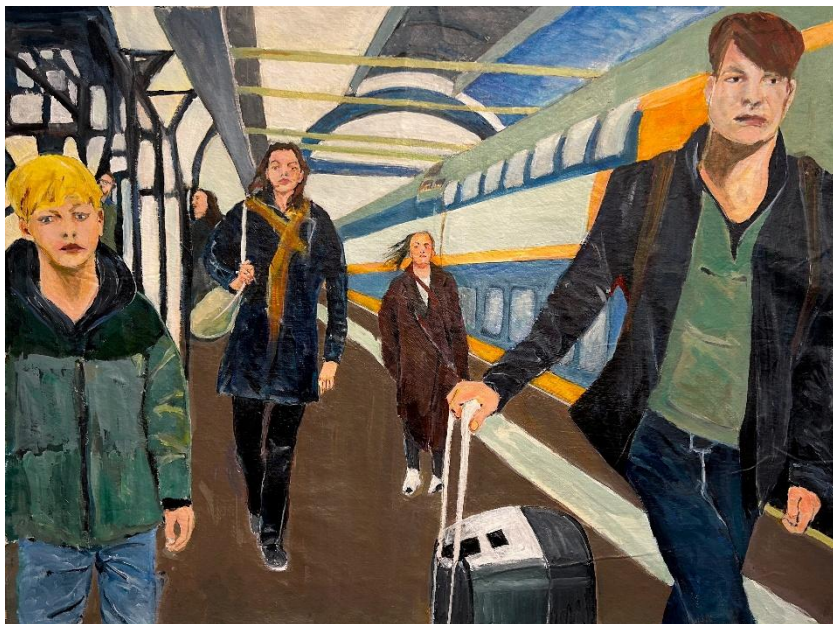
Closing the window, I see  
the stump of the birch tree  
I cut down years ago—  
the only serious job I ever did for you.

I think again of us kneeling  
in that back pew,  
listening as best we could:

*I am the Lord your God,  
I give you saints in glass,  
prayers to burn like money.*



*A Winning Steer / Owen Brown*



**In the Amsterdam Centraal / Owen Brown**

## A Collection of Things About Men I Used to Know

Allison Baker

### Part One

How do you decide if you want to fuck someone or if you just can?

I'm not intoxicated by men, I'm intoxicated by my own intoxication reflected back at me through rising bulges in jeans that are rarely styled well. I'm horny for power just to give it away and resent you for your willingness to take it and not give it immediately back after I promised it to you forever and ever, amen.

I remember everyone's name, mostly, or at least where and why. Men sought out purely for lore are boring when recounted. Fucking a lanky Fin in a wood fired sauna seems like it should generate a good story but it's just friction in a new and exotic location. But I liked how he wordlessly bathed me in cold water first. The rest was utterly forgettable and I left before he finished.

Sex is not power except when it is. Which is most of the time, until decidedly it is not.

I've always wanted to kneel at the altar of contractions. Doling out sweat, saliva, and semen like a benediction.

My temple needs tending.

My collection plate is empty.

Couch locked Holy communion and smiley face flavored balloons on the dance floor.

My favorite break up was with a handsome, suspiciously hairless man with an almost six pack well into his forties and eyes a little too wide set.

After staring bluntly into his third eye and picking a toilet paper fragment off before whispering prayers I found my backbone.

I hated how comfortable he looked on my couch, arms spread across the back taking up too much space. I offered a hand to help him off my loveseat and pushed him to the door.

“You don’t like me enough.”

“Do you want me to like you more?”

“No, I want you to leave.”

I closed the back door leading out from my kitchen, closed the blinds, and turned my music up. I don’t know how long he stood there. I like to think he stayed long enough to hear what I was listening to, to see if it meant something; I’m sure I thought it did.

Five or six years later his most recent ex looked me up and called me. He apparently decapitated a rabbit and left it on her porch. I didn’t get a murdered creature; I was right, he didn’t like me enough.

Once a man left a pack of parliaments in my mailbox after he bungled our first real date: he showed up over an hour late, already drunk, we missed our reservation, and I ended up buying his drinks all night at a sports bar downtown. He had smoked a few of the cigarettes to make room for a short cut, wilted rose. He became my second ex-husband four and a half long years later.

After I took him in like a shaggy, stray, grey dog I found it charming that he would jaywalk across the street to the bar whose entrance faced squarely against my porch. He said he liked the free popcorn he felt entitled to, almost as entitled as he was to my groceries and bed that he fell into naked the Sunday afternoon he stumbled across the street from the bar to my doorway. Vampires only come in if you invite them.

After every ounce of tequila vacated my body the same way it entered I tried to seek solace in my bed only to find a man face down in his pasty glory. The backside of an Irish family.

Ever the gentleman, when he rose to find what else was lurking in the back of my liquor cabinet he cajoled me to bed, a woman shouldn’t sleep on her own couch. After spitting simple syrup across my cheap vinyl, rented flooring he lapped at my adductor tendon with the eagerness of a man trying to please 3 inches in the wrong director. I found his ineptitude fascinating but his vocabulary was awe inspiring.

I snuck out without fanfare to teach my 8am class, still too drunk to be properly hungover.

On my drive back I prayed he was gone, although I sped home on the off chance he wasn't, equally excited and horrified by the possibility. It felt good to be drunkenly chosen as the best option across the street from one of the three bars in walking distance he hadn't been banned from yet.

I believe in true love. I believe in destiny. I believe in fate.

I mopped the sticky simple syrup residue loudly at noon until he rose from slumber like a pale waning moon. When I made him fresh bread he saw the love spell work sprinkled in with every grain of sea salt. But boxed pancakes couldn't be love years later.

Do you ever wonder if we were cursed from the beginning? If your soul—on some cosmic level—remembers what I confessed to you in bed, either just before or just after the tendon-prodding? Maybe your brilliant brain was too soaked in tequila to hold it, but your bones knew.

Our limbs, sloppy and tangled, like teenage girls whispering secrets at a slumber party. I told you I was in love with your friend. The one with the cool detachment, the curated aloofness. The one who never looked at me like he saw anything worth wanting.

A year before, I tried to kiss him on a dance floor after enough vodka Red Bulls to pretend it hadn't happened. When he didn't kiss me back, I decided to hide the shame in more mouths. If I kissed everyone, it became a quirk, not an awkward incident.

I swapped a kiss with a leather-clad dominatrix for a cigarette outside the club, then brought it back to our little trio like some kind of peace offering. I went back for another one. Not like a drunk girl who kissed your friend. Just a drunk girl who kissed everyone.

I'm grateful to you for your family's Catholicism—for bringing me closer to Mary Karr instead of God.

I once cried, all snot and sadness, in the middle of the pew during Father Paul's sermon on husbands being good to their wives. I like to think you bought me a donut after. Sometimes you'd spend too much money at Hy-Vee if I was good. But usually not, and usually mine.

You threw me into the end aisle for getting the wrong pancake mix.

I got both.

Both were wrong.

The desire to show love through pancakes was wrong. I hated you. Pancakes were the best I could do. Cooking isn't love. Love is love. But I didn't have any to spare—only pancakes.

The organic cereals heard my whisper, asking you not to do that in public.

Optics are very important.

The stray bullet that broke the window a week earlier wasn't the last straw, just a quaint little story about my chain of thoughts: four feet to the left would have saved me a lot of trouble—do I have enough in the bank to replace the double pane—now we'll fight for a week about needing to move, but not before sharing a plate of bad nachos on the couch beneath the ricochet hole in the plaster.

Maybe we slept in the same bed that night. I can't remember. I was busy trying to find love or pity or both.

I pretended to sleep with my jeans on and boots next to the bed. You did carry my suitcase to the truck and cried crocodile tears, the last time I saw your face you asked me three questions: were you cool? Was your dick big? Was the sex still okay?

I lied poorly with deep sighs, disgusted by how small you seemed.

The cats and I left in the morning after finishing your Harvard Fellowship application—the one you had no chance in hell of landing.

After ghostwriting your diversity statement beautifully, but decidedly in my own voice, a love letter to the man you should have been.

After one last romp.

After one last trip to CVS, eleven hours away.

I crossed myself in the car as I gulped.

Flushed your last chance at legacy down the drain.

I had a very stiff drink with very poor gin and a squeeze from a plastic lemon to settle my nerves. Later, a nip from the bourbon kept behind Grandpa's toolbox for a decade after he died. Holy Grandfather's cheap bourbon—transubstantiated into liquid courage,

just as he intended. Liquid courage helped slide my grandmother's ring sheepishly off my finger. I'd begged my mother for it after he proposed to me while I was crying in my bed. I can't remember what made me cry. Probably something about drinking or money, those were usually safe assumptions over what started the water works in the early days.

I paid to fix the vintage settings by sliding my own credit card to the jeweler as he looked anywhere but at our eyes. I signed the receipt without looking up either.

Actually, it's really quite feminist to pay for your own engagement ring. I was a trail blazer. I pioneer. A liberated woman. Equality feels great. I'm putting my Gender Studies degree and countless copies of Bitch Magazine to good use.

Mom says I can wear it again for my next wedding. We don't need to tell anyone.

I wish I were more of a drinker, but I can't crawl out from under my own mythology.

You called your other ex-wife on your way to the booby hatch and told her I was having a complete psychotic break.

I was too busy sneaking pumpkin into the Thanksgiving macaroni and teaching the girls to shuffle bridge with the old UNO deck.

Maybe it was insane to be normal.

Mom and I came back to the house on Christmas Day to perform an HGTV exorcism.

She got out of the car with wasp spray, hoping to blind your beady little ice-blue eyes.

I hope the new one trims your wild eyebrows. They don't hide the scar you're so insecure about.

Ugly glasses do a better job—I do like the new ones.

If it was me? I'd be more insecure about your collection of varsity letter personality disorders.

You wear them well too.

I still think of you.

I type your name like a prayer into the search bar, waiting to see your résumé swell and collapse under the weight of papers

scribbled and stacked precariously, dusted with powdered sugar from gas station donuts.

Mostly I wait for the day you've spent all my retirement money so I can buy another domain out from under you.

.ORG sounds better anyway.

I thought I fell in love with you smoking cigarettes fully clothed in a small bathtub in a five-story walk-up with a good view of the art museum.

I loved the cigarettes and the contrast in the dark beer bottles.

I used to tell you that you were the best thing I ever found in an alley. That was a lie, my urinal painting pulled from a dumpster 10 years before was always better, even when I did love you. I knew I loved the unattributed painting more. I cherished it more.

Men always hate that painting. But they hate it less than the mammoth photo of a limp dick against milky thighs hanging in my powder room. They hate the painting second most.

You confessed your sins incrementally but waited until my eyes had been rolling back in my head and bass rumbling my chest. When fingers and thumb were unable to coordinate compression enough to fill a water bottle.

I tried to confess my undying love to you on the dance floor.

I tried to convince myself of my undying love on the dance floor.

Mostly I was mad we left early.

In bed after a lazy bump you tried to tell me your true darkness. I was bracing for you to tell me you were a pedophile, you said you weren't, I still think you might be.

Addicted to a drug I had never heard of.

How peculiar and pathetic to get addicted to a drug from gas stations. I respected you more for the conviction to just be a heroin addict, that took commitment, effort, and creativity. You excelled at drugs. Drugs didn't ruin your potential, drugs highlighted your gumption if you wanted it badly enough. Unfortunately you only wanted drugs and whores enough to put your best foot forward.

I'm now skeptical of every man with an affinity to travel to South East Asia. I still suspect you developed a taste for under ripe fruits there.

I googled your photo and decided to seduce you before I arrived. Your callous hands and heart were my Mount Everest. My greatest summit. My story of low mountain conquest.

I tried on every face I had to entice you.

Eighties music video girl with a sudsy bucket and conspicuously wet T-shirt sitting several inches above the waist band of freshly cut off shorts?

Nope, he's too deep for such frivolities.

Dirty farm hand with a mechanical aptitude and a wry smile curled around a cigarette?

Nah. He's older, skilled, and embodied. He knows I only know a few tricks to get by.

Gracefully aging punk with a biting sense of justice?

Definitely not. Too much like his ex? Too intense? Too much trouble.

Nurturing gourmet domestic with enough grilled eggplant dripping with olive oil for everyone plus a neatly packed lunch just for you to take the next day?

Surprisingly, no. Mommy issues? Doesn't want to be mothered? Moms aren't sexy, right?

Erudite academic with an encyclopedic knowledge of Tom Robbins and strong opinions about which is the superior Coltrane?

Closer. He'll never get his chance to flex his intellectual might and no one else appreciates his NPR tiny desk taste in music.

Midnight drinking buddy that would hand you beer after cheap beer while casually and calculatingly nursing just one listening to your sad, sad stories?

Bingo.

So we drank together or I pretended to. Night after night I plied you with cold beers and a sympathetic ear until I straddled you at just the right moment of weakness. You passed out while I was running my tongue up the side of your neck where the three-day stubble caught every crystal of salt and dirt.

I reached to feel if the beers had softened a hickory branch into a pliable willow switch. Your sleepy hand tenderly grabbed my wrist.

I braced myself with excitement and the anticipation before being thrown off of you and fucked on the dirty floor with my wrist pinned over my head, skinned knees to make up a fabricated story about falling in the gravel when people asked the next day. I wrote a thousand possibilities in my head about what bed to sleep in and if I could find the coffee maker in your kitchen to bring you coffee in bed until we slunk back staggering our arrivals so no one would be suspicious.

Instead you gently removed my hand without fanfare. I stood up and announced that it was getting late.

No knowing glances of longing no matter how seductively I draped my bare leg across heavy machinery. No peak over the glasses as I turned pages licking my fingers with intention. No lingering hugs goodnight.

Just as many beers. Just fewer with me.

The less important you are, the longer the passage. The details, the stagecraft, the orbiting extras, the soundtrack are more important.

On our third date we met in the desert.

I sat in the mass produced macrame swing hung at an awkward height with my legs sticking out at strange angles while Carol Cole played on the cheap all in one record player. He was somewhere else inside doing something I found very unimportant.

You will always be on the other side of the world, even if that world is in your own head.

I kicked at sand gathering on the concrete and stared directly into the sun to try to burn my tears away.

I wept because my Venus is in Gemini, my attachment is “disorganized,” and I am my mother’s daughter.

My mother once followed a man to the desert too where she gained a penchant for beaded belts and layered sterling silver bangles.

I got too high and tried to find jack rabbit dens in the yard. Wandering in a circle trying to move the earth faster so this would all hurry up and get to the good part.

Climbing and disappearing behind massive smooth boulders you took pictures like you were afraid I would disappear—which I did—before scolding you for sharing intimacy publicly you were never willing to show privately. I liked being seen even if only through your digital lenses where you keep all your feelings.

If you zoom in on a photo I wonder if you can see the grimace of pain building in my guts. Not my body tearing itself apart from being forlorn but because I had to take a shit and it felt sacrilegious to explode trying to hide beneath a Joshua Tree.

I couldn't laugh or shit for three days.

I pretended to be impressed as you overcooked my eggs one by one with the sluggish pace of a man that never truly worked a day in his life. Dwindling eggs marking how many times we've done this dance where you 'contribute' and I appreciate your decency to make eggs while tiny finger print bruises blossom below my collarbone. I'm petulant and refuse to eat. Not just because your eggs are shitty but I want to reject any offering besides utter devotion.

Watching the timid way you cut raw chicken after cleaning every possible surface twice over that chicken liquid wafted near and poked at it with a fork and a tinge of disgust as it cooked slowly in the pan never with enough heat to brown I'm not shocked by your aversion to sticking your tongue into the depths of a woman.

I should have demanded satisfaction earlier instead I lowered myself spiritually before my knees hit the linoleum.

I was a desert fuck oracle.

On our last full day we visited some hippie alien revival tent. Over-priced kombucha and spring water conveniently located at every exit next to the expensive, ugly earrings I convinced you to buy. You thought I was a gold digger angling for your money, I just wanted to make you waste it and wear the overly feminine earrings yourself as I tried to leech your masculinity like a succubus. The day before I broke your phone screen on accident when your delicate fingers couldn't find the correct orientation or the latch for the top of the massive Jeep. Your fingers always struggled with orienting themselves blindly.

My internal monologue was screaming through the sound of singing bowls and ayurvedic breathing. On the aurally perfect silent square in the center of the mecca I looked again into the desert sun for clarity. He had a heart incapable of love beyond simple niceties, which still felt like a mechanical cold, dead, fish.

Internal fires took a massive intake of air to burn everything down within the confines of the sandy compound. I was determined to chaos. Music and light spanned across the yard, I danced wildly, cackled loudly and burned the leftovers leaving the oven unattended to arm wrestle at the quaint little kitchen table. Refusing to admit defeat. Scientists long struggled to determine when squid were mating or trying to tear each other's many limbs off. I spat ink in your aurora the next day. But not before wandering naked into the dark nearly starless night to soothe my aching muscles in the hot tub you refused to join me in yet again.

In the gentle morning light my astro-projection sound bath experience worked like a bad Alex Grey painting. With a body filled and the transcendental high from gasping to breathe I was a desert fuck oracle. I bored viper holes into the places that hurt the most to touch deep in your soul. Your money, your father, your desires, your phony dreams, your lack of legacy, your wanderlust, your inability to pick up a fucking phone. I spilled prophetic truths telling you how your life would unfold in a raspy voice from a trachea squeezed too tight. My lips moved independently. My eyes never closed. You gave up. My fire sucked all the air from the room leaving you fighting for your own oxygen for once. I will always be a desert fuck oracle.

**On** a circuitous route to the airport I was determined to find genuine human connection.

There was a shy, handsome young man with a new tan cowboy hat and a well-placed dribble of BBQ sauce on his forearm as he tended to the large grill pit. Leaning over the old-timey fence I asked him to light my cigarette for me on the open flame. I leered, sucking on my cigarette watching him work and blushing. He was too timid to meet my eyes a third time.

The waitress and I walked in together giggling and clasped each other's hands as I slipped her cash, apologizing for your shitty tip.

An older man pulled up on a motorcycle to the highway attraction, I jumped from rock to rock asking about his life and travels. Sitting cross legged and spritely I listened to him with rapt attention and the humility of humanity.

I had lost you again metaphorically and literally. Perched like a regal bird halfway up the graffiti strewn boulders, your crown of long, slowly greying locks framed your striking face perfectly. It was hard to stay mad at something so beautiful. Until we tried to scramble down together. Our hands clasped like brothers and I lowered you down before me. You looked at me with the same tinge of disgust you gave the chicken when I asked for help in turn to slide down smooth rock.

I'm, in turn, disgusted with myself for looking for strength within an unending chasm of someone else's weakness.

Turning down a sand road that looked more like rapidly breaking waves than traversable road I sang songs just for me and an excuse to utter more prophetic verses of namelessness aloud to you. Spending my last few hours in this alien landscape alone in the unfortunate company of another.

At the end of the road the sands opened up to a giant boulder that divided both halves of America. One side was ATVs and massive RVs flying American flags, the other pressed closer against the rocks of the cliffs were women in flowing, floral dresses and generators for DJ equipment.

I brought the last of the uneaten groceries and half a bottle of gin to a woman, it would be the second time I clasped the hands of a stranger that day starved for tenderness.

I asked her to tell me everything that was about to happen, what was I going to miss? Joy and freedom mostly. Still holding my hands the desert siren asked me to stay with her before she asked my name. Instead of replying I looked back to you with genuine affection for the first time.

“I will never see that man again”

“Why?”

“Because he will never be able to love me the way I deserve to be loved.”

Gently, she pulled me against her, our arms wrapping around the other's shoulders. “That's okay.”

A slow smile spread across my knowing face. Clarity delighted me. Being right delighted me. I sucked in more hot air and floated to the Jeep.

Uncharacteristically quiet, although I had learned to be quiet here. Smiles and soft laughs expanded and contracted and I skimmed the wavy sand road back to the highway like a speed boat grazing the tops of the waves and destroying someone else's suspension. I refused to share our sisterly secrets and sped with a vengeance toward the airport and the rest of my life without you.

Twelve hours after you boarded with your first-class direct flight ticket north I emerged from the back of the plane, sun speciously high in the sky.

I sat bleary eyed watching my bag go around the carousel over and over moving forward and going nowhere. I wanted to sit in that. Partially too tired to will my legs to move, partially because sitting keeps me in liminal Airport stasis too.

I have soreness in my muscles and tenderness in places less easily soothed to conjure images and meld them into memories to be stored and inspected periodically.

You say you seek magic but I think you've figured out by now I see things—deep in my core. I spoke the truth. I told you this would happen.

I feel mirrored in my own contradictions there: blazing sun yet cool air, hot and cold, hard people hiding soft hearts.

I should have just gone to the desert to find myself with my own truck and my dog. I missed my dog.

## **A Collection of Things About a Version of Me I'm Trying to Kill**

### **Part Two**

*"We tell ourselves stories in order to live."*

Joan Diddion

I'm honest only to the dog.

“I think your mom is depressed again.”

And I just bought a new motorcycle.

I thought I wanted to be softer. That softness would be the key to happiness. That a man could love me if I let myself become a warm cashmere sock.

Growing harder seemed impossible—any harder and I'd become a diamond.

Or, more likely, coke.

(Coal refined into economical fuel through heat and oxygen deprivation. I'm partial to both—oxygen deprivation and the party version of the namesake.)

I ate too many Fritos and sublimated my rage towards the men slipping through my claws by bossing boys around and making unnecessarily biting comments about teenage boys with bad haircuts, worse entitled attitudes, and fake mirrored Oakleys perched atop punchable faces. No booze to blame for my bad behavior and squalid, sober honesty. I'm perfectly capable of being an unpleasant handful while raw dogging reality in the asshole of America. I told teenage girls wearing matching white dresses like mini-Bachelorettes at a high school graduation party the key to happiness was: your own money and no men. I stand by this advice even if I only abide by part of it.

I think I'm only narrowly avoiding a manic diagnosis by not telling the truth.

It was easier to be cool in your twenties but fate often decided early which camp of cool you'd build your legacy.

Option A:

Option A was only really an option if you had a foundation rooted in being at least somewhat conventionally attractive. Once an attractive baseline was determined you had to skew in an equal and opposite measure. A moderately attractive girl needed at least a nose ring and a few bad tattoos to signal she was too cool to care about such frivolities as hegemonic beauty standards. A very attractive girl could dress up as a carnivalesque bearded lady for Halloween to demonstrate

how little notice she gave her perfectly upturned elvish nose, amble pert tits, and naturally fiery hair sprouting from everywhere including her armpits.

After subtly rejecting their innate beauty with one hand and applying a perfect flick of winged eyeliner with the other they must adopt a few quirky traits and accessorize their art school mystique. Cigarettes and fixed gear bikes were a given. A few vinyl records to spin while rolling fat cones on the floor was a popular choice. Displaying your drug addled boyfriends extensive vintage playboy collection was a move for the bold, liberated, and discerning. These girls would scream Dead Kennedy's lyrics while jumping on your bed when you failed to consummate after leaving the dive bar together.

#### Option B:

Ugly girls that refused to shrink their waistlines redefined the unfuckably cool strata. These girls played their acoustic guitars better than the boys, aced their papers on Bourdieu, had port-wine-stained birthmarks, and a curiously extensive knowledge of American serial killers before the advent of true crime podcasts, which they flexed while sitting in the front row of a gender studies class advocating for the other truly abject people of the world.

It was crucial to the ecosystem that Option A girls collected a few Option B girls to absorb their interests and amplified their own cool just with a higher probability of P in V.

Coolness is often stolen valor, once you break up with someone you're free to cherry pick all their good tastes and adopt them as your own. A penchant for punchy New Yorker fiction, the steady hand to perfectly filet a catfish after bludgeoning it to death, a smiley hanging from a bandana to swing against train yard bulls, a passable knowledge of microtonal guitars and Pro Tools. I'm bitter seeing someone ride away on my old motorcycle, I'm sure others are bitter watching me pass their tastes off as my own.

Thirty-seven is an awkward age to be cool, the fibers are woven into bone no longer a fleeting exercise in new costuming but worn, comfortable, and perfectly broken in selvedge denim. At thirty-seven you risk appearing like you're trying too hard to hold tight to youth, effort is and will always be the kryptonite to cool. Cool is easier at forty-seven, everyone else traded thrifted corduroy for Ann Taylor

pleated khakis and blunt bobs. Coolness, like color theory, is all relative.

The third time I bought the same King Crimson LP to replace, yet again, what a man took after I threw him out I didn't even want to listen to it. But I couldn't stand the thought that he was taking my own stolen valor and packing it into a milkcrate. He didn't even own a record player.

Slogging through another decade, watching my ass slowly creep towards the floor and my cool friends elect for comfortable balcony seats and slightly more sensible shoes, I redouble my resolve to hold onto cool through the "trying too hard" phase before resurrecting as cool again but at forty-seven. I'll have to start sliding into option B, unfuckable but also unfuck-with-able.

Can you still be a manic pixie dream girl at thirty-seven? Or are you just manic?

Can you still be a manic pixie dream girl at thirty-seven? Or are you just a little batty from losing the ability to do anything other than exactly what you want?

Can you still be a manic pixie dream girl at thirty-seven? Or are you just a shitty neighbor that plays music too loud with all the windows open so the whole block is the background to main character moments dancing in the kitchen?

Can you still be a manic pixie dream girl at thirty-seven? Or will the neighbors across the alley eventually call the cops when you miss judge your aim and lob another wad of wet clay with a slingshot and hear a conspicuous splat, probably dinging the Tesla parked without a garage. How do they charge their 67k cars with no garage, no EV hookup, and they've got balls to park two in the alley of a working-class neighborhood. I hope they have a few giant bird-shit-looking clay and newspaper splats across the hood.

Can you still be a manic pixie dream girl at thirty-seven? Or are you just myth making in the presence of others not for their enjoyment or character development but so you can revel in your own reflection in their wide eyes.

Can you still be a manic pixie dream girl at thirty-seven?

I want to be a difficult woman. I want to order drinks with exacting precision: Kettle One Martini, bone dry, extra olives. I want to send drink after drink back until it is just vodka with a whiff of vermouth and enough olives to count as an appetizer then only eat half. I want to eat hot wings rabidly punctuating the good parts of a story told in a posh accent by dropping half cleaned wings on a dirty plate.

I want to tell stories about getting cat called well into my fifties and how one mugger stole my purse but the real tragedy was that the wheel of parmesan I bought with my rent money went bouncing down the street and I chased the cheese not the wallet.

I want a loft in a rent-controlled apartment in DUMBO with my studio across the hall. I want a claw foot bathtub in the living room overlooking the Brooklyn Bridge before they built a massive apartment blocking my view but never taking my fire escape to sneak cigarettes on in the garbage scented summer heat. I want orange five-gallon buckets collecting rain from the ceiling to fill my bathtub.

I want to master the Irish goodbye and leave when everyone still wants me there. I want to take black and white photos of the city on the drunk walk home alone.

I want to have a long-term partner that uses the same subway stop but never stays the night. A man everyone knows theoretically exists but curiously never met nor can ever remember his name.

I want wildly expensive shoes and thrifted dresses that house a stray scorpion stowaway from a year spent at a residency in Roswell, NM.

I want to secretly speak Italian and have another life for six weeks once a year and tell stories just because the words taste good in my mouth.

I want to make everyone choke on my success that I wear so gracefully.

I never understood why people would say I am intimidating. I'm just a prickly pear. A little cupcake with frosting that turns your tongue black. But for a moment I wanted to feel like a lady.

Clean the rust and grease off hand hands, take what my mother calls a whore's bath. Put on a casually slutty (thrifed) dress, heels or boots, heels or boot? Sandals. Backwards hat in a tomboyish way to hide the sweat. Just an hour to feel like a lady sipping a beer and watching my dog run around the park. Maybe talk to a much younger cute boy.

Instead I sat on the crone's bench in the shade to indulge in the novelty of the lives of others. The dumpy, grumpy, queer polycule(?) With ancient, half dead dogs in their usual circle. Men staring into phones. One with a whole WFH station—and a wedding ring. A plastic woman in a matching athleisure fit and two tiny teacup dogs with pearl collars. A beautiful blonde giggly woman in a bright red spaghetti strap tank top and perfectly cuffed shorts and some generic man fortunate enough to have her attention. I watched their flirting unfold taking note of how normal people interact. A comment and silence. Chat about the dog. More pauses. Knees slowly turning to each other and comments quickly become a conversation. I stare at the split running up her thigh muscles and touch my own wondering if my legs look the same. Her arms are thinner, her smile is gentler, her laugh is more coy, but her tits are not subtle either.

Another crone joins me in the shade, we instantly share our mutual disdain for the amount of doodles, poodles, and goldens. People do always match their dogs. Our chitchat inevitably turns to men—we aren't obeying the canonical rule of feminist cinema and I don't know her name.

“I don't know why people are intimidated by pitbulls.”

“I don't know why men say I'm intimidating.”

A gun in the first act means shots fired in the second.

Before the beautiful woman and lucky average man exchange phone numbers he heroically hears a cat crying and notes it as odd before offering to buy her another beer, they don't have light beer and she politely declines. My new crone friend identifies the car it is stuck in. Before I know how or why I hop over the chain link fence leaving my beer on the bench next to her sculpted ass.

The hood is open and my moment of girlhood is over, grease covers my arms again, my hand is burning on the engine, little floofy ears stuck at the bottom. I call for action and no men move.

No men own tools, a lesbian comes to my rescue with pliers and screw drivers.

“I’m going to jack up your car and pull your wheel well apart because if this cat dies I’m going to have to kill myself.”

I might have asked for permission but we all knew he was obligated to comply. Orders are barked at no one in particular, people generally do as told.

After much turmoil, distress, heat, grease, and frustration a single kitten emerges and is rushed into the bar for water. I apologize for throwing tools around and ask the spectating bartender for a cigarette, he says he only vapes and says he can ask around.

“The men here don’t have tools, they aren’t going to have a cigarette.”

My back hurts either from crawling around under cars or when I had to help two men dump the cowboy swimming pool after a dog pissed in it. At least I can spend the day recalling how useless men are.

Divine comedy, cosmic timing. The gun reappears for the third act.

My tire is slashed open by poorly placed metal. Insurance has free roadside so I’ll try again to be a princess and watch a man change my tire in the rain.

Tornado sirens rage and I beacon the young man inside. Princesses still have manners. The rain subsides and I implore him to finish the job, his truck is blocking one of my studio assistants in and I’m pretty sure I’m still paying them to be here.

We watch from inside as he raises and lowers the jack. Trying to break my tire free. Running flat on the rim back and forth.

My Valkyries take flight with me outside to survey the situation after I let out too many sighs. He said he used to be a photographer, that was the first warning besides his truck without a job box. Again my hands are covered in grease inspecting his failure. I send one of my Sybils to fetch a sledge hammer while the man in a yellow roadside vest pulls up a YouTube video on how to remove a tire. While he watches his phone we pound kneeling in the water. Tire freed. I give him the dignity of putting the spare on but inflate it myself

as that step slipped his mind. My Three Graces resume our girlhood just a little dirtier than usual giggling in a huddle.

I had my own cigarettes today.

I have a habit of breaking up with men in scenic locations: the isolated beach cottage in Michigan, midsummer in Iceland, at night atop of Stone Arch Bridge, and careening down a desert highway. I look back on the relationship more favorably than when we sit on couches and floors with a pile of laundry between us, both crying or yelling watching as our entwined lives slowly implode.

I gave a sweet man in New Orleans a message in a bottle to hold instead of throwing it into the northern most headwaters of the Mississippi River hoping he would find it four states away where the muddy river emptied into deltas and brackish water opened into the ocean. “For all the love that surely would have been.” He gave me a DVD I never watched.

On Stone Arch Bridge I drunkenly ranted at a man who’s natural scent—while not wholly unpleasant—felt acrid in my nostrils, my head was never comfortable on his pelted chest inhaling him. He had the audacity to ask about my best Christmas as a child while taking in the Minneapolis skyline after leaving a restaurant I couldn’t afford. I snorted. Fuck that, tell me about your worst. His worst Christmas wasn’t even comparable to my worst Tuesday in three weeks. I never went back, but I did learn to recreate the Pappardelle with hare sauce. Hare is quite difficult to find in the cities.

Fifteen feet in the air straddling a welder strapped to a forklift via an emoji. His name never felt good in my mouth, too many letters and formalities. An overly dramatic deathblow meant for the girls to cackle over later.

I haven’t permitted a man to end things with me since I was sixteen and I’ve—somehow—avoided needing penicillin for anything besides strep throat. My ticket is bound to come up any day now.

Slither and strut down a mountain highway past ski lifts closed for the season, second homes, and boutiques ignoring the clearly marked trails because Google maps said to just take the road. More successful,

beautiful, slightly older women expand and contract discussing all our mutual kin. I analyze their foreheads for signs of Botox trying to decide when it is my turn under the needle. They say I look like Chloe Sevigny. I think that means stylish in an odd way with tired too big eyes and that look of someone who is slightly bored of the whole thing but also a bit of a handful. You can always tell who has a past based on how they flick their sugar packets.

I'm supposed to be boy sober, I'm settling for California sober. I'm the best version of me when I'm performing. I'm usually always performing.

Be a chameleon, smoke the roaches from a recent or maybe not quite yet divorcee next to a dumpster, offer to review portfolios and dole out career advice, clear the plates of septuagenarians and see past her advanced age to her personhood, her girlhood, her possibly wild artist past. Complimenting her pants was an honest gesture. I want to be seen as a whole woman at seventy-five. I wanted to be seen as a whole woman at thirty-five.

Wear the bikini, read Kathy Acker in the hot tub. Swim laps alone. Float on your back so the patio bar patrons can make eye contact while I back stroke and do flips trying not to lose my bottoms with more tattoos than they've seen outside of their porn searches. Win the teacher of the week award even if the competition is only your head.

I went to the rodeo alone in leopard print pants to find a cowboy. I found four, maybe not all cowboys but one did lend me his hat while I was roping dummy bulls next to sticky, costumed children. I didn't pay for drinks and don't remember anyone's names. My hand was kissed. My thirst was quenched. My spirit is full. I shared a menthol with a cowgirl and stayed behind the bar after they closed to the tourists and ate the salty potato chips out of someone's hamburger boxed staff dinner. I'm learning to leave when I really want to stay. Trouble is best when narrowly avoided.

I left my bag with mascara in the shop and sauntered into the morning sun with a bare face and the smile that only comes from secrets. Slugging coffee and eating yesterday's desert for breakfast in my quiet corner alone.

"How was the rodeo?"

One raised eyebrow and an uneven smile. Only the left side of my face emotes and betrays me.

I can't wait for it to be a frozen scowl although I do have a penchant for a quick flash of eyebrows.

"Did you still go?"

"I had a wonderful time."

Girlish giggles and a quick hug with heads touching—even though I had to lower mine to reach her grey short shorn hair.

One last joint by the dumpster gathered around nothingness but gravel doling out wisdom you aren't sure you have. One last walk up the hill to catch the village bus, hopefully not the same driver that caught the silver side of my tongue hours earlier. Hitching a ride with a wiry, young intern and a genuinely warm hug goodbye. I see them at twenty-six, all green and hopeful with strong arms and ambitions.

I used to want a soft landing, now I just want to enjoy the fall.

Forward. Fast. Feral. Focused.

Speeding at the top of fourth gear getting lost down country highway between expanses of alternating corn and soy. Trying to find twisted roads to corner too fast, Lean too hard until my stomach drops out and I squeeze thighs clad in men's Levi's hard against the tank and feel my asshole pucker and sucked up inside my body. Cackle when you don't die. One hand stuck straight to the side commanding with a pointed finger to overtake a station wagon or minivan. Squeak between cars and beat them off the line in the wrong lane. Sing and scream and have conversations with myself playing both parties. Chambray denim shirt flapping in the wind like wings exposing a bony shoulder and caressing the tank the way I wish lovers touched me. Entertain the flirtation of an older man and listen to his opinions about economy fuel, punctuated with playful "baby girl." Turn fully around to make eye contact with another bike leaving one hand on the throttle and test extending both arms wide welcoming wind and sun on your chest. Speed viciously towards a cherry dipped soft serve cone eaten messily alone on a bench with quietly ringing ears.

After doing shots at Hooters and a failed WNBA game I rode dark streets through fireworks exploding in every direction. Downtown, a pack of men on Japanese piss missiles each had a woman scrunched up on the back of their bikes, clinging to them like baby monkeys. While trying to decide whether to run the red and catch

them my stomach felt like hot bile at the thought of being ornamental on back. Instead I rode around the city alone feeling the darkness cool the air still thick with humidity whip through my clothing and stick to my skin. A woman and I made eye contact across two lanes as a huge smile spread across her face and extended to mine. Kindred smiles in seeing the rugged wholeness of being seen by no one but yourself and strangers but to be wholly seen.

I think ultimately I just want someone to share my GPS location with that won't nag me for speeding but also care if I die.

Once I eject a man from my life I erase every shred of their existence, every gift, every reminder except three items and the slew of artworks produced that I swore up and down weren't about them:

1. An exorbitantly expensive Marina Abramovnik book.
2. A slightly less expensive Louise Bourgeois book that was left in messy wrapping paper to find on Christmas propped up on the record console table, miraculously he left me half of the PJ Harvey LPs I bought anyway.
3. A thank you/break up card I keep hidden in the bottom drawer of my grandmother's 1970s jewelry box recounting how happy he was when I threw rocks at his window—he also gave me the Abramovnik book, maybe he knew me better than I thought.
4. A single, almost nice crew sock I found on the floor the next day hung around for a few weeks to sheath my vibrator in. A reminder I wasn't destined to be a warm sock for a man. I eventually threw that out once I no longer needed the reminder.

Unfortunately, I love bloodsport. I want to break and rebuild, I want to put all my crazy in a big box that turns into a dance to the death that everyone knows is coming. Tigers flicking tails each knowing the rules to an unscripted game.

Until then—and probably after—I'll take summer very seriously. Eat five-day-old Thai peanut noodles mostly naked in my kitchen, the hacking of a cat about to vomit drowned out by too loud music. Or subsist on nothing but donuts, protein shakes, and

problematic amounts of coffee for days and work until my hands can't grip and spend summer evenings gently washing grime from the day off in urban rivers clearly marked *no swimming* while baby ducks and children babbling in foreign tongues swim downstream where I just peed.

You can't accept the swooping arm wave of a Westside biker gang and get absorbed into a downtown stunt show when you really just went for a ride back to work because you're a mess and forgot your wallet if someone is waiting at home. You can't be in the thick of wheelies in front of cops or drive the wrong way down the highway towards a Shell station—still without your wallet—and Cash App a stranger for five dollars in gas when you have dinner plans. You can't ride a mechanical bull with your girls or slow dance with your neighbor when someone wants their towels folded a certain way. You can't go on a hungover ride with your motorcycle mechanic with kind eyes, a playful swagger, and about ten years too young for you if you're supposed to be doing Sunday morning grocery shopping. You can't let a casual cruise turn into an eight-hour warm summer rain drenched day if you have kids to take to soccer practice. You can't go night swimming on a Wednesday if you follow everyone's rules of order. You can't live waiting for another but you also can't let spite ruin a good thing.

Fear has left my body. The hot flush of shame seldom comes anymore. I aspire to be an old woman in the same boyish clothes and long grey braids with more tattoos on sagging arm skin that I refuse to cover. I only fear domesticity, boredom, and losing my wildness.

The manic pixie dream girl doesn't die at thirty-seven withering on the vine. She's sovereign, the most dangerous man in the room with nothing to lose besides a freedom she protects with cloak and a dagger tattooed down her sternum. A trickster to test and disrupt her own narrative arc.

Writing and recording is dangerous, living every moment like a trailer for A24 cinema is dangerous, observing the world in full-spectrum kaleidoscopic color is dangerous.

But sipping black coffee with the shop owner, a tidy fan of outdated motoGP magazines between us is glorious. Sweat and sunshine and secrets only I know is glorious. Freedom, above all, is fucking glorious.

Not everyone is built to softly flicker like a welcoming porch light. I'm blazing like a comet, screaming towards the horizon line, thrilled by anticipation of the crater that I'll leave my body behind in. The ferocity by which I consume life without chewing in ravenous gulps can only last so long. It's a coin toss as to how my life burns out: a fire drifting slowly out to sea until it disappears into new storm clouds or like a star imploding on itself creating a black hole that sucks all the life around it into the darkness.

I'd rather be rare than regular. I'd rather ride alone wrapped in my own joy. But I might try to quit smoking this year.

Joyce Carroll Oates' short stories that end during the final climbing action before the climax are my favorite. You are fairly sure you know what will happen but she leaves you guessing if you're right.



**Jersey Couple** / Lawrence Bridges



Muscle Beach Couple / Lawrence Bridges



Rodeo Princesses / Lawrence Bridges



Three Men at a Bar / Lawrence Bridges

## Thirst

Morgan Rose-Marie

The invasive creep started right after lunch. Juniper looked up from her peanut butter sandwich and saw the prickly pear. The cactus was small. So small, she might not have noticed it, except she'd walked the perimeter of the property that morning hunting for prickly pear for her father to turn into jam. There hadn't been any then.

She wished the sour churning was just the peanut butter sitting heavy in her stomach.

"Dad," Juniper called out, setting her sandwich back on its plate.

The prickly pear had been her favorite kind of cactus. The flowers and fruit were enough to win over most people, but it had been Juniper's science textbook that had persuaded her. They had fun names like "bunny ear" and "beavertail." Running her fingers over the glossy photos had made it seem like they were soft to the touch.

"What is it, Juni?"

She pointed out the window at the cactus. "It just appeared."

His Adam's apple bobbed like he'd swallowed a piece of prickly pear. She understood. His stomach lurched with peanut butter even though he hadn't eaten any. "Want me to get it?"

"Don't go out there."

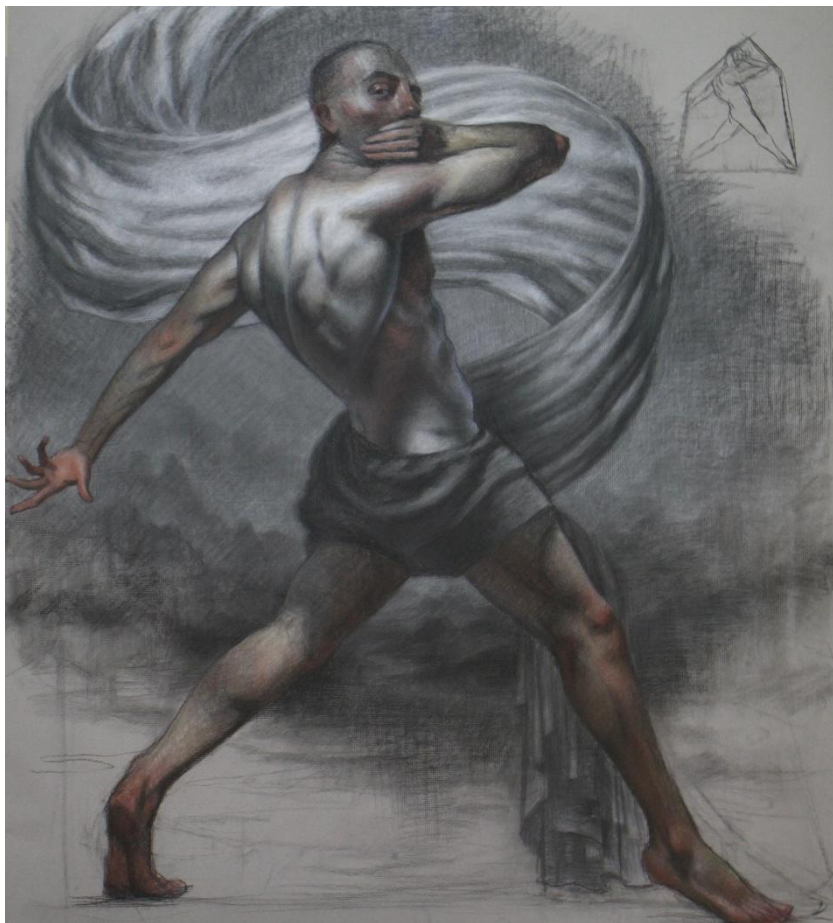
He did though. The cactus didn't even try to run. It let itself be harvested.

They'd both wonder why as they ate prickly pear jam on their peanut butter sandwiches for dinner, and they'd both arrive at the same conclusion before the evening was over.

By nightfall, the house was surrounded. Blue candles. Blue myrtles. Organ pipes. Barrels. Chollas. Ocotillos. Mexican fence posts. Saguaro. The cardon showed up last, as they polished off their sandwiches. They'd made it longer than everyone they knew. Longer than most, they figured. Longer, certainly, than either expected.

No one lives forever, Juniper wanted to say when her father couldn't meet her eyes.

Their well was drained before the sun rose.



"非礼勿言 / Asem M Ahmed



**Bioluminescent** / Valyntina Grenier and Joseph Mark Hansen

## The Last Piece

Morgan Rose-Marie

Regina wanted the last piece of cake. It was German chocolate cake, and she loved chocolate. It was also kind of dry. Regina didn't love that. She eyed the remaining piece on the glass plate anyway, paying more attention to it than the ladies on either side of her talking about ... what were they talking about?

Regina should care. She tried to. Kind of. Regina let her eyes fall to her lap. She'd joined this women's social group out of desperation. She and her husband had moved to town last year, Regina had yet to mold even a single acquaintance into a true friend. Her husband had found easy friends in his colleagues, and now she suspected he'd become more than friends with one of them.

"Will anyone *please* eat this last piece of cake?" The woman in the pretentious pompadour hat asked. Regina couldn't remember her name. "It's just going to go to waste."

All of the ladies, Regina included, *damn it*, politely shook their heads. *No*. Her mouth filled with unsatisfied saliva. From the very first meeting, she found afternoon tea boring, only now was it frustrating as well.

She'd celebrated her forty-second birthday last month. More than a decade had passed since she made herself throw up or, if her throat resisted her fingers as they tended to, made herself run until she threw up after eating a dessert. It had been two decades since she'd finished the college degree that her husband said she never used. Three decades ago, she'd eaten her grandmother's German chocolate cake for the last time.

She should have said she wanted it. She should just say —

"I want it."

"Want *what*?"

Regina didn't see the confusion puckering the ladies' mouths. She had already risen from her chair and was moving toward the — "Cake. I want the cake." She felt a dozen pairs of eyes looking at her, maybe finally seeing her. *Too late*, she thought. *Why is it always too late?*

Regina walks.

As she does, time wrinkles.

Like the clothes she never bothers to move to the dryer fast enough or remove from the dryer fast enough.

Regina walks toward the end of table where the last piece of cake sits forgotten by all but her. Each successive step requires exponentially more ticks of the clock to complete. Still, she walks.

In a year she and her husband would divorce and he would “start” dating his colleague become friend become lover.

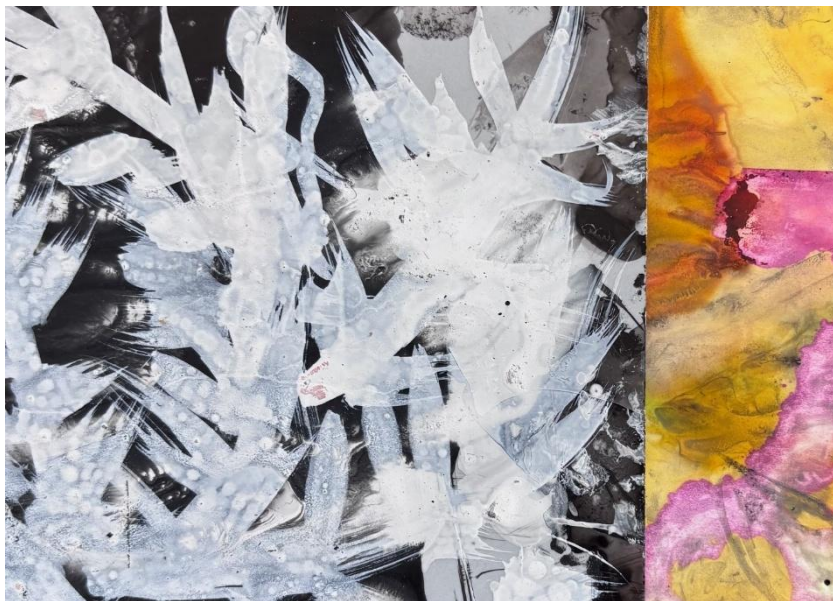
It takes almost a lifetime, hers, for her fingers to wrap around the handle of a fork and sink it into the final slice of German chocolate cake.

In the immediate aftermath of the Big Bang, time moved slower than it does now. *Time dilation*, her professor had explained all those years ago, in her last semester of her physics degree. The universe is expanding. It is also speeding up. We are all accelerating. Racing apart.

Except Regina.

Regina pulls the bite toward her lips. The ladies around her are long gone. Her husband and his second wife dead and buried.

The cosmos disintegrates as a granule of sugar dissolves on her tongue.



**Fair** / Cynthia Yatchman



Delight / Cynthia Yatchman

## Cruising

Emilio Cabral

My best friend sends me a link to a *New York Magazine* article that claims “we’ve reached peak gay sluttiness.” Jockstraps are ubiquitous. Poppers are glamorous. Online cruising apps like Grindr and Sniffies are the first step toward socialism. *Be honest*, my friend says. *Does it really show you exactly how far away people are?*

An anonymous Sniffies profile messages me a few minutes after my plane lands at LaGuardia. He wants to meet in one of the terminal’s single-occupancy bathrooms. He is usually only attracted to other white men, but his wife has not given him a blowjob in two months, so he is willing to make an exception. As I sink to my knees beneath the bathroom’s jaundiced overhead light, my eyes fall on the handful of lopsided hearts—the kind I drew in elementary school—scrawled on the side of his right hand in pink marker. I let him slap me because I’m charmed by his child’s aesthetic sensibility.

My ex-boyfriend and I call once a month to catch each other up on our sexcapades. His updates often involve upgrading an attractive, age-appropriate man from hookup to short-lived partner. To not seem pathetic by comparison, I gloss over the encounters I’m most ashamed of. The father of three I spotted at Cinemark between showings. A banker smelling of fermenting fruit who was looking for a faggot to face fuck. One night, when I am feeling brave, I ask if he believes his being a white man in Evanston, Illinois, versus my being a brown man in Raleigh, North Carolina, has anything to do with how easily he transmutes sex into coffee dates. *You’re thinking about it too hard*, he says. *You’ll find someone soon. Have you tried changing your profile pic?*

At a party, acquaintances whose information on cruising (and gay sex generally) comes solely from viral social media posts ask my opinion on Equinox steam rooms. *Do guys really fuck in plain view of everyone? How do you know you’re not going to flash a straight guy?* They lean in when I say I’ve been cruised before, but their interest wanes when I explain the details of my first time: twenty years old, tipsy, wandering Jackson Heights at three in the morning after being locked

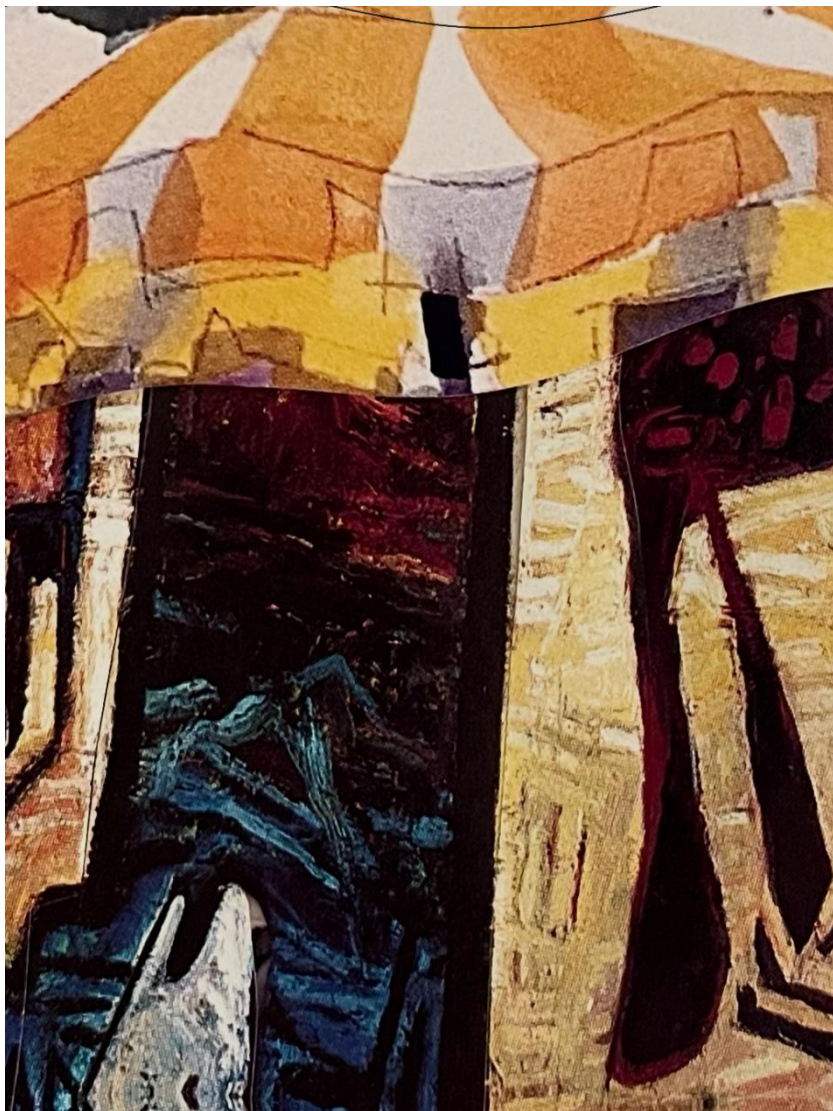
out of the apartment I was staying in. The story is somehow too salacious for them. They want the sort of titillating, yet ultimately low-stakes, encounter between sculpted, hairless millennials that can be repackaged for prestige television. One they can recreate with the Ken Dolls in their closets.

In *Gay Bar*, Jeremy Atherton Lin says cruising is an “archeology of looking.” That queer men excavate meaning from places society discarded. Though I’m not quite sure what mythologies I am creating when I log on to Grindr or Sniffies to see how far other gay men are down to the nearest foot. Something has been lost in the decades between the encounters Atherton Lin describes in the 80s and 90s and the invention of apps that outsource the “looking” he places so much value in. What meaning is there to excavate from the morning of my junior year of college, when I ordered an Uber to the house of a forty-year-old man who messaged me on Sniffies to tell me my eyes were beautiful? The man refused to open his front door when I arrived, convinced my smooth cheeks and the basketball shorts hanging down past my knees were proof I was underage. I tried to call my roommate, but my phone died—a gift from the mid-November sub-zero temperatures. Folding my hands into the sleeves of my flimsy denim jacket, I ran five miles across Chicago’s northern suburbs, not stopping until my numbing fingers rested on my building’s brick and mortar.

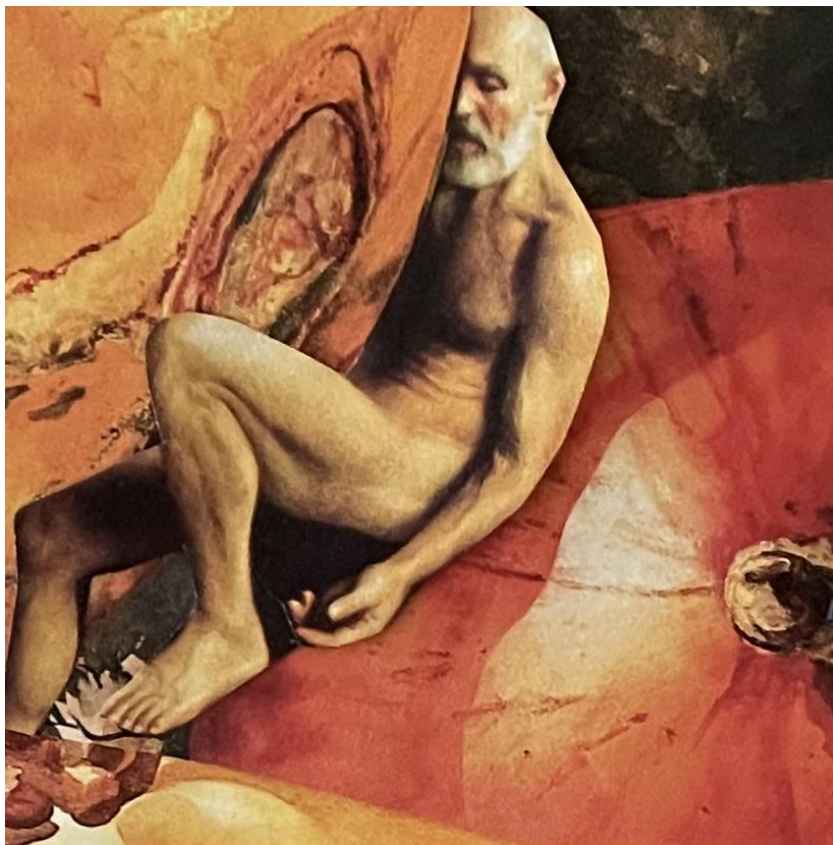
A Los Angeles-based micro-influencer I follow on Instagram recently started making videos on how to cruise, in an attempt to diversify his content and increase his follower count. *How to Cruise at Home Depot: First, scope out the aisle and linger just long enough to lock eyes; next, slowly walk toward the back and make sure he follows; then, flip your hat backwards to send him a signal; finally, step casually inside the bathroom and wait for him to knock on the door of your stall.* Sometimes, I comment on his videos to ask if he ever cruises because he feels obligated to. If he ever thinks cruising is the only way to find men who see him as desirable. If any of the men he cruises have gotten violent. Mine are the only comments he doesn’t reply to.

I stand in front of the mirror and practice turning my most recent public encounter into a story to tell at the next party I’m invited to: ~~he insisted I asked me to meet him in the copse of trees outside his apartment building because outdoor sex turned him on his roommates were home. He called me a faggot good boy and gripped me by the~~ rubbed my shoulders. I

*expected him to force me to my knees, but I did not expect how his fingers dug into my shoulder blades like my skin was putty he asked me if I would blow him. I cried out said yes. He kept going anyway. I almost asked him if we could take a pause and move to my room. But where he fucked me wouldn't have mattered I didn't want to ruin good sex just because I was scared of getting caught. Either way, it would be him who pulled me to my feet once. Once he was satisfied hard, he turned me around with one hand, then tugged my pants down with the other. His fingers would have still found their way to my neck, squeezing the words in my throat like my mother wrings her kitchen sponge and increasing the force until he was satisfied I wouldn't ask him to stop applying light pressure. Best sex I ever had.*



Strange Happenings at the Piano Bar / Robin Young



**Middle Orange Melancholy / Robin Young**



Apocalypse Maybe / Robin Young



**Another Way to Look at It / Robin Young**

**Almost as on Judgement Day**

Rainer Maria Rilke

Translated from German by Wally Swist

Almost as on Judgement Day the dead tear themselves  
from the embrace of the earth, and the relieved ball  
hanging above them loses itself in the heavens—;  
So now those who live almost collapse into the earth,  
and the laden one, the earth, sinks to the earth's foundation  
into the millennia-old seaweed, where fates still—  
silent with dull fishy eyes—  
have cold encounters. Where from reeds emerge,  
like sea anemones,  
wounds bloom magnificently, and the current itself  
carries the terrible pulp's tactile arm  
to that which is to be grasped. There  
from the stony limestone, the pale coral forms  
of rigid gray, silently vanish.

*Irschenhausen, early September 1914*

**Almost as on Judgement Day**

Rainer Maria Rilke

Fast wie am Jungsten Tag die Toten sich reißen  
aus der Umarmung der Erde, und der erleichterte Ball  
hinger ihnen empor sich in die Himmel verliert—;  
so fast sturzen jetzt diese, die leben, ins Erdreich,  
und die beladene sinkt, die Erde, zum Weltgrund  
in der Jahrtausende Tang, wo die Schicksale noch—  
stumme mit stumpfem Fischblick—  
kalte Begegnungen haen. Wo aus Rohren hervort,  
wie See-Anemonen,  
prachtvoll die Wunden erbluhn, und dem furchtbaren Pulp  
selber die Stromung den Tast-Arm  
an das zu Fassende tragt. Da Bildet  
aus dem gebeinernen Kalk sich die blasse Koralle  
starrebendigen Grauns, die sich schweigend verzeigt.

**Again and again, even if we know the landscape of love**

Rainer Maria Rilke

Translated from German by Wally Swist

Again and again, even if we know the landscape of love  
and the small churchyard with its plaintive names  
and the terribly rambling trench in which the others end:  
again and again we go out, the two of us  
under the old trees, we camp again and again  
among the flowers, facing the sky.

*Munich(?), end of 1914*

**Again and again, even if we know the landscape of love**

Rainer Maria Rilke

Immer wieder, ob wir die Liebe Landschaft auch kennen  
und den kleinen Kirchhof mit seinen klagenden Namen  
und die furchtbar verschweifende Schlucht, in welcher die  
    ändern  
enden: immer wieder gehn wir zu zweien hinaus  
unter die alten Baume, lagern uns immer wieder  
zwischen die Blumen, gegenüber dem Himmel.



Image 6468 / Max St-Jacques



**Image 7502** / Max St-Jacques



**Image 0763** / Max St-Jacques

## Skin

Mark Wagstaff

### Act 1

This city was major. It happened there. Those corporate streets, occupational, served by amenities of taste and stature to soothe the significant dogs that generate value. That street in particular had the essentials: coffee stores, take out, dry and wet cleaning, media services, a few little sparkly luxury outlets for all that income. It had brisk people, they walked a positive way. They kept bits of plastic tube in their ears to stay connected. The cement and concrete and paving stones might originate from sand and granite a bajillion years old. The planet these materials come from might be a wonder of cosmic precision. Its remarkable gases and gravity the incitement to a long walk from amoebas to now. All unimportant. That place was the money.

That individual was uncontroversial. Grown older, slower, a little grey. Congruent with his surroundings and purpose of business. Michael Kirby, forty-seven now. Forty-seven was a strange age. Not young anymore. Not enough to be an old wise head. Young enough, still, to be expected to participate. Old enough to ask why. That grey suit, white shirt, somewhat old-fashioned necktie, was not accidental. Michael Kirby presented that particular image of persistent continuation. He'd no more wear rainbow suspenders than freebase off a hard body. That popular confusion. Michael Kirby felt it keenly. A soggy, disputed border between serious and dull. Young people, and old people richer than him, thought his reticence tedious. But Kirby knew his role as a serious man. He didn't make money. He was serious business.

No parking space at the office, its underground lot reserved for the dogs and blue-collar trucks the dogs kept by for flavor. He parked at the public tower four blocks north. That was okay: cameras and guards who stomped around in stiff collars. He didn't expect to park at the office, not at his level and not making money. It was okay.

His job was probity. Compliance. To park at the office might seem like taking favors. With that ethics trap avoided, he walked the four blocks from the public tower to the office. He might even—someplace in his brain—think he's off to do good today.

The city was large, its economy diverse and robust. But winners and losers. Here's the thing: Kirby understands there's winners and losers. There have to be. His corporation competed with others in the energy business. If someone found more, sold more, his employer got priced down. There were jobs and people competed. Not Kirby. He hadn't applied for a job in years, and some people seemed to think that's a subject for conversation. But the people who applied competed. Of course. Winners and losers. How it worked all through life. So it could be no surprise that while he lived in a house, which was a good house, and drove a car just four years old to a job that paid sensible money, there were others who don't get any of that. Even this close to major business were bodies in the street. Jittery men who walked too fast, who shouted for each other down sidecuts and alleys, always searching, always wanting. Old deadbeats whose clothes were cardboard. Who drank from the bottle and stared at the swirl of vivid motion around them, like tourists on a hayride in space. Women. Not so many. But women on the street. Slipped loose from the easy assumption that women always find someplace to stay.

The woman below him was harder than most. A lot of street women were paper. This one was solid. Hunkered to a fire door, tall, with the spring of unforced exercise. Charcoal pants, a once-white shirt hinted at eager biceps. Drizzly blonde curls almost graceful in their negligence. Eyes, that was the thing. Hard eyes in a sharp face. Didn't bother Michael Kirby seeing those people. How could they have plans.

Where it happened was not exciting, but essential. He worked ten years in this job and, once, had a team around him. Older, specialist custodians of the book, when he was the new guy. Bigger changes up the line and the script became compliance is everyone's job. It had to be braided — the term they used — braided through each project and activity. Now, Michael Kirby collated reports from across the business. The hub, the fulcrum, a boss once called him, thinking that sounded

grand. He checked reports for concerns that might hint at violations. Like a pit boss, another guy told him, overlooking casino games.

Properly and essentially, there was a clear desk and tidy up policy. It might be a breach—even a violation—to leave a screen unlocked, a document on show. Young shots doing deals around him never printed anything. They managed their lives on glimmering slicks of glass they holstered like guns. He did all he could onscreen. But in meetings he liked something solid. Paper he could square and arrange, to let the other guy know he's prepped. First task at the office, Michael Kirby printed his updates, his highlights, the chart in particular he wanted to focus eyes on. The value added. The serious impact of his work.

He didn't engage so much with colleagues around him. In his novice days of office work, there seemed more commonality. Talk about the weather, the game. A little complaint on unfounded rent reviews. Get a sub at lunch. A beer, maybe, after work. Everyone then was in the same swim. These colleagues today, young and sharp, veered swiftly between Earth-shaking matters and vids of a guy who fed his dog coffee and had to live with the upshot of that. Simultaneously, they seemed more together and more broken. They made too much of the wrong noise. They didn't print.

He always did this and he didn't know why. He saw the meeting would happen in six minutes. Five minutes. He saw it would happen in three and, only then, stood up. He had to rush when, really, he could avoid that. If he stood at six or five, instead of at three. Michael Kirby got himself straight. Tweaked his tie. Smoothed his jacket. Found his cuffs too tight and thought he should get new shirts. With barely two minutes to get to the room, his hands—that did this bajillion times—dived to scoop his papers.

He cut his finger. Old school. A decent paper cut, along the index of his right hand. He watched, amazed, at skin split wide, at sudden, jubilant blood. It threatened his findings. He dropped the papers like scalding and wrenched a scrap of tissue from the paper ball in his pocket. That blood was keen to get around. He chased it down his lifeline. The wound hung fresh and alluring. He was late to the meeting.

Dan Bradley was the extraction dog. Not the over dog. The over dog's helpmeet, assigned to enlighten this section that didn't make money. He had to grasp the compliance environment and that never pleased him. Each move of his body brandished that tension of oil guys: that conflict between severe caution, so the client didn't get stiffed, and roughneck craving to take exuberant risk. Brash and bitter, puzzled at what he did wrong to get kicked upstairs to a desk.

Jim Sharples was straightforward. He headed up the division. He wanted results, so he could get promotion. He really wanted a lot more money and that ridiculous house. Understandably, he wanted nothing that might conflict with that. Sharples had a fondness for leaning into the bigger picture. Cogs in the chain, all linked together. Each part delivers the whole. That stuff.

Sharples and Bradley had been in the room several minutes before Kirby arrived. They didn't enjoy this especially but, as mid-range dogs, tacitly grasped they were meant to be collegial. It was nearly, but not, a relief when Kirby showed up.

"Apologies." Kirby said that. A compressed, battered sound. He hadn't thought what to give for an alibi. "I was rechecking the figures."

"The figures?" That got Sharples' spine talking. "You have figures?"

"Numbers." Kirby lunged at it. "Volume of potential concerns."

"Concerns?" Bradley sucked on the word. "These have been socialized through the chain?"

None of this was where Kirby had meant to begin. He'd sat down—his heart hadn't even sat down—and the whole presentation was in the wrong place. "There are a few possible instances to discuss. I was rechecking how many."

"Let me say, by way of preamble." Sharples closed the gap between his fist and the desk. "Directorate and the Executive are laser-focused on our compliance position. Rightly," he turned to Bradley, who hadn't protested, "we are held to account. You gentlemen have heard me say this before." Everyone heard him say it before. "The business we do is not routine. It's foundational. Hospitals, schools, those vital research facilities, every business from a coffee cart to air travel, they need energy, right? They need power. What we do is not small. The risks are commensurate. You hear me say this."

Though the lines were familiar, Kirby drew comfort from them. To have a boss who could say his work mattered—so much as say it—was a score. He had no illusions about his place and countered that daily skepticism with his laser focus on the value of rules.

“So,” Sharples continued, while Bradley stabbed his phone, “we should discuss these instances freely. We should have a clear way ahead. You know I don’t expect only green on the chart. What project is that, only green, right? There will be moments to give us pause, absolutely. So what you got?”

Kirby printed these tables that showed where compliance concerns had arisen. Helpfully, he included the governing statute, thinking Bradley would welcome that. He worked up these formats, this summary text. The backbone of sporadic reports he got asked to send up the chain. Facts were known and conjecture were supported. The audit pre-defined. “Extraction activities continue to present likely challenges. Disputes over water and so on.”

“Local conflicts where we are the innocent bystander,” Sharples said wisely.

“Indeed. There’s also possible friction with subcontractors, that side of the business. The usual local landscape around kickbacks and graft.”

“Obviously,” Bradley laid his phone aside a significant way, “if any of our partners break local laws we’ll reexamine their contracts. We need to ensure people can do business with us in confidence.”

So much encouragement. Perhaps Kirby had started too easy. “We do operate in some environments where a little,” he savored the word, “wheel-greasing is considered the price of business. We know some of our competitors make those deals.”

“And we’ve been clear on our approach in every committee we’ve been called to.” Sharples had a little twist of the lip. “Directorate and Executive have a clear vision that we will compete on fair terms. We may dig dirt from the ground but our hands are clean.” He was quoting the global CEO at an especially fractious committee. “What else we got?”

“Issues in renewables over land use.”

“No, I won’t have this.” Sharples steepled his fingers grandly. “Renewables create jobs and local value. What’s the crop yield on those

dirt patches? Bushel? Couple bushels? Plant panels. Plant turbines. Then you get to buy food.”

Bradley seemed peptic. “Yeah, how is it I’m here and these renewables snake men are absent? Anyhow, it’s the same principle. Our land lease deals are tight. We pay up to and including to beat out the competition.”

“Other nations.” Sharples made it a sage pronouncement. “Other nations don’t care for local populations like we do. That’s the nub. Our competitors won’t play fair.” He nodded sorrowful agreement with himself. “Terrible people.”

Kirby checked his list. “Our thorium supplies.”

“Why are these papers slicked with blood?” Sharples prided himself on calm tenacity he barely possessed. The interruption had been itching at him. “I appreciate dedication. We all strive to our duty. But why are you bleeding?”

Kirby watched a narrow channel of blood drown his careful assessments. “I cut myself on the report.”

Bradley chuckled. “I told you compliance had teeth.”

Bradley’s amusement yanked Sharples’ fragile chain. “You cut yourself on printed matter?”

It seemed unfeasible. “It appears so.”

“Maybe do something with that.”

First aid boxes that, once, were taped up beside refreshment points got tidied away. A previous boss with a love of clean lines took against them. Besides, personal responsibility wasn’t served by giving people sterile supplies. Kirby wrapped kitchen paper around his hand, searching cupboards and drawers for leftover band aids. Concerned how quickly his blood soaked the paper. How unwilling it seemed to congeal.

Around, people came and went. Some colleagues. Some he didn’t know. More disturbing than their side-eye, their unwillingness to mention the bloodied wad of paper hung off his arm. Back when the office felt a little cozier, someone would horse him about it. They might get brash—personal even—but it would be a thing to discuss. Now everyone pretended he wasn’t bleeding right there. Sure, it looked worse than it was. Just how the blood spread through grainy

wadding. But, curiously, he felt on his own with it, in a way he didn't care for. Once, anything unusual would raise a smile. Now it was all process.

Checking the drawer below the sink, the blue-handle knife with its lengthy serrated blade looked an event. An imposition on the section's problem-solving air. Someone, at some time, brought a massive knife to their workplace. Left it in a public drawer with no outward indication. Pushed to the side, it would take a clumsy move to dip in and experience it. But still, a knife that big.

"Ah." A young woman in elastic pants and a sweater set down two pineapples on the counter. She got the knife from the drawer, navigating it around the sodden mess of Kirby's hand. "These are just ripe." With swift, decisive action, she topped and tailed the pineapples and started to fillet them into a bowl, the jagged blade greedy for fibrous flesh.

"Pineapples." Kirby could never bring more than a fraction to these conversations.

"Aren't they gorgeous? I get these from one of our partners. We did a deal on boreholes."

"Hope you log it as a business gift." He couldn't even find the sly nudge that, once, would have made that.

She stared like he said something coarse. She left the knife on the counter, dripping skin.

Michael Kirby learned to drive young. He was driving for years. His insurance was clean. Any bumps purely peripheral. Anyone checking the hours of footage from bridge and causeway cameras would notice his car — if they saw it at all — as an example of sane and sanitary driving. Anyone, if they could be bothered, would say: there's a guy defensive with risk. But Kirby's relationship with the road was informed by using both hands. Ten and two on the wheel, with occasional dip-down of the right hand to change mode or attend something on the dashboard. He found band aids. He swaddled up the index finger of his right hand. He peeled them off and did it again, where they soaked through too quickly. He tried to drive with that finger neutralized, out of position. But the rest of his hand didn't know what it should do. Even slight pressure on the wheel risked the skin.

It throbbed, as willful blood seemed drawn to the site to escape. He tried to drive one-handed and had to wrench the car back from crossing the lines. Some guy overtook and shouted at him. He had to tolerate the pain. An accident couldn't be his fault.

They bought in a good neighborhood, where values weren't subject to short term friction. With a clear plan—his wife had the plan—that this was their house while they worked in the city. At some point, the plan suggested, they could move upstate to a larger spread, with cash and assets enough to slow down working. Currently, that didn't seem feasible. His wife liked to work, she had to be in town for client visits. For events and occasions.

Kirby took the hit to make sure he was driving right, especially by Doug Wayne's house. He had no apparent beef with Wayne. He tried to stay indifferent to all their neighbors. But something about Doug Wayne stretched his patience. The guy was too much on the outside, too carefully tousled, too shaggy and unrepentant of party noise and obvious transient women. That his wallet was doing okay was a given—these weren't subsidized streets. But he never seemed to work enough for the money he spent. He took things effortless, in his black polo and slacks. In his windswept effects and leering caterpillar mustache. Wayne was the type made hardworking guys look like jerks.

Michael Kirby couldn't get up to his garage door. He couldn't get into his own driveway. He owned that concrete ramp and he couldn't just go there. With plant pots and dainty ceramics all over the concrete. Some were flowering plants. Some were evergreens. A few still had store labels attached, with optimistic, sun-faded pictures of their later selves. All should be in the backyard, but here they were, clustered like a protest blocking the garage door, strung together with strands of ribbon and holiday tinsel. Sure, a few neighbors had planters out front. Perhaps a bay tree in a pot. Ornamental stoneware, a statue maybe. Orderly, decorative pieces to guide the eye to their splendid house. Not to disrupt the driveway. He couldn't even pull onto his property without the rear end of the car hanging controversially in the road. It wasn't that sort of neighborhood.

Michael Kirby parked and, listless, inspected this carnage. Its origin was obvious. Its remedy was on him. Shifting the plants was painful. The pots had nothing to grip. Even the smallest needed two

hands, to avoid stiffing his wrist. Dragging the plants made him a freak. It scratched the cement. He had to lift them. The tinsel and ribbons and little bells he bundled in a sparkly ball. A properly angry man would dump all that in the trash. But it cost money. It came from somewhere. He had to preserve the possibility of restoring this stuff to use.

By the time he got the garage open and started the car and backed it up onto the asphalt and finally finished this simple journey, his hand was butchery.

No big deal, not at all, his wife kept her single name. Corporate, with a strong reputation, in a field where client relations were all, she wouldn't waste the ten years she spent before him building her brand. He got used to business dinners where people called her Ms. Slater. Some little voice, in back of his box, still couldn't believe she said yes to him. He wasn't complaining. It was very much his gain.

Amanda Slater was on a call. Wholly unsurprising. Since Kirby moved to compliance he got used to this once illicit buzz of getting home before seven pm. Like a regular joe in the old days, with a lunch pail, riding the bus. But his wife's clients straddled time zones as weightlessly as they changed currency. Theirs were always working hours. Slater started dinner. She got big boxes delivered, with portioned ingredients and recipe cards, it was cooking color-by-numbers. Kirby offered to help sometimes, but she told him he made too much hoo-ha. Slater was at the stove, stirring the pot, checking details on an app, the little plastic tubes snuggled in her ear, talking the vivid, magic language of accounting. Kirby's work revolved around principles and procedures. His numbers were numbers of incidents. The ballpark of potential loss. Slater ran corporate sheets. She knew abatements and accruals. Obligations and options. Every rate from prime to junk. She could grow a profit. She could fatten stock for sale. She could lose an oilfield or two and got impatient when he mentioned conflict of interest. If her clients worked with his corporation, keeping straight was on them.

Before she noticed his shape at the door, he listened to her a moment. That stuff about margin and markdown. Real returns and paper. It called to him, those things she said. A fiduciary love song.

She turned, saw him and raised her hand, as she would to any shadow on the meeting room glass.

Leah watched whatever she watched on her phone with static intensity. It unnerved him. Thirteen years before, they had quite the conversation. Whether it was right to bring a child into this world. What it might do to their careers. To Slater's career. They rolled the dice and, some ways, Leah was the jackpot. A self-amused baby. A precocious preschooler. A kid happy to learn. Then she changed. From eleven, from ten, Leah got arch and evasive. Before twelve she got all the lines on climate and justice. Without apparent motive, she elevated to a different level of thought. Now her parents were disgusting. Her dad was a crook. Raping the sweet green fields for dirty oil. Slater pitched her daughter as a future leader. An intellectual in waiting, trying out habits of thought. What Kirby felt: he spent time and money raising a child who became his master.

"Leah." He already dropped the 'dears' and 'darlings' that once sweetened their conversation. She could see through him like glass. "Leah."

The child made a large gesture of pausing her phone. Those wonderful, crystal, baleful eyes turned on him. Where to begin. "How's school?"

"The conformity factory works overtime churning out good consumers."

He didn't like to think how she used to sit on his knee, while he read the same stories over and over. Silly, lovely stories of sunny times. "Should you be doing homework?"

"Probably. Don't worry." She gave him the sincere stare. "You'll get a good return on investment."

He found himself tinkering with objects—perking cushion corners, aligning picture frames. Like he was the one should be embarrassed. "Did you move some plants out front of the house?" It wasn't till then he considered how she moved them. She was strong but those pots were solid.

"Plants?"

"Plant pots. In the driveway. I had to shift them to park the car."

“My habitat.”

She was on her feet and out the front door before he felt the breeze pass him. Cooking smells promised good food. What choice did he have.

Kirby got outside in time for the bomb.

“What in fuck? My habitat.”

Slater and him agreed they'd squash down her cursing. Maybe Slater didn't care now. “They were all over. Right across here. I had to move them to get the car in.”

“You moved my plants for your vehicle of death?”

“I can't leave the car on the street.”

“I was hours bringing those here. I'm building a habitat for neighborhood wildlife. Do you know how sterile this street is?” She spotted the cotton and tinsel, scrambled beside the door. The thumbnail size decoration bells mashed in the gravel. “You can't help yourself, can you? You destroy fucking everything.”

“Leah.”

“Oh, that's right.” The slender nose. That haughty chin. “Pick on me. Provoke me. Then beat me down for reacting. I'm to blame. But it's alright for you, stripping the Earth of its goodness. Those people killed for your oilwells. That's just collateral, but me saying 'fuck' is an outrage. Well, fuck you.” She tore past, rushing inside, slamming the door behind her. From the kitchen, Slater's shout was met with a scream.

Evening now. Real evening. Lights in porches and hallways. A few late arrivals, parking their cars, in pristine drives with not a grease spot.

“She's getting quite the young lady.”

Stupidly, Kirby thought the darkening sky was speaking to him. Before he perceived the shape of Doug Wayne, in black pants and black sweater, cut out from the dark. “How's it going Doug?”

“I just took a bubble bath.”

“That's swell.” He didn't want to go inside till Wayne was gone. He didn't want Wayne taking even a peek of his hallway. “You keeping busy?”

“She really is getting quite the young lady. You’ll need eyes everywhere.”

It all looked so right. Kirby walked into the dining room. There was the table, three places set around one end, the rest a polished prairie. Plates and eating tools, and steaming aromas from bowls to remind him how lucky he was to have a wife with bankable skills, who earned good money and still had time to reliably serve up a feast. Getting older made Slater more beautiful. That was her uncanny magic. Stood by the table, ladle in hand, waiting Kirby’s arrival so she could serve. And their daughter, her childhood’s wild prettiness maturing day by day to accusatory beauty. Not a replica of her mother. A look all her own. That second was like a happy family moment. The snapshot he’d choose, for a show and tell on his life.

Kirby took his seat between his two women. That was right. He was the man. “This looks great. Smells wonderful.”

Leah already cut her vegetables in strips, so she could eat them in the sequence that most aligned with her body rhythm. The fork paused on its way to her lips. “Why is there so much blood on your shirt? It’s dripping out that rag.”

“For crying out loud.” Slater clattered her knife. “Don’t you think you should dress that up before dinner? It’s leaking on the au gratin.”

“Tomato paste,” Leah snickered.

Kirby looked at his sleeve. At the plate. He wasn’t sure what to do.

Slater scraped back her hair across softly-lined skin. “Michael. Go to the bathroom. Rinse that blood and strap up your hand. There’s gauze and patches. What did you even do?”

“Paper cut. It’s just one finger.”

“Paper cut? All that?”

Leah quivered. Her voice broke apart with laughter. “Hey dad, I can lend you a tampon. Hardly used.”

“Leah.” Slater tried to make her numerate mouth savage. “That’s not for table.”

“Aw.” Leah chewed her greens. “And I thought you were big on recycling.”

He could barely navigate getting undressed, putting into pajamas, teeth and flossing, with his hand bound so tight. Slater despaired of his efforts and did it herself, pressing down on the wound and telling him not to be a man baby.

“If this doesn’t heal in a day or so go to the doctor. You might need shots. You’ve obviously done damage.”

“It was just paper.”

“Did you see that pile of wadding I threw in the trash? There’s significant blood come from that cut. It ought to stop by itself. Why won’t it?”

Kirby paused in front of the mirror. He didn’t know. He could cut himself shaving—even today, he still did that—and the spot would be just visible when he went out. “Ordinarily, I stop bleeding.”

“Exactly. You’ve done something here.”

She was already in bed. She got ready and he got ready, and separately they went to bed together. It was a while since there’d been any savagery to these moments. They couldn’t anyway, not with Leah down the hall. Her mockery was intense. “When I get home tomorrow I’ll move those plants back out to the yard. Unless she wants to do it. How did she do it?”

“Our daughter has a name. And there’s a pack and roll in the utility room, as you will know.” She tweaked her pajama cuffs. “Those plants brighten the front. No one sees them out back.”

A lead weight sank in the bile of his gut. “She laid them across the driveway. I can’t leave the car on the street.”

“She got the idea from that podcast on urban greening. Leah is effective at putting ideas into action.”

“And you didn’t stop her?”

“Oh yes.” That spare, lively skin around her eyes turned to cement. “It’s my job to stop our daughter pursuing her interests. And when was I supposed to do that? I had calls all afternoon. Do you know how long it takes to compile and audit accounts?”

Her warmth beside him a functional thing. “Don’t you have a team for that?”

She slapped the quilt. “I’m not even sure how to answer you. I’m a senior partner. I sign the opinion. It’s a matter of professional probity. I should think you would understand that. But you want I break stride and get out the zone to chastise a girl who’s just trying to

make the world better. Remind me why you can't be home the odd while."

"We don't do that." He raised defeated arms. "We don't work that way."

"Because it's energy?" She flipped under the linen. "Maybe Leah's right. It is macho bull."

Where Jim Sharples was disappointed, he wanted to be easy-going. A chilled-out boss with a great team hitting the bullseye. Excellence without effort, like all the bastards he hated. Kirby well understood this was his point of view. When Sharples came with the big picture, enthused about all they'd deliver, it was framed on limiting process, easing agility, to achieve excellence in thought leadership and make the weather. Kirby got this was the message he was to internalize.

An unscheduled meeting, the grim arena of Sharples' office as bland and provoking as ever. Kirby printed his papers all out again. He carried them in his left, well away from the clumped dressing on his right.

"I fully get it." Sharples sifted the notes. "Extraction challenges. These renewables issues. We should promote, protect and prevent. Our unscrupulous rivals from other nations no doubt bear culpability. We are scrutinized. We need good answers."

"The Board agreed our compliance strategy." Indeed it had. It had no choice. Kirby knew that wasn't what Sharples was saying.

"Compliance must be front and center to our offer." Sharples drew it wide with his fingers. "We can't let ourselves be complacent about compliance. Nor should we miss what it has to offer, when aligned with her aims and values."

"Values?"

"Absolutely. Compliance exists to make business work better. That's a given. Let's make sure, Michael, compliance achieves that."

Dizziness, that dogged him from waking, buzzed the corners of his wetware. "Achieves it?"

"Our approach to compliance is how we sell. Our policy is our card. The policy is a pure thing. It exists in pure space. In the grubby mush of a borehole or the hot winds of a gas field, compliance may sometimes be served by different decisions."

“You mean,” Kirby juggled words, “context-specific?”

“Culture. That’s an excellent word. The places we work have culture. People respect that. A tourist should do as the locals do. It’s only polite.”

Kirby didn’t speak much with his colleagues. They did deals. They ate on the go. Their filed returns covered off compliance questions. No one was mendacious, that was the thing. No one set out to deceive. Untalked-to and deep in the zone, Kirby jumped when Sharples tapped his shoulder. Jumped and banged his knee on the desk.

“Deep in thought I see,” Sharples chuckled. “That’s good. We encourage thought. I meant to say, you know we have the program board upcoming. You’ll be sure to tailor your report to foreground our aspirations.”

Kirby didn’t know what to say.

“It’s important the heads of section understand the big picture. We don’t want them focused on minor points.” He shook Kirby’s shoulder like scratching a dog. “And confidentially,” he dropped his voice to a stage whisper. “I’d get a fresh dressing on that hand. Whatever did you do?”

When Sharples moved off to anoint the dealmakers, Kirby allowed himself a moment to unpack his wallet. Among the cards and remnant cash and coupons he never used, that little snap of Slater and baby Leah. When Slater still wore her hair south of the shoulders and showed a smidgin of skin up top. And the placid form in her arms, gazing at the camera with lovely indifference. Not often, but sometimes, Kirby studied that picture. Not always, but mostly, it seemed a fork in the road. A moment when things could have gone this way or different. He put on his jacket and went out to lunch. He invited no one. No one would invite him.

“How much you say that was?”

The guy at the counter surveyed him. “Twelve. It’s twelve today.”

“Twelve? For that?” Kirby’s gesture boxed the sandwich. “You telling me that’s twelve?”

“Well, what do you think it should be?” The man’s apron was spotless. His careful, graphite hair peeked cheekily under his cap. “Since you’re the expert.”

“That.” The sandwich seemed small. “That. Something like that. Used to be eight. Seven-fifty, some places. You saying fifty percent more now? Where’s the benefit for that added cost?”

The man wasn’t young but kept himself trim, no doubt from more healthy choices than his menu. Sort of middle-aged guy, Kirby thought, who still went to clubs and still scored. “Buddy, can I ask what you know of the sandwich business? More fundamentally, what you know of global food? These products, they’re made from components. Those have to be sourced on the market from numerous origin points. These supply chains, you may have heard of them, they stretch across the horizon. Everything costs and everyone has to get paid. If that sandwich there has a ticket of twelve, how much of that lands in my pocket? After I settled my invoices and paid rent on this place. And don’t get me started with the cost of keeping the lights on. Talk to those guys, those energy guys, if you want a cheaper sandwich.”

If he pushed himself to it, Michael Kirby could remember how many years he’d worked around these streets. How, as a young man, he’d run with the crowd. The new boys, out to make mischief. Changing jobs as easy as changing shirts. Then his applications stopped getting answers. Then he stopped looking. The power company was a big deal. Compliance was important. He’d topped out.

A sudden collision. Arms and a body around him. An obscene, forced wrenching away from his thoughts to some physical moment. A cluster of strong muscles, shaking him down. A slap of blonde curls against his face. Large arms holding him steady. Charcoal pants, a once-white shirt, infested with eager action. The woman, sprung up from the doorway.

Breathless, alert but unknowing he struggled against her. A street woman, exhausted no doubt, unnourished, against a well-fed, rested man. But the woman was rangy, made from wire, bludgeoning and determined. One hand holding him off, the other exploring his

jacket. He shouted, yelled, thinking someone might step in to help. But he knew the rest would hurry by while her pincer hands were busy.

Kirby threw all he had at this woman. No physical guy but he got his arms working, got his spine in the game, tried to wrestle her into the doorway. At one brief instant they deadlocked. For a breath they stood face to face. Her chin was a spike. Her cheekbones knives. Her eyes were shards of flint. That's what unmoored him. Hardest eyes he ever saw. But distant, a falling away to some place of great violence. Yet capable to endure.

The woman turned back his hands, bounced Kirby into the wall. His wallet was hers and his arms flung up to his face, to defend some fatal blow. His right arm beat against hers. The slick open wound on her wrist. The open wound pressed against his torn bandage. Then she sprung to the sidewalk and gone on strong legs.

Adrenaline telling his bones its lies, Kirby chased after the woman, shoving dimwits out the way who could have stopped her but didn't. He glimpsed her through the crowd, hitting her stride, pounding the sidewalk like a conveyor. His grey suit, white shirt, old fashioned necktie lay sedate on his unwilling, sedentary body. These weren't clothes to run in the street and his wasn't a body to take them. He caught one final sight of her, two blocks down slicing around a corner like no one could stop her. Nobody could.

Of course Sharples said to go on home. He was no ornament here. Making call after call for lost credit cards. Babbling that he got mugged. "Take the afternoon off." Sharples kept his hands clear of anything Kirby touched. "You most likely want to get new clothes anyhow."

That costly sandwich he carried into the fight lay remaindered across his jacket. That puffiness round the eyes from colliding with hard bones and getting exerted. That impressive blood stain, right up his sleeve, from where his hand burst open. This acute embarrassment at not being business-ready. "I'm okay. I just need to clean up."

"Go home." Sharples' generosity, warm as a threat. "Come back in good order tomorrow."

**Act 2**

Blurry, on the drive home. Cautious of nuts who couldn't steer. Of cameras at each intersection. Drinking back the stale air of ordinary living, after the fight. He didn't fight. The woman rolled him. A tall, fit, rangy bitch, she picked her victim well. She knew, when she jumped off the ground, when she bodychecked him, she knew right then his wallet was hers. In a street of a thousand faces she picked him because he looked easy. Was easy. She planned and got what she wanted. More successful than him, in her business day.

Driving through his neighborhood, in working hours, was irksome. Here were people who worked from home. Or didn't work at all. Those buoyant people who needed no net nor wire. Who survived—thrived, spent big money—precisely because they didn't have work each day. The ones who went jogging at three pm. Who burned the lights when it wasn't even raining. This was where the young dealmakers were headed. While he'd be chasing compliance till he was seventy, with not enough in his old age fund.

And among each large annoyance, he had to leave his car on the street. Cars were meant not to be left on the street. Local ordinance forbid it. For sane and wholly accountable reasons. The fire trucks had to get through. These houses were choice, the deeds were fresh, these liabilities endless. If that house or that house burned to its ass because his car blocked the fire trucks, he'd be on the street with that woman panhandling stamps.

He had to leave his car on the street because a car was in his driveway. One day the drive was lousy with plants, now it was blocked by a sports car. He went out on a morning to earn some corn and the house stopped being his, that was the thing. While he was out, it was somebody else's house and they did what they liked. He made sure to slam the car door good and loud. He made royal noise with his keys.

Obvious, the sports tires were Stephen Kennedy. The man had turned their sitting room into a conference suite. There was Kennedy's neat device, on wireless hookup to the big TV. There was Slater's device, patched in. There they were, side by side at the table Kirby used for admin, meeting a half dozen suits in what looked like a boardroom. Stephen Kennedy had the softest voice, the quietude of a

true master. A good suit jacket and sharp shirt above, jeans below, out of sight, he was laying it out for these tiny figures that their corporation's accounts would get only a qualified pass, unless they took the sensible and entirely appropriate steps that Ms. Slater's opinion suggested.

As Kennedy made this elegant threat, Slater glanced at Kirby and back to the screen. Her expression didn't change—this was business—but Kirby understood he should leave the meeting. Not his house, in daylight hours.

He went upstairs to change and clean up, putting his clothes in a trash bag, not to contaminate the laundry. Before leaving the office, he partly fixed the torn bandage. He tried to seal it with packing tape, but it seemed nothing stuck to blood. Whatever healing the wound on his hand achieved had all come apart again. And this other blood he knew wasn't his, though it looked no different. He washed it out and it clung to the sink. Unwilling to give to gravity, it smeared the porcelain.

His phone beeped. A message from Slater, in the meeting downstairs. 'What are you doing here?' He knew that was shorthand to mean: Hello Husband, I'm surprised to see you in the neighborhood in these working hours of the afternoon ... do tell me how this has occurred. It was shorthand for that. He tapped back: 'I got mugged. Wallet stolen'. She answered: 'Great'.

He wouldn't be welcome downstairs while Slater and her boss gave clients the hard line. Even the kitchen risked too much disruption. As Kirby lingered at the top of the stairs he caught a secondary sound. Four pm, just after, so he wasn't sure why there'd be noise in Leah's room. Didn't she go to school today. Wasn't she due at school every day.

Conscious of the easy way he fell to being an ogre, he knocked at the door with hesitancy, nearly regret. The voice continued. He knocked again.

"What now?" Leah had the full setup in her room: stretch screen, two cameras, all-weather mic that rarely made it outdoors. Whatever she'd been doing was paused, the screen to neutral. "What are you doing here?"

This room was not part of the house Kirby owned. He hardly saw it. Aside from the tech, it was a stark frame. A closet, some posters, no waste. "Come to say hello." Something not right.

"Don't tell me ... you killed everyone at the office in the fight for climate justice."

He wasn't sure what he was seeing. Leah had a full face of makeup. Not childhood experiment ... properly painted, from wing-flick eyes to blood lips. "Why do you look that way?"

She kissed her teeth. "Try asking a cogent question."

"Why are you wearing makeup?"

Though she could act when she wanted, her look was genuine astonishment. "This is my face. I own this face. I decide what I do with it. Aren't you the one always bleating about property rights?"

Maybe he was concussed. His brain was slow. He couldn't move on. "You're twelve years old."

A sad shake of her head. "It's so inspiring to have a father who can remember my birthday. Makes me feel cherished for sure. And since we're getting personal, dad, why are you like you've had a cage fight?"

He touched his face.

"You're bruised to fuck."

"A woman attacked me."

"A woman?"

"A mugger. We fought. She took my wallet. She was strong. And fast. She ran off. I couldn't catch her."

"Perhaps she's a disruptor."

"It's serious Leah. I'd seen her before. She's one of the street types."

Those arms out wide. "What does that mean?"

"I've seen her. She lives on the street. Attacking innocent people."

"Attacking capitalists and climate deniers."

Anger never came right. "Not everything is a war, Leah. Some people are thieves. Just that. Not everything is politics."

"You stupid man." Cold. Harder than years. "Everything is political. This." She gestured her face. "This is political. Now leave. I'm on a call."

If anyone asked, knocked on the window and asked why he was there, he'd say he was ready to move his car in case the fire trucks came. He was waiting, just now, for someone to move this other car from his driveway. When they did, he'd put his car away. Until then, he'd wait in his car. He didn't want to cause an issue.

In winter, of course, night came early and stayed late. He the street plenty in darkness. But this was the regular dark of real night. Slater and her boss might stay talking for hours. He knew how those calls could go. A business with clean accounts was readily investable. A business with qualification might face a price hike. Those brushed suits in that boardroom would do everything to impress the accountants with the earnestness of their endeavors. They would be monsters of probity, whatever else they did after hours. Kennedy as the boss would defer to Slater as lead technician. It was Kennedy's style to play that way. The relaxed man behind the strong woman. Kennedy was on the stupid level of rich, Kirby knew that much. Rich, to park his ass at another guy's table and his car in another guy's drive.

In regular dark, Kirby didn't realize how much the street was alive. Teens from around the way made leisurely progress between the lights. Daughters and sons of leaf-blower wielding neighbors. A few of the district's more recent couples walked arms locked or hands in each other's pockets. A defense against thieves. Doug Wayne stretched from his nasty car and sauntered around the passenger side to welcome out a young blonde. Though at distance, Kirby knew she had a full face of makeup.

He would be wholly justified, entirely within rights, to go back inside, to ask in a caring but pointed manner when dinner might be done. He had, after all, come home sick and received no crumb of coddling. But every attempt must be weighed against risk. Slater's career mattered, her income mattered. She'd be royal pissed to get stiffed in front of Kennedy as he would with Sharples. Difference was, Sharples was a mid-range grey man doing enough for a leg up. Kennedy was smooth as shit and ran the firm.

On Kirby's wrist lay a glaring welt, no doubt from that bitch's nails. What a world, where someone could put the jump on an ordinary guy passing by. The welt smarted and Kirby scratched it. Didn't he

know, his whole life long, scratching an itch didn't slake it. But Kirby scratched, enjoying each momentary lapse in pressure, each poignant reduction in irritation, before the skin flamed again. He scratched. He went on scratching. Even when blood was under his nails, he took delight in abrasion.

Jolted on sensation, he slammed back his head. Kennedy and Slater, their faces framed in the car windows. Slater's mouth a kiss of disgust. Kennedy looked buoyant.

Now it got awkward to button pajamas, with his right index bound in band aid and his right wrist looped with a dressing. In a feeble moment, he tried telling Slater his action arose from delayed shock at getting street jacked. But she said since he called in the credit cards and had barely cash in his wallet, on a practical scale he hadn't lost much. She didn't know, he guessed, or didn't recall that baby picture.

Kirby's bedtime habit—bedtime being an arid affair—was to arrange his clothes for the following morning. This was efficient, it saved time and, ordinarily, was no more than five minutes' work. A suit, a white shirt, a necktie. But he had to sort out a whole new set of clothes for the morning. A chore usually restricted to more leisurely Sunday night had invaded the week. And he couldn't browse his shirts. He couldn't take hold of the hangers. With his hand and wrist swaddled and stiffness in his bones. Twice he failed to grip on a suit and then he dropped it, the collapsed grey fabric sending a plump cloud of dust, where no one, specifically him, cleaned low in the closet. "Damn shit."

Slater, in bed in her silkies, looked up from her phone. "You should take that to the doctor. There may be nerve damage."

"Yeah, you said."

"Because it's correct. Honestly." She got back scrolling. "I don't know why it's so hard. We're well insured. Dr. Grant is a family friend. Just call an appointment. You may have tetanus or whatever."

Kirby clattered through shirts. "I don't have tetanus. That's when your jaw locks, you grin like a fool. I'm not smiling."

"Well, you clearly have motor difficulties. Turn sideways."

"I beg your pardon?"

“Michael, I just noticed something. Turn sideways. No, towards me.”

He hung at the closet door. “Shall I pull some poses? Walk up and down?”

“Are you putting on weight?”

He slapped his stomach. “I hardly eat that much. I’m careful. You know this.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I mean on your chest.”

A monthly wingding, the corporate management meeting. Twelve times a year, a gathering, to review progress, upscale ambitions, share successes and find good reasons not to fail. Beneath the air-starved heights of Board and Executive meetings, the monthly corporate management was for less sparkly moments: operational planning, financial reporting, taking temperature on compliance. It was Kirby’s biggest occasion. It was no one’s favorite thing.

This monthly affair riled Sharples. It laid it right into his face that he was still in the lower leagues, the second tier ... this meeting, still, his biggest platform. A man whose temper and pragmatism cried for promotion. He prepped for it brutal. In the pre-meet, he surveyed the bright, photogenic young women of his section, the ones who could update on deals while looking the part. “This matters,” he told them. “What we contribute goes up the chain to Directorate and the Executive. The reputation of our labors rests on this. Simple language, people: no screw ups.” His gaze lit on Kirby. The guy looked wrapped for collection. “Michael, are your dressings tight?”

Kirby tried to focus across the room but something was off with the distance. The room wasn’t so big but, like a desert, its vastness put everything into slow motion. He realized something may have been said about his arm and saw, with curiosity, the white patch cotton extending from under his shirt cuff. There was maybe a little, incipient stain. No more than ever. He realized he should speak. “All good here.” That sounded okay.

Kirby scowled. “And get under a lamp. You look like pastry.”

The monthly corporate management was in one of the meeting suites, on that floor of the building that was only meeting suites. Generally, that floor was busy but occasionally—late Fridays or in the dead days of summer—a body could walk from vast room to vast room and see no one. Kirby did that a few times, way back. When Slater and him would have spicy calls in day time. There must have been a last day they did that. He couldn't recall.

This month's corporate management had the added incentive VP Emerging Markets made a star appearance. A swift piece of theater to rally the boondock troops, her attendance obliged the section heads to do likewise. Bradley, as pleased as any man would be sat on a bajillion barrels, Travis the renewables nut in his hairy shirt, and Lawrence. Lawrence dressed like a general on Sunday maneuvers. An old-fashioned tan and a coat with long pockets. White goatee and a string tie. Lawrence was the nuclear guy.

With the hangers-on, the governance dorks, the note taking fingers, it made a rich roomful. Kirby hustled to a seat at the far end, away from the wattage. His report was tabled. He would open his mouth to answer questions only, and only if Sharples said. Right-handed, he had to lean his arm on the table, but tugged down his shirt and jacket to cover as much bandage as he could. It seemed he was the only one in the room with any failure of skin.

Sheri McClintock, VP Emerging Markets, got recruited from one of the big banks as a deal hustler. Presidents in poor countries with rich potential needed convincing to go with this firm—by implication, this nation—and not those other guys. Local boundaries might need redrawing. Some bodies might need digging up. It was all in hand and all for the best, to secure a brighter tomorrow. Sheri McClintock spoke first. "I want to tell you again how much the Executive, the global Board, appreciates your work."

Kirby saw her in person just two or three times before. He was impressed with the depth of her voice and enthralled at how her braids lifted and slipped from her shoulders as she swung slowly about to address the whole room. He never really thought of any woman other than Slater. But McClintock was magnetic.

"We face trying times. You don't need me to tell you. Our competitors—some of which are fronts for state bodies, as we know—are alert as we are to ramping global demand and as keen to strike

deals in every corner. Across our supply chains, novel and enigmatic problems assail us. Technology problems, yes. Geophysical problems. And also, increasingly, social frictions, where the method of what we do becomes as scrutinized as the outcome. Compliance.”

An electric shock nudged Kirby’s heart. He saw Sharples get the same.

McClintock laid her elegant hands on the table, her fine skin gleaming. “Compliance has grown more demanding. Harder to navigate. More stringent and also more multilayered. There are bear traps, no doubt. There are pathways we should avoid. And, above all, the Executive, the global Board, are clear, we should respect local practice.” She let that sink in. “Ultimately, we are guests in others’ houses. We are partners, advisers, I would hope friends. We work with leaders in emerging markets to do one thing and do it well. We should respect their wishes, their customs and how they work. We should not impose our views. You have a friend.” She beamed around, as though they might have. “Your friend has an avocado bathroom. You know this. You accept it, because they are your friend. Each time you wash your hands, you don’t go to your friend and say, ‘You freak. What’s wrong with you? Ditch that ceramic’. Of course you don’t say that. They are your friend. You tolerate their quaint notions. The same applies when we do business. We don’t make fuss.”

The section heads were midrange dogs. They weren’t blasting rockets. And here was someone in the genuine cloth of the top tier. A body that sat at those tables and called people by their first names. The section heads had to prove themselves worthy. And Bradley was first to juice his mouth. “Rest assured, Dr. McClintock. As the division with the widest reach across emerging markets, extraction remains supremely sensitive to local requirements. Our ability to partner, to develop fresh skills, is unparalleled. Extraction, as we know, creates myriad opportunities. To reassign land use. To shape and mold. To bring in new infrastructure with enduring lifespan.”

“Bullshit.” Lawrence had a honeydew drawl that made is cussing music. “You dig out the ground and dump crap down the chute. That’s your reassigned land use.”

Bradley sparked up. “And your little atoms mean nothing can grow there again.”

“Bullshit,” Lawrence repeated, cheerfully. “The cleaned, warmed water we restore to the sea creates new fishing industries. Would Mr. Bradley like to remind us of his contribution to the fishing industry?”

“Who wants to go fish at a nuclear plant?”

“I do.”

Bradley switched around like sitcom dad seeking sanity. “What, on vacation?”

“On Sundays. At my house across the bay from a three-reactor plant. How many oil rigs you got in your neighborhood, buddy?”

Travis struggled to sit straight. “Perhaps we should talk about carbon capture and storage.”

Lawrence hugged his shoulder. “Perhaps we don’t.”

The meeting ran long into lunch. By the time of release, Kirby was seeing stars. His arm ached. Yes, with cuts and bruises. But he felt also some other, painful sensation. A captivity, a dense complaint at bandages, clothing, at being constrained.

In the corridor, as he tried to get by, the section heads still simmered. Travis, who never seemed to notice no one cared, was saying, “We’re working on upscaling waste cooking grease to biodiesel.”

Bradley laughed, appalled. “Biodiesel’s insane. You chew more plants than you save.”

“I like that.” Lawrence gave Travis a clonk on the chin. “I could use that to reduce lube waste off our reactor shields.”

“You know everyone hates you, right?” Bradley picked a stance. “With your shit tons of immortal crap no one knows what to do with.”

“Son.” Lawrence gave Bradley that steady look. “Our neutrons will be spinning when you’re running your car on pussy grease.”

Hungry, frustrated at getting penned up, the stinking street was like some fresh moment of springtime. Kirby felt lighter to step out the door, to breathe in the traffic, bad breath, the old guys in their dregs. To move among people who dodged his path, swerved around him.

People whose side-eye he could return with a growl. He had no need to play nice with what was no more than a collage of ciphers. Shapes and forms moved around by constructed truth. He had no need for this.

A charity collector stepped into his sights. Device raised. Calling him friend. Telling him he looked a generous man. Angling a sign up on something. With a smart strike of his good left hand, Kirby shoved the guy to the curb.

There she was. He could never mistake her. Her looks, her shape, her face, her body, imprinted on his. The blonde curls, charcoal pants, the once-white shirt. There she was. Not in a doorway now. Not crouching and waiting. Not in the throes of some fresh fight. There she was. Clung to the side of a telephone booth. One of the old-time booths, kept for tourist selfies and guys spying on people. The women clutched the side of the booth as a hurricane dragged her away. Her body streamed with the force of the wind. Her limbs yearned, dragged relentlessly on the storm air, heeling away from her body. Thinned by the air, sharpened, her form near translucent as she gripped one hand to the booth, wedged one foot to its frame, and the rest of her winnowed out, as a cloud, broken aside in the high atmosphere. In a storm she alone could feel. There wasn't even a breeze.

"Where's my wallet?" Kirby ran over the lights, flipping off traffic. "You hear me? Where's my fucking wallet?" He had now. He couldn't let slip. "I'm getting the fucking police." He grabbed her outstretched arm, fingers sunk in spongy flesh, surprised it wasn't more solid. Blood flowed freely through her clothes, painting her festive red. Kirby was solid, on a still day. The woman flew with the tornado. With a snap of bones, she let go the booth. One second, held in Kirby's arms. Then she fell. Dead.

He told these police he had to get back to the office, but that didn't move them. They preceded a leisurely way, to stare at the corpse and ask questions.

"Power company, huh?" The cop called it in. "How come you guys can't find a cheap way to light a bulb?"

“I’m sorry. I’ll ask people to try harder. Is this going to take long?”

The cop listened to what the voice told him. “That checks. Your address. Your employer. Your story all checks.”

“I don’t have a story. I’m just a guy here.”

The paramedics shuffled the woman into the bag, trying not to spread more blood.

“For the record,” said the cop. “How did you find her?”

“I said. I was walking along here. She seemed in distress. I was asking what I could do. And she was just dead.”

“You knew she was dead?” That was unhealthy interest.

“I mean,” Kirby corrected himself, “it seemed apparent. She was in distress. Then she fell to the ground. I couldn’t see signs of life.”

“You checked?”

“We get a little training at work. In case colleagues get sick.”

“That’s very civic.” The cop was appreciative. “I don’t think we need you more for now. If you need more information, take this number. Detective Talyah Rahman. She’s a junior in this section. She’ll handle the paperwork. Buddy.”

Kirby stared at him.

“Thanks for stepping in. These people. They’re not so public-minded.”

They checked their phones in bed. Him and Slater. That’s what they did. Slater checked her phone because she had actual work commitments. Kirby followed the news and sports, a little. Enough, in case anyone talked to him at work.

They checked their phones and talked. This became the pattern of years. Because what else might happen, with two bodies lying so close. Kirby would never claim to be the world’s sensitive man. Freely, he’d acknowledge a lot passed him by. A lot of nuance he wasn’t geared to read. But right before Slater spoke, he felt a change to the air. A little shift in the comfortable inertia.

“Thanks,” Slater said, a power start, “for your understanding on that meeting the other day.”

He felt cold. His arm itched. “It was no problem.”

“Stephen had to drop off some papers and there’s connectivity issues at the office. They dug up the street again.”

“It’s okay.”

“They bust the cable. A lawyer in the building says we ought to take a class action.”

“It’s most likely utilities. Improving the network.”

Slater pondered this. “Anyway, you gathered it was a tough meeting. Those clients are facing problems.”

“You don’t need tell me.”

“Just context. Their numbers grew legs. I may have to take a few days to go work with them.”

“A few days out from the office, you mean?”

“From the city. Their corporate base is down the coast. Long story. Historic reasons. I may need to go stay there a while.”

He couldn’t argue this. He couldn’t defeat it. He was proud of her skills and income. “When will you know for definite?”

“I’ll check with Stephen. Really, it’s just a few days.” Her eyes begged to return to the phone screen. But she felt, perhaps, some duty. “You really ought to get the doctor to look at these cuts. Shall I make an appointment for you?”

Slater pressed a gingerly finger to the bandage. Kirby shrugged her away. He didn’t feel why. He should be glad she touched him. Some itch in the blood, some spasm, resisted her care.

Slater sighed.

Silence ticked its way around them. From down the hall, Leah’s phone rang. And quickly stopped.

Stephen Kennedy made a laid-back shape. He ran this accountancy show. He slogged through the ranks, getting qualified, getting experienced, learning he hated to work for someone else. The numbers game was a crowded market—he could never takedown those multiplex firms with partners all over the world. So he offered boutique. Bijou. A deep dive with known faces. He worked only with agile, creative types who knew accountancy for an art. His top senior partner was Amanda Slater. A hungry ambition that would never have been satisfied, working that top-tier job. So he made her an offer: not just base and commission, not just the senior partner tag. Autonomy.

Authority. The freedom to work when and where she pleased, in return for brand commitment. A supreme accountant. A fabulous hire. Stephen Kennedy—big though his boots were—remained awestruck this smart, put-together woman had landed at this precise point, in the greatest profession.

Now she sat on his office couch, fidgeting that way she did, extemporizing on some rare cause he knew she could fix.

“I want to say thank you again for how you handled that gateway with them.”

Slater fussed her pant legs. “Thank you for your support. It was valuable for you to be there.”

“And thanks also for your hospitality. You have a lovely home.”

She turned this around to examine its root. “It’s cozy. But I like it.”

Kennedy took a moment with the pictures on his wall. Black and white photographs of buildings were his collectable. They mixed edgy with solidity, in a way that just screamed ‘check your accounts’. Not for the first time, he focused in on that picture of a Ferris wheel. Was a Ferris wheel a building. “No need to be modest. Your work with clients at that level is one reason we have to take on more technicians. You may have seen we have another new large client. Another refugee from the burger-brand firms.”

She smiled, poised and encouraging. She always seemed to consider every move before she made it.

“You’re good with clients.” He made it earnest. “You’re our top fee earner.”

“There’s hardly that many of us.”

“That doesn’t preclude being top.” An imperial clap of the hands. “And ours is quality work. Not stodge. I’m developing proposals. A small restructure, to capture more growth. There’s big opportunities. I want to deploy you.”

Again, that modest, cuff-tweaking hum. “Whatever I can do, Stephen. I’m committed to the firm.”

“We may need that week away.”

Detective Talyah Rahman wasn't a hit at school. Aside from the casual racism—which she expected, challenged and got nowhere with—the curriculum didn't suit her scattershot mind. Her serious sisters went off to be doctors. Both of them, both doctors. She'd be lucky to get a certificate in animal health. Then one day came a shooting. Not for real. A guy with a BB gun winged a phys-ed coach everyone hated. But for around thirty minutes it was quite the scare, where no one knew if the BB kid was just a distraction to some more harsh visitation. The police arrived. Detectives, who scowled at every speck of dirt and asked intemperate questions. And Talyah Rahman knew she wanted to be just like them.

The academy was hard, with the casual racism—which she expected, challenged and got nowhere with—but once she had that badge on her name people treated her different. Now her color was blue. She didn't get the glamor jobs, the wild frauds, the pristine murders. But she had a place in the structure. She had a line on the chart. She could shout and cuss without anyone turning an eye. That was better than most jobs.

Unidentified female. Cause of death unknown. Not top-tier compelling, but it had some interest. Initial pathology suggested a cocktail of disease. The woman seemed eaten away in unlikely places. Physical whole on the outside. Muscles in strong condition. But weird stuff occurring around the vitals. Lack of data on blood type. How was that a thing.

“Lab.”

“It's Rahman.” She still got a kick saying that. “Unidentified female. Yeah, that one. What's this with the blood?”

The technician sighed. “It's in the report, Detective. The tests crapped out on us. Twice. We can't yet determine blood type.”

“These results though.”

“I believe these days they're called 'street people.' She was a street person. No doubt unsanitary. No doubt familiar with narcotics. These conditions, low level in themselves, can aggregate if untreated. We can't pin an identity on her. We can't find record of healthcare. She's carrying round a viral load, no doubt from a whole menu of unpleasant habits. Yes, it's odd we can't name a blood type. The reason is most likely there in the dregs of her lifestyle.”

Rahman stiffened up. She was the one who did hard talk. “This is my case. There’s no proof of natural causes.”

“She was sick, Detective.”

“We could still be looking at something more. What’s the timeline on further screening?”

The technician coughed an ugly way. “We got dead children down here. They’re the ones I feel for.”

Sharples made it a joke—Michael Kirby, on a rare trip to the office. Sharples seemed to find it amusing. “All happens to you, Michael. Getting robbed. Then the thief getting dead in your arms. Boy, I’m not standing next to you in a storm. But really,” Sharples hunkered in. “We need that redrawn compliance map. McClintock’s itching.”

The strategy must be refreshed, to meet the corporate steer. That was a given. Directorate, Executive, the global Board, had to be satisfied the firm’s compliance approach met modern practice. Ethical flexibility, that was the touchstone. Alive to the big stuff. Working the small stuff round.

There were the prompts. The source material. The headlines. There was the document Kirby was tasked to edit. He scrolled up and down. Moved the cursor around. These little shapes onscreen. These electronic spitballs. This button and that. Nothing to taste. Nothing to savor. Empty empires of grand designs. Faint and wasteful.

Kirby reached to his wallet, to that picture. There was no wallet. He thought he’d go clever. In the street, when she fell from his arms, he was nimble enough to get how wrong searching her body would look. Create a total wrong narrative for the milling masses. Besides, she most likely had it stashed at her hidey-hole, with all her other winnings. Kirby stepped into the corridor. Waited the traffic to pass. Dialed the number.

“City police. Detective Rahman.”

“Yes. Hello. Yes. This is Michael Kirby.”

“Do I know you, Mr. Kirby.”

“Not directly. More tangential. I found that poor woman who died the other day. I called it in. I found her.”

“Thank you for that, Mr. Kirby.”

“You see.” How did he play this, not to create the wrong interest. “There’s a thing I forgot to mention to your officer. I had encountered that woman before.”

A barbed pause. A definite spike of silence. “Do you think you might need to come into the precinct, Mr. Kirby? To talk about that.”

How could he. He was already the day’s big joke. “She stole my wallet.”

That sharp breath again. “Your wallet?”

“Perhaps she made a habit of it. She stole it a couple of days back. You can check with my card providers.”

“I may just do that.”

This woman was grossly salty. He was the honest citizen here. “I saw her and went to remonstrate.”

“Remonstrate?”

“To get back my wallet. But she was in midst of something. She had some kind of fit.” He rode that ugly breath. “So, did you find it? My wallet. Did you find it in her things?”

“Mr. Kirby. Why don’t we book time for a little chat? I have your address. I can call round tonight.”

His gut was gone, decorating the floor. “I wouldn’t want to break into your evening.”

“I don’t have plans.”

On the drive home—the slow, awkward drive—Kirby framed how to say it. Slater understood he got robbed, though gave it no bandwidth. How the suspect died in his arms he didn’t communicate. Last night was the time for that, when they talked. Last night he should have said it. But Slater wanted to talk about down the coast, to see those clients. She wanted to talk her demanding job. It wasn’t time for the sudden death of a stranger. Perhaps he might not even have said it. Wallet theft was simple. Tidy. The woman’s death made it outstanding. Why else would that detective call at his home. Which was why Kirby had to tell Slater.

Upstairs, Leah’s room was quiet. Total quiet meant she was out. Out where. It was evening nearly. Dark coming down. Out where in the city with a full face of makeup. He stopped with his hand on the

door to her room. They always gave her space. They gave her trust. A future leader, Slater said. Let Slater deal.

Downstairs, Slater was still on the call. She was on the call with Kennedy when Kirby got in. He washed up, changed, took a moment with the mirror to inspect his fatty chest. He went downstairs and Slater was still on that call. He tried getting into her eye but she turned away. Turned away from him. He called her by name. Her first name. He said, "There's something I need to tell you. Hey, we got a visitor coming. Hey, there's something I need to tell you. I need to tell you right now. This is important, fuck sakes. Fucking listen to me." That's when he grabbed the phone from her hand—she was too shocked to stop him—and flung Kennedy's bewildered voice across the room. The phone hit the floor, bounced once and under the armchair. And Kennedy's tiny, tinny voice, saying, "Hello? Hello?"

When Slater said *yes* to his fumbling proposal, Kirby knew he was one lucky stiff. Slater was magnificent: brains, height and temper. With her method for making every problem easily solved. Across the years they rarely argued, because Slater was rarely wrong.

Her hand remained up by her shoulder, muscles not believing the phone was no longer there. She didn't look at Kirby, not at first. She looked at the trajectory the phone took. At the midpoint, where ascent caved to gravity. She didn't holler, likely conscious the call was still open. "Would you care to explain to me why you did that Michael?"

"I got something to tell you. Urgent."

"Urgent enough to disrupt a call with my boss. The man who pays my salary."

Kirby had to give. It was right and required. "I'm sorry I did that. Anyhow, you make your salary. You earn him fees."

Those folded arms pushed up her breasts, just a little. "Now is not the time to placate me."

"We got someone coming this evening. A detective."

"Will they require feeding?"

He didn't know what to do with that. "I shouldn't think so. It's about the robbery."

"Robbery?"

"My wallet."

"That? They're coming for that?"

“I wasn’t wholly complete with them.”

“Firstly, is there any financial aspect to your problem?”

Magnificent and baffling. “My wallet got stolen.”

That phenomenal eye-roll. “I mean impropriety. Is there impropriety to this? Anything that might touch on my license?”

“No. It’s only, I saw the woman.”

“Woman?”

“The woman who stole it.”

That way Slater scrunched her face, that used to be super-cute. “You got rolled by a woman?”

“She surprised me.”

“I bet.”

“She died on me.”

Now Slater was solid attention. “I want this slowly and clearly. In what sense do you mean ‘on me’?”

Why it should have been last night. When sheets and a quilt could wrap the moment and stop it spreading. “I saw her in the street. I recognized her. I went to confront her. To get my wallet back. I was decisive.”

“Props.”

“She had some kind of fit, though.”

“When she saw you? When you got close?” Slater’s suspicion put ice through the room.

“She was already having the fit. I try getting her attention. She fell toward me. She died. I don’t know.” His arms made useless wings. “Perhaps some hemorrhage.”

“And this is what you will tell the detective when they get here?”

“To explain how my wallet’s in this woman’s things.”

Slater adjusted her cuffs. “Pick up my phone, Michael. I’m on a call.”

A relief, nearly a pleasure, to get down onto the floor and search under the chair. To get out from the world of verticals and eye contact. Kirby struggled back to his feet, using the table for leverage.

Slater took the phone without a word.

“When’s Leah getting back?”

Slater’s thumb on redial. “Back?”

“She’s out. When I went upstairs she’s out. It’s late. Where’s she gone?”

“It’s not late Michael. It’s not above eight pm.”

“She’s twelve.”

That single, abrupt knock on the door, though they had a bell.

“Is that your detective?”

“Nice neighborhood.” Detective Talyah Rahman scanned around, like pricing the furniture. “Sorry not to get her sooner. Crime is endemic. And you are?”

“Amanda Slater. I’m Mr. Kirby’s wife.”

“For a moment I thought he might have got lawyered-up. This shouldn’t take long, Ms. Slater. I have questions for your husband. You can sit in.”

Slater stared. “This is my house.”

They took the armchairs. With Rahman on the couch, it may have looked, to some omniscient eye, like an interview for a thrupple. Rahman rested her hands on her knees. Her favorite move. To ride the silence. “As I’m sure your husband told you, Ms. Slater, he called in a death. He saw a woman die in the street and, in a spirit of service, informed the police. There was nothing untoward here. We checked his employment, his address. We were confident it was one of those things. However, there was more.”

The heat was down. The night was in. He should have felt average. Perhaps even a little cold. But fine mist pervaded his clothes. His skin stung and itched. The room grew hot. The more Rahman talked, the hotter it got.

“What we didn’t know, Mr. Kirby, is you already had knowledge of this woman. Your paths had crossed. When you claim she took your wallet.”

“Claim?” His voice came high, broken. “Claim what? I had to cancel all my cards. I lost valuables.”

“Valuables?”

“A little cash and pictures.”

Rahman must practice looking perplexed. She had it cold. “You didn’t say pictures.”

“Family keepsakes.” He looked at Slater but she shared Rahman’s irritable bemusement. “Look.” His collar choked him. Actively squeezed his pipes. “She jumped me. From the ground. I suppose it’s her method. Was her method. Innocent guy walks by. Bam. Up jumps the thief. No one expects that. So, when I saw her again.”

“This is the occasion when she died?”

“Yes, Detective. When I saw her again, I thought it could do no harm, on a busy street, in view of plenty, to ask what in fuck she did with my wallet. I thought I might get it back.”

Rahman’s neck made little clicks as she shook her head. “You thought perhaps she might be a collector? She’d keep it?”

“I did not think that, Detective.” Why didn’t Slater say something. Why was she staring too. “The cards and cash would be gone, of course I knew this. But I thought the family pictures, the wallet itself, she might still have that.”

“She might keep this incriminating article?”

“I thought that. That’s what I thought.”

Rahman nodded, neck clicking. “And when you went to ask about it, she died. Is that the length of it, Mr. Kirby?”

“She was having some kind of fit.” A faint inspiration. “I mean, if she saw me walk toward her, she’d run, don’t you think? For fear of capture. But she was incapacitated by this fit.”

“And died in your arms.”

“Detective Rahman.” Slater cupped her hands. “This all points to a perfectly simple explanation, don’t you think? We know the levels of street crime in this city. That’s why families like ours live out here. It’s established fact, I believe, the greater part of this street crime is connected with addiction. These poor people seeking a fix. Addiction and chaotic lifestyles lead to ill health. To early death. This is all well known. Of course Mr. Kirby here went to retrieve his wallet. Anyone would, that saw the opportunity to do so. I have to say, that was a robust decision. This person could have been armed, after all. Mr. Kirby went to retrieve his wallet at the moment of this person’s sad demise. As he rightly says, if she still had presence of mind, she wouldn’t have waited for him to confront her. Sneak thieves are always cowards. We are talking, Detective, about a coincidence.”

He was fully prepared to believe that was the most Slater said about him in years. The most energy she directed to detailing his life.

If Rahman came to find probable cause she was bust and knew it. Her fingers clawed her kneecaps. A few pearls of sweat strung her hairline. "Thank you both for your time. It's late." She zeroed on Kirby, the weak link. "We may need to speak again. Our inquiries into this woman's circumstances are ongoing."

In a swift, sharp move, she was at the door.

"Did you find it though?" Kirby asked earnestly. "Was my wallet in her things?"

"She didn't have things."

Before they could even discuss it, Leah came in. Her key hit the lock, she was there at the door, staring at them.

Kirby wondered if they looked guilty. He had to own this. "Where have you been?"

Leah was stunned. "What do you mean where have I been? I've been with Jade and Ricci."

Kirby lurched forward. "Who are they?"

"What do you mean who are they? Have you been drinking?"

"I want to know where you've been till this time of night."

"It's not even nine. There's kids playing ball on the corner."

Maybe Slater had wavered. She made up her mind. "Did you have a good time, sweetheart?"

Leah looked suspiciously one to the other. "Are you working that good cop bad cop shit?"

"Your father's concerned about you."

"Thanks." Leah went to the stairs.

"Where are you going?"

She turned, tip toe on the step. "I should think it's majorly obvious where I'm going."

"Don't take that tone with me."

"Or what? Or actual what? I was happy before I came back here. Two seconds. Bam. You wreck it."

"Darling," Slater got treacly. "It's understandable concern."

“It’s not good enough.” Again, Kirby’s voice cracked. That high, quavery sound. “You’re out all hours of the evening. With people we don’t even know. And why are you wearing hooker lipstick?”

Three stairs up, their eyes were level. Leah slapped him. Her smooth, entire, unblemished hand, with vehement force, around Kirby’s face. The noise it made, that crack, echoed up through the house. “Behave yourself.” She flung her hair over her shoulders and marched upstairs.

Slater whistled. “You asked for that. You go and apologize to her.”

“Fuck will I ever. She’s a little kid. She needs discipline.”

“She’s a young woman.” Slater stared cold. “She acts with decorum. You insult her, of course she fights back.”

“Do you actually think she likes you any more than me?”

Shrugging, Slater turned aside. “If you spent any time with her, you wouldn’t need ask.”

Into their scratchy silence came the sound of Doug Wayne and a female voice, arguing in the street.

Stephen Kennedy let his calls go to message. He focused on Slater. “I did think it strange. One second we’re speaking, the next we’re not.”

“It isn’t just that.” Slater let her head roll back on Kennedy’s couch, showing the angular emotions filling her throat. “A moment of temper. That happens. It’s this fantastical business of his wallet and the dead woman.”

Kennedy tweaked his chin judiciously. “It does all seem strange.”

“People get robbed, I know this. But she died. And this war he’s started with our daughter. Goodness knows what he’s thinking.” Realization came heavy. “I don’t see I can join the client visit. I’m sorry. I can’t leave Leah. Not with him like this.”

Placidly, Kennedy considered his monochrome landscapes. “Sounds like your husband has acute stress. I know a good doctor.”

Every room was overheated. Kirby felt it everywhere. Warmth sucking his skin. Soaking his clothing. Breathless heat in every corner. But he'd get through. He prepped for this meeting. He had his device. His folder.

Beadle and Sharples behind the desk looked uncomfortable as he felt. Perhaps something was wrong in the pipework. Someone should report it.

"I've made a good start on the new compliance approach." Kirby was careful to hold his voice. To stay focused. "I've proposed some areas for reform. Here and here. Where we might," what was the phrase, "enhance our direction of travel. Very much welcome your thoughts, before taking it further."

"Yeah, I'm sure it's great."

Sharples made a gesture, to ratchet Bradley down. "Thank you, Michael. We'll look at this after. This present meeting is about an administrative matter."

Kirby looked one to the other. "You asked me to prep our new compliance approach."

"And so we'll look at it shortly." Sharples poked around on his keyboard, wasting seconds. "It's a more immediate concern we need to discuss. About expectations."

"You put that report to the corporate management meeting." Bradley had hold of the table, not to take off. "You put it in without thinking—not even thinking—how it might land."

Emptiness chewed Kirby's throat. He looked to Sharples. "We discussed. Ahead of submission, we discussed handling."

"VP McClintock had pretty good handling."

Ordinarily, Kirby might be puzzled at Bradley. "I didn't know she'd open on that. I didn't know she'd be there."

"You didn't know? You didn't know? Aren't you supposed to think about risk? Do you need your balls nailed to a stick to piss straight?"

Again, Kirby looked to Sharples. His boss was checking mail. "The report was compiled in line with the compliance framework laid out by the Board. From last time. From that time with the gas in the lake."

“You say no fucking word to me about the gas in the lake.” Bradley clattered his chair. “That was all scientific. Rare side effects. You say nothing.”

That peculiar kiss of blood rising. “I compiled the report in line with the framework. I’m refining our approach in line with the latest steer. What is the problem?”

“The problem.” Sharples spoke calm and slow. “Is we went to corporate management. To a meeting of heads of section. A meeting attended by VP McClintock. And we looked like little panty-wetting girls. Energy is a noisy business. A sinewy business. McClintock gets time at global Board. We have to look like men, at least.”

Kirby rolled his hands. “Meaning what?”

“You’re on disciplinary.”

He worked with Sharples this long while. “You saw the report, Jim.”

“I see lots of things.”

When Bradley had gone to huff off his roughneck buddies, Sharples called Kirby back in. “You see how we’re fixed?” He tried making it ‘we’ now. “Extraction gets mad, they know the clock’s running down. Those guys know nothing but dig and drill. Algorithms scare them.”

Sad thing was, it wasn’t beyond belief. “I get a disciplinary, to spare Bradley’s feelings?”

“Michael. It’s a day at the office. You saw that jerkoff Lawrence, how he acts out, when that shit of his takes most the life of this planet to decay. You can eat coal but one sniff of that fairy dust puts you under. It’s how it goes.”

Kirby understood. Of course he did. But this was grievance. “I did a good job on that report.”

“You did an old-fashioned job. We got the steer now. A new direction.” Bradley studied him, close and wary. “You lost an armful of blood with that hand thing. You look tired. Don’t take it so personal. Leave that to the guys who measure their dicks.” A grinding of gears round the subject. “How’s things at home? How’s the wife?”

“Good. She’s doing good.”

“Amanda, wasn’t it? Amanda. Why don’t Mary and me come around one night, for a good old foursome dinner? Something relaxed. And get some rest.”

Every room was overheated.

“Do you know,” the clerk tapped it out with her fingers, “the backlog we’re dealing with? There’s cases closed last year not docketed yet.”

Rahman saw old pictures of the autopsy records room. Shelves and stacks and miles of little brown folders. Now the walls were bare, stained with rust where bolts from the shelving decayed. Now it was all digitized. Except it wasn’t. “It’s really one simple query.”

“Honey, it is always one simple query. Except it’s not. It’s more work and less staff.”

“I just want,” that phrase Rahman used her whole life, “a spread of cases where blood type proved hard to establish. I want to see if there’s patterns to these failed tests.”

The clerk hooted through her nose. “Honey, there’s no failed tests. We’re the police, remember. The infallible keepers of rules. Flaky test results get badged type O. That’s been the answer for years. There’s a box on the form and some piece of data has to fill that box. Type O. That’s what you’re looking at.”

So what did tough girls do. “Okay. I want to see the body.”

“See’ in what sense?”

“I want to take a look at the body. As part of my investigation. I am the investigating officer in an unexplained death.” Said it as much for herself as this matronly woman, who had every case with the juice rolodexed in her head.

“There, Detective Rahman, you are also disappointed.”

Something moved in her chest now. Some glittering shape seed of rage. “What do you mean I am disappointed?”

“The body’s been taken.”

There it was now, bursting out sharp as knives. “Taken? What does that mean? Someone stole it? Or was it the rats?”

The clerk gave a pitying snort. “This section is records. This is my counter. You can bitch dance all day and night upstairs in the squad room. Here, it’s my country. You may not be aware ... clearly are not aware, Detective ... the city has an arrangement with the

medical school. You know, that place all the smart people won those prizes. The medical school is boffo on toxicology research. It's been profiled. Of all the cadavers this city enjoys each year, is a stubborn percentage never gets named or claimed. We used to tip them in a hole. Now the arrangement is they go to the medical school. To help others after their death."

She hadn't known. She couldn't say. "I'm aware that's the arrangement. But this cadaver remains material to a live investigation. It's maybe a tad premature to give it away."

The clerk shrugged. "He only collects once a month. He's got the whole city to cover."

"Who does? Who collects?"

"Dr. Lee."

"Dr. Lee."

"You could ask him about it. He may not have pickled it yet."

He could have looked up the dictionary form of *snake*. That was Jim Sharples. Puts in the needle, puts it right in, then invites himself to dinner. Who would even be cooking that dinner? They'd have to get catered. Years, Kirby worked that job. So it wasn't a spectacular job. So he was no rising star. But there were parameters. That word Slater had? There was decorum. Stiff the messenger. Shaft the messenger. So Bradley and his drill heads could go on being perplexed about why no one loved them. Breaking the earth. Tearing the planet. Like a man chopping down his house for firewood. Kirby could barely keep hold on the wheel for sweat slipping through his fingers. He needed a shower. Cold shower. Needed to wrap himself in ice. Infection. Something material in the blood. Some contagion of heat. Fuck all of them. Fuck the whole tribe. Let them find someone else to piss on.

There, on the couch, in his sitting room, strumming a fucking guitar, black polo and slacks, that mustache. Doug Wayne.

Wayne nodded to him, fingers making out with the strings. "I'm play a request for you, Kirby, but I only know songs from the last century."

"Wayne." There was no nice way around it. "Surprised to see you. In my house."

“As always. As ever.” Wayne spread his arms. “I’m here to do good.”

Kirby knew he looked ridiculous, sweating in his suit, while this leviathan oaf looked supremely relaxed. “What manner of good would that be, Wayne?”

“Spreading the gift of artistic creation.”

“No kidding.”

Wayne tapped the guitar body, raising some bass notes. “Ms. Leah Slater Kirby has an interest to learn the guitar.”

The wicked thing was, the real pisser, it was entirely plausible Leah wanted to play the guitar. Her enthusiasms covered all bases. But Kirby wouldn’t know if that’s what Leah wanted. Because she’d rather tell Doug Wayne about it than her dad. “You bought her a guitar?”

“Not exactly bought. You know how it is. There’s always stuff in the rumpus room.”

“Well, I’ll make sure she gets it.”

Like a jock, Wayne switched the guitar out from Kirby’s grasp. “I need to show her the finger positions.”

Kirby stood like a tool while Wayne played a tune. “Very tasteful.”

“Speaking of which.” Wayne squinted at him. “You been hitting your old lady’s cooking these past weeks and days?”

Marooned. Utterly adrift against this man’s twinkling stupidity. “What you talking about?”

“Looking fleshy, old boy. Larger, in all the wrong places. You want be careful your old lady don’t get envy.”

“What does that mean?”

“Is there some special light in here?” Wayne flicked his fingers around the ceiling. “You’re looking less bald.”

Slater jogged from upstairs, where she’d clearly been hiding out. She gave Kirby a sharpened, direct look. “I didn’t hear you come back.”

“Mr. Wayne’s been explaining our daughter’s musical ambitions.”

Slater looked at Wayne like she didn’t know he was there.

The door buzzed.

Wayne unscrambled more notes. “Well ain’t this the hot spot.”

It took Kirby a second to recognize Sharples on the doorstep. Unfamiliar against the neighborhood's routine backdrop. Kirby thought perhaps to play it light. "Jim. I didn't think you meant dinner tonight." All the inspiring hate he felt, all the clean rage, was gone. Wasted on that dimwit Wayne, when he should have been stewing for this man who came to gloat right on his porch.

"I been buying plants at that garden place. Mary wants nasturtiums for her borders."

He loathed this guy. He had to show manners. "You stepping in?"

"Your wife home?" Sharples squinted at the treacly mess of the guitar. "Let's talk here. There's limits, you know this, to what we say at the office."

Kirby agreed, not knowing why.

"Ambitious young punks with flapping ears. The big dogs got insulation. We have to go careful."

"Chitchat costs deals." What the old sweats used to say.

"You know it." Sharples coned around. "The message, Michael, the serious message, is lay off the compliance high horse. Compliance is getting too noticed. Ethics look great in print. But actions got to be worth it. This disciplinary of yours, we can fudge it. It won't get financial. But there's bigger shifts in the plates, right? You don't want to be the dinosaur, drifting off to the frozen wastes. Also." Sharples kept looking round, like waiting for someone to spin him. "There are further questions on you."

That fucking man wouldn't stop snapping those strings. And was Slater singing. "Further questions, Jim?"

"That stuff with your wallet, that was a laugh. And who gets a cut that won't heal. But criminals, thieves, dying on you."

"On me?"

"You made that call in the office. Those walls are porous. And you stink like a jockstrap, sweating all day. It's not even warm weather. And these reports you look at people weird."

"What people?"

"Doesn't matter what people. Once someone thinks you look at them weird, everyone sees it." Sharples dug around in his pockets, to give his hands something to do. "We are a very exposed industry."

We're on eggshells twenty-four-seven. Everyone's looking to someone else to draw the fire, right? Don't be so easy to blame."

Kirby couldn't even begin on that.

Sharples was muffling up to go when Wayne stepped outside, calling soupy goodbyes to Slater and Leah with wholly offensive charm. On the step—on the step of this house that wasn't his—he paused to stretch his pants waist. "Cheery-bye Kirby. Tell her she's got to practice. Hey." He beamed at Sharples. "What's this? Another climate cocksucker." He meandered into the thickening night.

Sharples flapped his coat. "Excuse me one minute." He caught up to Wayne in the shadows of neighborhood trees. "Now I don't know you, buddy, but I know a rude ass when I see one. You just about owe me a sorry."

"Cool it, old chap. Cool it." Doug Wayne looked back to Kirby, stiff and hesitant on the step. "A word for you, away from our friend."

Sharples maybe recognized something, from years of going careful. "Make it quick. I got store plants wilting."

"You know this cat Kirby. You know how he rolls."

"I'm familiar."

"I been speaking with his family. I don't think it's coincidental."

Sharples glanced over his shoulder. "You say?"

"I wouldn't leave a little girl with that guy."

Too hot to sleep. At the bedroom window, his breath steamed the glass. Slater went for water. She went a half hour ago. Beyond his breath, the motionless street lay congealed till morning. Nobody drove along here at night. No one came and no one went. A daytime neighborhood. An office and family crowd. A neighborly party would stop at ten-thirty. You could set your watch. Sweat prints on the window paint, on the door and everywhere. Sweat that dried unwillingly. Like a fading scream. His fingers, his hands, with the bandages gone, soft and hairless. He always had hairs on his knuckles. As a kid, a girl mocked him for it. He shaved his hands every day for a month. Now was only skin.

Unhitching his pajamas, he ran his hands down his body over again. He never used product. All those male cosmetics. A man should be messy. Imperfect. Slater never used to mind. A man should have wire in each baggy pocket. But now he found no resistance. He was smooth as a sacrifice. His face—he didn't even shave that morning. Every morning he shaved. Leah, when she was little, would shy away from his chin. She'd yelp, say it scratched her. That morning, he didn't shave.

Slater went for water. When Kirby cracked the door—the house so still, the street so dead—he heard her on a midnight call. Maybe clients, away in some other zone. Maybe someone.

Kirby opened the closet, enjoying its noiseless glide. Each night, he set out his look for the morning. A suit, a white shirt, a necktie. His soft hands enjoyed the warm pull, the bright resistance, of Slater's clothes.

Sharples went to Bradley. That was the deal. Bradley's exec assistant ran for coffee and, that next quarter hour, Sharples struggled to look easy in Bradley's easy chair. Not an actual guy thing. It was corporate. Plastic. But at least that quarter hour Sharples could spill and it wasn't all one way.

"So then," Sharples said, "this guy comes from his house. Creep-looking bastard with a porno mustache."

"I'll take your word on that," said Bradley.

"Funny guy. Any road up, this guy gives me mouth. Gives offensive. So obviously I go down the street to teach him what from what."

Bradley blew out coffee froth. "Give him your street moves did you? Some of that urban dance?"

"Listen will you." Sharples slapped the chair. "I'm telling you something. Turns out, he disrespected me precisely so I'd go after him, so he could tell me something."

"Cunning. Very cunning."

"Listen. This guy's a neighbor or something. I wouldn't want him for my neighbor but here we are. He casts some serious doubts on our Mr. Kirby. Highly serious doubts."

Bradley pondered the rapid decay of gassed-up foam. How it stained the cup like corrosion. “Kirby worked here a long time. Think I’m right to say he stopped rising a while back. When a guy hits middle age and stops rising, that’s when the blood gets itchy.”

“What I’m thinking.” Sharples agreed with Bradley on only expedient matters. “And with all this heat we’re receiving on compliance.”

“Heat I’m receiving. Like renewables don’t use plastic and nuclear’s just bottled sunshine. Yeah.” He took a big slurp. “You should worry for Kirby.”

“What I’m saying.”

“Guy’s gonna blow. Should be capped. Why don’t you tell him today.”

That was what Sharples was missing. “I not even seen him today.”

Since the cruiser arrived, drivers behind stopped wringing their horns and filtered around the damage. Kirby’s hands stayed firm on the wheel. Ten and two. They never left the wheel. One patrol cop waved by traffic a loose, half-assed way. The other patrol cop filled Kirby’s driver-side window.

“Again, buddy. Can you recall what happened before you hit the rails?”

The car hood mashed to some degree. Not completely. The strike wasn’t heavy enough for completely. But the rails along the sidewalk lurched, buckled in, shapely and pregnant with impact. Bypassers skirted around them, flinging filthy looks. Traffic edged around the car’s skewed, immodest rear end.

“Again, buddy. What happened?”

Hands on the wheel, eyes on the windshield, Kirby considered. He drove this road to the job every day since they bought that house in the cluster of neighborly streets screened back from the highway. They bought that house when Leah was expected. He drove this road twelve years plus. He’d seen it change, of course. Old buildings flattened. New buildings put up. The road excavated for cables and pipes. The occasional crash. But he’d pretty much tell anyone he could drive this road. “I must have forgot.”

The patrol cop held onto his chin, feeling its character. "I'm not sure I heard that, buddy. What caused you to crash? Someone swerve in your path? Your brakes go? Did you black out?"

"I forgot I was driving."

Using his chin for a handle, the patrol cop nodded his head. "Those are words in a language I understand. But I don't know what you're saying. Help me out, buddy."

Kirby had no indication what would occur. He left home. He got the car. He was driving. Maybe part of his brain slipped to automatic. He drove this road twelve years plus. But then he wasn't there at all. No symptoms. No preamble. It just wasn't him in the car. He was nowhere. And whoever was in that seat didn't drive and didn't care. Kirby came back with the force of forward motion trapped in the rails.

"I'll see your license."

"What?"

"You speak the language? License." The cop's fingers moved into the car like surgery tools.

Took an effort of will to drag his hands from the wheel. Kirby touched his jacket. "My wallet got stolen." He hadn't thought. "Guess it had my license."

"You don't know your license got stolen?"

He never thought of his license. He just drove the car. "My wallet was stolen. I told Detective Rahman."

"Detective Rahman?"

"She's looking into the case."

The cop seemed satisfied, in that particular way all the bad things he thought were vindicated. "Then perhaps we go see Detective Rahman."

Kirby looked at the dashboard. He didn't know what it meant.

They'd tow the car, at Kirby's expense, to an auto shop of his choosing. They could see right there on the system Kirby had a license. No previous. No stains. But failing to have his license or report it missing, was misdemeanor remiss. "You know," the old guy who booked him in said, "these punks steal a license to order. Any documentation. It's a

valuable thing. Some punk right now could be driving around with your face.”

Detective Rahman took him for coffee, which was pleasant of her. No one till her asked if he was injured.

Kirby felt around his fatty chest. “I don’t think so. I was wearing the belt. I was in traffic, just going a few miles an hour.”

“You’re shaken up.” She gave him an encouraging look.

“I guess.”

“You had quite a week, Mr. Kirby. Really, you should have mentioned your license was among the items stolen.”

The precinct coffee room was cramped and sour. A lot of people looking at their hands. “I never think of my license. I don’t really look at it.” Maybe he did get a knock when he crashed. The rim of the room, the table edges, were streaked with thin silver light. Voices came thick and aquatic. Rahman’s pleasant, unmemorable face was a dark wonder. He felt himself taking shape. “Did you find my wallet?”

She pushed aside the sloppy mug. “Thought I said. There was nothing to find. She probably had accomplices.”

“Accomplices? Like a ring?”

“Most people aren’t alone.”

In the hallway she asked him to stand by the wall. Stand under the light. Something seemed to concern her.

“I wear the same shoes every day. These same shoes. They’re practical for walking and driving. How tall are you, Mr. Kirby?”

The hallway seemed rounded, elongated. People moved as though hauling great weight. “I been this same height a long time.”

“I always wear the same shoes. You seem taller. Turn your head, please.”

“I feel an exhibit.”

“This is a police precinct. We’re all on display. Turn your head.”

He moved his neck around. It felt easy. Fluid.

“May I ask.” She coughed wetly. “Do you wear a hairpiece?”

“A rug?” Sure, he’d lost some. Slater didn’t say about it. “Guess not. I mean, who does, these days?”

“When we met I saw the clear early signs of male pattern baldness. Now I can’t see your scalp at all.”

“Maybe the light. And I could use a trim. Maybe that.”

She walked him to the public entrance. “If you can, I suggest work from home a few days. Till you’re sure there’s no concussion. And apply for a replacement license. Before you driving a car.”

“About my wallet?”

“Your interest is duly noted.”

Back at her desk, Rahman wasted twenty-three minutes hunting a number at the med shack that might lead to someone helpful. Eventually, she got connected to Dr. Lee’s front office. The call went to message. “This is Detective Talyah Rahman, city police. I’m keen to speak with Dr. Lee about a Jane Doe collected this week as part of the toxicology program. I think there may have been miscommunication on this, as that case is still live. Waiting your call, so we can discuss.” She waited all day.

Kirby never took cabs, because who did. He went only from that precinct to the office and it cost half an armful. Slater subbed him a clip of very clean bills until his new cards were delivered. If he was taking cabs he’d need a refill.

How he was already late on a meeting with Bradley that didn’t exist yesterday stirred him up. Bradley was a dog in extraction. Extraction was business. Bradley ought to have more to do than slide meetings with Kirby. But here he was, in Bradley’s easy chair, while this make-believe tough guy talked pocket tough.

“I’m sure Jim Sharples already spoke with you.”

Kirby couldn’t deny it. Sharples often spoke with him.

“I recognize your work on the new compliance approach.”

This, all out from nowhere, became a thing. In regular session, the Board agreed a compliance framework everyone followed. It matched to industry standard. It was simple enough for the regulators to grasp. Guys in the field, stood in the mud, knew what was needed to stay right side of the line. Suddenly, that was old news and, pertinently, disreputable, as though some alien force had ladled compliance upon them and only now, with rediscovered manhood, they clawed their way out. That was the gist of what Bradley said.

“I have guys out there,” Bradley flung his paw at the window, “aiming to turn deals in the most challenging circumstances. This ain’t

business. It's foreign policy. It's catharsis. It's restitution. We deal with the guys who say they won the vote. Then we deal with the guys with guns. The women and men of extraction are global helpers. Seeking out sources of power to keep the old folks warm this winter and make sure that little baby's heart-lung machine doesn't crap out. Yes, the wind is free and the sea blows stormy. Those sources are part of the mix. But until we invent a battery big as a mountain and light as a feather, we need to keep drilling that shit out the ground. But we get hobbled every which way by lawn chair experts. We miss targets because of compliance scares. Am I starting to make sense to you?"

Kirby had evidenced, sober rebuttals. But his mouth said, "No."

Bradley looked at him as long as a stone age. "I think it's best I speak with Jim Sharples."

"Are we done?" Kirby never said that. He never stood without waiting an answer.

Bradley got to his feet. He was wide and raw. "Jim told me some interesting things he heard from your neighbor."

"My neighbor called him a cocksucker."

"Nice community. And Kirby?"

Kirby turned, his body heated.

"Why you wearing a woman's shirt?"

Restaurants were a usual location for business. Clients often preferred bad news with a good meal. Kennedy suggested dinner. Slater agreed. Her career had placed her in front of a million entrees. Enough glasses of wheatgrass to fill a sea. A senior partner, there was nothing remarkable to dinner with the founder. They worked together for years. It was business and social.

"I wanted to pick up our prior discussion." Kennedy ate slowly, deliberately, giving each mouthful due diligence. "Thanks in no small part to your efforts, we're taking on clients now from the dinosaurs. Your skilled, robust leadership of assessments is getting noticed."

"I'm passionate about standards." It was something she could say with Kennedy that wouldn't be misconstrued. Since college, accounting was all she wanted. The profession provided everything: opportunity, challenge, reward. When a business was on sale and went

for a bajillion, a great part of that value was due to financial integrity. The summation of strong, practical work by accountants. Slater held her head high.

“As our workload increases,” Kennedy platooned his food, “I’m thinking more about structure. In-house growth, and perhaps affiliates. I’m mulling a second office. I know, people said, ‘It’s all going online. Everyone will work from the beach’. I know and you know our clients still want the solidity of presence.”

“A second office in the city?”

“Maybe. Or maybe down the coast. We’re picking up clients down there. I’d want someone to set it up. Run it. Hire in a good team. An excellent team. In return: top base and cream off of total commission. And down the coast: you could work from the beach.”

Slater took a long slow sip. The taste of fresh mornings in springtime. “It would mean relocating.”

“Property search. Pack and lift. All part of the deal.”

“It would be upheaval for Leah.”

Earnest fingers hugged his plate. “I think Leah is twelve? That right? Already? You could move before she starts high school.”

“Starting school in a new place, no friends.”

“If we’re talking about Leah your daughter, I’ve met her. She has her mother’s sharp wit and resilience. I’m sure she’d do well. In a more academic location. We could take a deduction on fees.”

Leah would be okay, Slater knew that. The girl’s self-sufficiency was way above average. But this room had that elephant. “I’m not sure how Kirby would take it. He’s quite established in his sector.”

“You think Kirby will ever make more than he does now? The finance guys there couldn’t even place his name.”

A small tremor in her jacket pocket. Tiny and seismic. Slater checked her phone. “I need to go. There’s something with Leah.”

Leah was on the front step. Though she’d been told not to wait outside where people could see. She’d been told it was two seconds’ work to fold her in back of a car. Slater hugged Leah, no longer surprised at the vehement way that small, hard body resisted. “What happened?”

“He’s gone more strange. He’s always strange. He’s gone batshit.”

The backyard, ringed with potted plants Leah determined as a habitat for brown and gnarly bugs, picked up flecks of light from neighbor houses. Little stone ornaments, gathered here and there on family travels that just fizzled, as years went on and they each pursued their own aims. A few redundant tools she’d write off for scrap but Kirby insisted just needed the greasing he’d give them one day. The lone swing of the single child.

First moment, Slater wondered someone pitched a tent in the yard. They had a tent, packed somewhere among the bric-a-brac. But up close, it was a sheet draped over a seated figure. One of her good cotton sheets for when family stayed.

In faint, unformed light she barely recognized Kirby. To sit on the ground with his knees drawn high was scarcely a usual posture. He’d complain of his back, his calves. He’d hate to get dirty. And the dense, motiveless dark made his hair thicker. Longer-seeming. Though his hair had been flaking and fading long as she knew him. Something wrong with his stillness. He was too still. “Kirby?”

The voice was pitched up. Rasping. Raw. “It comes in the blood. That’s the moment. When the blood moves and it comes in the flash with the white light. That’s the hours, days, years on cement. Cold cement. At least you can’t fall. Down low, at least you can’t stumble. The power stretches bone from bone. Blood. Blood quickens. The time you sit, like every time. Take your tribute. Take your due. They all have enough. They don’t starve. They don’t see you. They have enough to share some. In this town or that town or any town. Right there, on the cement. The cops come. And the water jets. Pay them no mind. In this town and every town, they come to chase you out. But you quicken. One leap. One time in the blood. You get lockup. They give you the needle. They impose upon you the smallness they feel in themselves. Pay them no mind. For you come very far. Very far for this. You scratch your nails on the cement. You scratch your mark. This is your moment. They can’t stand you. They can’t live around you. You have to be that thing in the gutter under their feet. They throw you a coin. A sandwich. You store away all they do. They will collapse. They will wipe out. They will fail forever. It comes in the blood. The moment comes. They stay the same. You change.”

Slater's arms on his shoulders felt him shaking. "Kirby, what happened?"

The eyes that came around to hers were hungry, inflected with light.

"We should go inside. It's late."

Slater thought she'd struggle to get Kirby to his feet. That she'd have to grapple his weight like a rock in a pond. But he uncoiled, moved upward, without effort. As though drawn by the sky. He was naked. She saw inside the sheet.

She left Kirby sat on the bed. He wouldn't lay down. He stopped talking. His face was stone. Slater went downstairs, her pent-up breath released as, "Fuck," when she saw Wayne on the couch. "A little late for visiting, Doug."

Doug Wayne's arms stretched along the back of the couch as though wrestling gravity. His legs manspread, heels digging into the rug. "Summoned, Amanda. A damsel in distress."

"I called him mom." Leah had mixed him a whiskey and her ginger fizz looked suspect. She walked from the kitchen door, a glass in each hand like a popular hostess.

"Called him?" Slater looked from Wayne to her daughter.

Leah's stern eye would take no dissent. "You were out. I need protection, now dad's gone crazy."

Doug Wayne savored his glass. "I'm glad to help at this sad time. What neighbors are for, isn't it? We look out for each other."

"Excuse us a moment. A word, please."

Leah stared over the rim. "What?"

"In the kitchen."

She nearly had to clip the girl's shoulder to get her moving. "Whatever difficulties Kirby has, it's a family matter, you see that?"

Leah took a big slurp of her drink. "You include yourself in those 'difficulties'?"

Slater gave her the level eye. "Think before you speak."

"I was thinking. All this time with your boss. All these extra hours. Maybe dad finds it hard to swallow. Unlike you."

She wouldn't strike the girl. That was unethical and, anyway, ineffective. She tried one of the putdowns that had been ladled at her.

“I think you’re letting your imagination run away with you, young lady.”

Leah snickered. “I’m the least imaginative here. I’m one hundred percent the real world. And if I feel threatened and call for help ... call, because my mother’s not here ... that’s not your business, is it, Amanda? It’s not your affair.”

“What have you got in that drink?”

Leah shook her head, smiling. “You sad middle-aged bitch.” She pushed Slater aside. “Thanks for coming over, Doug. It’s a comfort to know someone cares. See you later.”

“See you.” He waved lazily from the couch.

Slater seethed at his relaxed shape. “I think the emergency is over, Mr. Wayne.”

“Mr. Wayne, is it?” He made languorous business of getting to his feet. “And I thought we were so pally, in this neighborhood.”

“It’s late. I have work. You’ll excuse my short manners.” She buffeted him to the door.

“You know.” His shadow hugged the step. “You should get that husband of yours fixed. Wrapped up like nightmares. Ranting and wailing. That poor young woman was fearful.”

“Thank you for your interest.”

“She tells me a lot about what goes on.”

Slater shut the door. Slammed her head on its therapeutic hardness.

**Dr. Lee** was grateful for Slater’s call. He knew Stephen Kennedy a long time. “Stephen’s a good person. Always focused on the needs of others.”

“It may be nothing.” Slater drew a long breath. “My husband’s behavior. He may have a virus. He had a small car accident the other day. Just a shunt into some fencepoles. It may have shaken things up. Perhaps rest and medication?”

“I’ll see him, of course. If he’s prepared to see me. People, sometimes, especially men — they don’t see the wood for the trees. They may say: ‘I wasn’t sick, until the doctor diagnosed me.’” He allowed himself a tuneful laugh. “That older relative who tells us: ‘I’m not going to hospital. My friend went to hospital and died.’” More

fluting. "People take their car for tune up. Get their refrigerator fixed. But won't see the doctor."

"I'll speak with him. I'll make sure he's willing." But Slater wasn't sure. She told Kirby he should go sick.

"I've never gone sick." Outraged, his voice was chalk on the wall. "All the years. I'm never sick. I don't want that on my file. I've seen guys go sick. Next thing, they're shifted out."

"A vacation, then. Let's go away."

His gaze a burn of suspicion. "When do we take vacation? The time's always wrong. Anyhow, she doesn't enjoy it."

With the delicacy of rare moments, Slater wound her arms to his neck. With an upheaval of muscular shoulders, Kirby pushed her away.

The car at the shop, Kirby rode the bus to the office. That woman at the house thought that's where he should go. He washed his hair that morning, faint blonde streaks strengthening now, chasing out brown and grey. That woman's clothes made a good enough fit. The jeans a little loose on the waist, but that was okay. This belted top stretched at significant places.

The bus was kids and deadbeats who had to be moved out the way. That was okay. They didn't insist, once Kirby started to holler. The walk to this office a long, loose stride. Muscles uncramped from years of concern. Bones set free of tight spaces. A few fleshy objects got in the way. This stride didn't do detours. Slam: one shoulder cast aside. Slam: another. Some jumped up and a few got antsy. One even tried his hand against Kirby's shoulder. That was okay. His wrist would mend in a month or two.

Anyone that came with inordinate mouth got the finger. Next time would be the fist.

That someone there — that was a face from the radar. That was someone there was a memory for. That huddled brown girl in the straight shoes.

**Act 3**

All morning this woman polluted the office. Worse, stopped work getting done. She seemed, somehow, to slip by the guards. She had a pass, but it didn't match her. There were always newcomers, loan-ins, trainees. No one noticed at first. But nobody claimed her. She rattled round loose.

She seemed to know something of the layout. She buzzed around that miserable desk the compliance guy used to cling hold of. She stood too close to the dealmakers. Got them confused. When Jim Sharples went down to see what was who, she made a pinky gesture at him, laughing with broad, bad teeth. The only language she had was bile and cussing.

Talking it over later, people felt worst for those interns getting their training. Though a dozen plus years in the education system should have toughened them some, they couldn't prepare for her busting in, scattering their devices, leaving sweat prints on their apprentice suits and breathing rich, flammable breath in that mousey guy's ear. Some of the cohort thought it was an initiative test.

Dan Bradley, the intermediate dog of extraction, happened along with the pitcher of crude and lignite stick he kept on his shelf to liven his presentations. To make real the discussion of what all this energy was. He was the first to challenge that woman keenly. Reassuring for him, the eye wash station was fully refilled.

Next second, she was in the refreshment point, smashing cups in the sink and scattering chai. Some impulse took her through each cupboard drawer, some urge for something useful. People came running, shouting around. And her right hand got overfilled by a blue-handle knife with a long, serrated blade. That's when they called the cops.

It took four of those properly muscled guys to drag that woman through the violated business space, into the elevator and down to the truck. She went kicking and punching the whole way. Even with a cop on each limb she was a writhing handful. They tried showing her their guns but she had no interest, so that didn't work. Besides, collateral damage made the brass shifty.

Impressively energetic, she was still seething and squawking when they offloaded her at the precinct. One cop had a black eye by then, occasioned through sharp contact with that blonde head.

Detective Talyah Rahman watched the procession unfold. The woman's shape alive with impact. "Who is that?"

The desk sergeant shrugged. "Don't got a name. She ain't saying. You see the whupping she give those boys? She's beating on them with the bracelets. While they're actually holding her." His dry little laugh of years on the job. "That will be the crack cocaine. Or tina. Or K. Or whatever you like. That's medicated strength."

"What's the charges?"

"Take a look. It's better than comics."

This office was right for Slater's spine. She sat straighter, walked firmer, here with her team of starry young numbers specialists, with her exec assistant holding calls and coffee, with Kennedy next door. Clients, in high definition onscreen, in supplicant person, wanted her mark, her warranty that this or that enterprise wasn't a parcel of sand. Men who did deals and walked like they had spurs, she could knock down with numbers. The power of accounting standards, the force of probity, in her neat hands. This would be paradise, if Leah could love it.

Slater handled awkward meetings with firm grace and cold facts. But this next was tricky. Dan Bradley was no doubt an expert in marginal benefits of sinking a well in this place over that. No doubt he knew the economics of blast over tunnel. He would certainly know when and when not to price safety. But the contract for his employer was tied up years ahead. This was a social call.

Bradley was a big guy. She expected that. Not roughneck big. All-rounded. He approached with a kind of boisterous caution — a sweet water smile for the lady — trying to hold his stocky frame off the ground. "Alright here?" He pointed out the chair on the guest side of the desk.

"There's fine, Mr. Bradley."

"Dan." Of course he said that. "Dan Bradley. I look after holes in the ground."

She allowed him a little smile. "It's a dirty job but someone's got to do it."

"That is so right." His fingers danced along the edge of the desk. "That's factual. And it better be us, I always say. People who know what they're doing."

Drawing out her own piece of theater, Slater glanced at her phone. "You'll excuse me if I'm brief, Dan. This is non-fee time."

"Absolutely understand that." He looked around like expecting some objection. "It's about your husband."

His message hadn't said much, but she was forensic. "I had thought perhaps it would be." Whatever happened, she couldn't look out of the loop. That was death to brand value.

"We all," he made a loose, empty gesture, "the whole office family. We're devastated by your husband's difficulties."

"It's kind of you to come here to say that." A particular species of 'kind'.

"I wasn't aware. I mean, none of us were." His mouth moved on silence. "I mean, it seems so sudden. When did Michael start presenting as a woman?"

Unwanted, inescapable, that backyard figure, wrapped loose in a sheet. "I don't think it's quite that."

"I mean, he's good. He passes. No question." Perhaps Bradley thought these were kind things to say. "Absolutely convincing. But he seems to have lost some of his dedication."

She was grateful Rahman made that call. More grateful each second. "I am aware my husband is with the police. They informed me about it."

When Bradley extended his fingers, she saw their lines were filled like he dipped in the treacle. "I've worked in the field, Ms. Slater. Getting oil flung on me, that's like rig guys saying Hello. But your husband upset a group of our youthful trainees. We're liable for them. And the kitchen knife, that was unfortunate. No one knew where that might lead."

"I appreciate your concern." Could they manage on just her income. They might have to, if she took that chance down the coast. But they wouldn't bust. Kennedy would make sure she wasn't scrimping. He was a line on her forecast. "Rest assured, Dan, we're

taking steps to resolve this. My colleague here, Mr. Kennedy, he recommended a specialist physician. Dr. Lee.”

“Dr. Lee?” That got more of a business demeanor. “The tox head at the med school?”

Slater dealt with distressed executives. She knew how to hold her face. “You’ve heard of him? That’s all the more reassuring.”

“Yeah, we got a charity fund. We invest in causes. The Board is strong on medical research. In partner countries, obviously. And in our home town.”

“Dr. Lee has agreed to examine my husband.” That sounded simple. Like a boil or ingrown nail. She wasn’t sure how it translated to what was inside that sheet. “And thank you again, Dan. For your best wishes.”

He laughed a little too easy. “Of course. Non-fee time. Us corporate paychecks forget. It may be best if we stay in touch on Michael’s progress.”

She took the phone number he offered. She’d know where to go if she needed oil.

Dr. Lee was a most precise man. Slater saw them all. The button-downs, the billionaire eccentrics. She never saw a man as fitted as Dr. Lee. His clothes enclosed him exactly, as though cut by laser to measurements that could never change. His hair an exact covering, clipped to his scalp. His skin seemed to have a fixed ratio of coverage to his bones. He spoke with compact diction and no waste of expression. He moved as little as possible. “Ms. Slater. However hopeless, however desperate, this matter may appear now, let me assure you Mr. Kirby is pivotal to resolving his problem.”

She’d been good and adult all day. Through the call with Rahman. The meeting with Bradley. Through Kennedy’s tactile concern. Along with trying to do the glorious work she was paid for. Now this was the moment, culturally speaking. Doctors saw people at their worst. Doctors forgave messiness. Even a man with an office like this and bajillions in research funds was still a doctor. “My husband seems to have turned into a woman.”

“Indeed.” Nothing moved.

“I don’t mean he’s presenting. He seems to have turned, quite suddenly, into a female who is both younger and taller than him. I could understand if we were on a journey together. If he was taking some resolute steps to switch gender. He is not. He has never expressed any interest in that direction. And the fact she is younger and taller is where, especially, I’d like to focus. Because I’m not sure that’s even possible.”

Nothing moved. “There are paper towels in that box. Ms. Slater, it is hard I know, but we must keep this in proportion.”

His hand stayed rigid above the tissue box. “I’m not sure how else to approach this.”

So far as she could tell, he seemed satisfied. “If what you suggest has happened has actually happened, we are halfway to victory. If a process has taken place, we can examine that process, deconstruct it, understand its workings. I’m not saying reverse it, but we can at least find out the ‘how’. The ‘how’ is a scientific question. We must focus on the ‘how’. Never the ‘why’. The ‘why’ is metaphysics.”

He was right. She should be less extreme in her reactions. “What are the next steps, Doctor?”

“Mr. Kirby will get the best of care. Better than going to jail, which is also a possibility. The brandishing of the knife, the law does not take lightly.”

“He’s lucky to be here.” That struck her as true.

“This is a research institution. We have partners in knowledge worldwide. The hive mind will address what has occurred. There may be an antidote. A cure. We may learn from this something of universal value. What has occurred may be useful. We’ll keep Mr. Kirby monitored. And under mild sedation.”

“Sedation?”

That surprised him. “Obviously, Ms. Slater. We want him alert enough to respond to our tests. But not so energetic he flies the coop.” Something onscreen drew minimal movement from his eye. “My next appointment is due. We’ll keep you informed, Ms. Slater.”

The teary, dreary woman was replaced in front of him by a young detective. Not much of her, but a scrapper, digging her elbows in his veneer. “It’s good of you to spare time, Dr. Lee.”

“My pleasure, Detective Rahman.”

“I had quite the time getting hold of you.” She squiggled those elbows around. “Your office seems shy of returning calls.”

“Returning calls?” He smiled faintly. “They won’t do that.”

“I originally asked for your time on one thing. But now there’s two things.”

“Perhaps, Detective, you should take them in order.”

She watched every move a cop could make. She spoke with old timers. She copied their stance. She learned the fresh slang. She watched movies. She trained herself to every detail of every organ bank she met. This guy was either putting her on or the wrong side of the bars. “You collected a body.”

A slight tremor to the air. “Not personally. I’m not so obsessive.” His shoulders twitched.

“Your team collected a body from my precinct. An unidentified female deceased of unknown cause. I had thought we might keep her until my investigation was complete.”

“We only collect once a month.”

“Indeed.”

“We have the whole city to cover.”

She breathed deep enough to taste all her ambition. “Earlier today, an individual was brought to this facility. Apparently male. Michael Kirby. Yet transformed in some way I cannot exactly define right now. Transformed to the likeness of the female deceased.”

“You suggest a hypothesis the live man became the dead woman? That is provocative.”

“Can I see the woman’s body?”

Again, that microbial tremor. “Apologies, Detective Rahman. We do not keep subjects here. We call our deceased colleagues ‘subjects’ so as not to objectify them. Keeping them here would require infrastructure at a scale unsympathetic to this building’s character and unappealing to its inhabitants. We have patients here and our students live in. Few want to sleep on top of a mortuary, however impressive. Our subjects are kept in refrigeration at a select location, until their presence is required.”

In the movies, in TV shows, cops could always find ways to their aims. They could find a charge to stick on an uncooperative witness. There had to be something she could charge this man with.

Some reason to heat his collar. “In which case, can you tell me about Mr. Kirby’s treatment?”

“Of course not, Detective. Patient care is privileged. Things may need to be done. Invasive things. No one wants that shared around. As you are police, I presume your interest is threat. In general terms, this is a therapeutic facility with security commensurate to our level of risk. We have close links with agencies at all levels of government. We have gold standard training. We conduct frequent exercises to test our response in a range of scenarios. Our patient-staff ratio is three to one. If you were seriously sick with an inexplicable condition, you’d want to be here.”

“Can you tell me, in general terms, about the form of treatment?”

“Our licenses cover a range of research.” Something onscreen drew minimal movement from his eye. “We must conclude, Detective. It’s time for seminar.”

Night in the clinic. A row of beds behind glass partitions. Blocked in and wholly visible. Apologetic light descends from brackets high in the corners. The floor is veined with overlapping shadows. Machines, on mute for the peaceful hours, pulsed patterns of red and green light. Patterns that swirled and settled onscreen. Competing in audacious beauty.

Each bed occupied. The occupants apparent from bandaged limbs, looping wires, perhaps a kick or sleep twitch. Replete sedation cossets everything. Sleep’s silver mesh lay unperturbed.

A nurse moved from her station. In starch cream scrubs, she walked the glass partitions. Stopping in front of each bed, she drew values from the machines and entered them on a device clipped to her belt. She didn’t step behind the glass. She didn’t approach the patients directly. She took, perhaps, their steady breath and inertia as proof of efficacy for the sedative. She didn’t see the woman’s eyes open wide.

The nurse returned to her station. Checked the time. Three more hours on shift. She unclipped the device from her belt, opened the drawer of her desk and placed the device inside. Next to her gun.

A fine morning to work in the lab, with the wind flinging dust at the windows. Endless grey sky promised rain. Students at the benches, taking direction through headsets, oblivious to the action in the room. They'd hear about it, in fragments, when professors teased the latest knowledge, suggesting insight on things they barely understood.

Away from the diligent students, at the terminals in the alcove, at the closest point of connection to quantum power, figures in white coats, in suits and structured dresses, watched packet data unwrap onscreen. Each line of text, each x-ray, each generated picture, elicited nods and murmurs. Someone gasped.

Dr. Lee attended lecture hall at great personal effort. His assistants inspected the floor. He rose in private. He took the hallway with steps of identical length, exactly measured. The assembled clinicians, advisers and students bound to strict orders not to make small talk nor ask how he was doing. When he removed his dark glasses, the room fell still.

"It is early in the day and early in the process for us to consider results. Those who know my method of work will, no doubt, be surprised ... perhaps, I may say, skeptical ... to see findings so soon. Ordinarily, as you know, the faculty present early stage. So why do I usurp their moment?" He didn't move. No one moved. "This is a case in particular. A case in singularity. We do not yet have the answer. But it is a case liable to excite speculation. Perhaps, I may say, wonder. Therefore, I have relieved faculty colleagues of the severity of presenting the implausible. I take this upon my shoulders. Knowing its weight may crush me."

His assistants, who understood his patterns to the breath, took their cue to cut the lights, light the screen, start the projector. Charts, graphs and scans followed each on the other. Fastidiously, Dr. Lee scalped the work with a laser pen. He spoke of amino acids, nucleotides, complex chromosomal rearrangements. Translocations and breakpoints. Self-replicating effects. "We have processes, well understood, for elective migration from one gender point to another. We can plot diverse outcomes along the gender spectrum. I wish to be crystal clear we are not talking about any of that. Indeed, this is not strictly about gender at all. Other indications: height, musculature, age

of the body, have similarly been transplanted. A wholesale subsumption of one identity by another. In consequence of viral load.”

They listened in silence. What choice would they have. But this conclusion sparked noise from the benches. Muttered curses circulated. A white coated arm was raised. He didn’t wait to be called. “Dr. Lee. Are you asking us to accept that identity is an infection?”

Dr. Lee stared, unblinking. “What do you think it is? Psychosomatic?”

Other cases she let slide. Rahman, locked online, trawled sites in every language from everywhere. Blood disorders. Blood mysteries. Stonings for witchcraft. A man claiming his gay lover was once his wife. Behind the tabloid hoopla, beyond conspiracy bullshit, she searched any indication the impossible might be actual. That this might be one in a pattern. That others had stood on this ledge.

Restless, she got time with the chief. She said she wanted a warrant on Dr. Lee, on the med school. The chief asked did she like police work.

Dr. Lee disliked these people in his office. These people he couldn’t avoid. They overflowed chairs. They mussed up the rug. They made havoc of air currents. Their gold pens and shiny shoes rebuked him on a level he couldn’t fathom.

His assistants handed round the report. The junior version. The text for brains not suited to this method of work. He gave them highlights, the superficial summary of this seismic event.

One old professor, who’d dissolved what once made him great in the acid of corporate stipends, turned the report up and about, as though its charts, its arguments, were a trick of the light. “You realize.” Coarsely, he addressed Dr. Lee without preamble. “This takes toxicology back to kindergarten.”

“On the contrary.” Lee hung cold. “This points the way to new fields of endeavor. There is much to gain.”

The old brains spluttered. “There is nothing to gain from destroying the tranquility of millions. Think of the cost. Think of the uproar.”

“I think we all know,” one military man said smoothly, “containment is the best approach.”

The nurse was surprised to see Dr. Lee in the clinic at night. He rarely visited patients. He found them dismaying. The nurse was also attached to her belief Dr. Lee was a great humanitarian. A common belief among faculty and staff. She would not—could not—question his actions. She welcomed him as if he visited every night.

Dr. Lee had prepared the syringe in his office. The ethical weight of carrying it this distance was near exhausting. But something had to be done. To put matters beyond doubt. The nurse unlocked the partition and ushered him in beside the woman’s bed. They called this patient ‘the woman’. It seemed odd to use the name on the chart ... how could she be Michael Kirby? The nurse asked Dr. Lee if there was anything she could do. But he told her that he took this upon his shoulders. That was so like him.

He unhitched the tubes and wires. He never much liked this paraphernalia of surveillance. They should monitor only with brainwaves. He made a note to set up a trial. With the ether swab, he prepped the woman’s arm, noting a tattered band aid that had been overlooked, clinging to her finger. Dr. Lee uncorked the syringe. It should be straightforward. The sedatives they used were proven effective.

The woman was strong and swift. Patient, also. No doubt she waited hours for this moment. Able to reason. Or, at least, open to cunning. Smooth, clean, she sat up. She grabbed the Doctor’s arm in her wire grip.

He struggled. That was reflex. A momentary lapse to animal maneuvers. He considered this embarrassing, but of interest.

The woman had stolen a scalpel and hidden it under her pillow. The nurses didn’t change the bed things till the morning. With Dr. Lee viced by her strong left arm, she brought out the clean, bright scalpel and stabbed him in the chest. As he fell aside, she jumped from the bed, tearing away the last links to the machines. The nurse was quick to her gun and took keen shots as the woman ran into the hallway. But if she was hit, she paid it no mind.

Up came the lights. On went the alarms. The guards came running, automatic rifles slung on their chests.

The woman crashed through door after door. Each triggered another alarm to join the violent squall of sound.

The guards were shooting. The dogs ran close behind.

A rational entity, she understood fight or flight. She understood the precariousness of her skin, against hot bullets. The buildings a jangle of light, of noise, running figures, smart instincts. She understood invisibility was no defeat.

One building stood apart from the institute block. It remained dark and silent, amid the ruin of night. This was the animal block, where experimental subjects were bred, kept and removed to be killed, for good reasons. The door had a keypad and chain. Neither could withstand her hammering fists.

An obvious move formed in her brain. Meet chaos with chaos. She started to shout. She hadn't used her voice since they brought her here. Its sound was strange on this static, windowless air. She shouted and slammed her fists on the bars of cages. She tipped them aside. Monkeys, drawn from their melancholy dreams, scared of the dark and dispersal, shrieked futile warnings. With better night vision than theirs, she saw how the cages connected. She ripped them wide, scooping out the terrified creatures, making them run. The rats needed far less encouragement.

She crashed through the door at the other end, as the hammering footsteps of the guards faltered.

"The animals must be contained." One shouted it. They all shouted.

The animals must be contained.

Some part of her could do this. Some remnant knowledge she could access, on a moment's stillness. Breaking into the car was easy. The glass accepted her fist as its fate. Some relic of memory moved her fingers around these shiny, delightful buttons. The dazzle box with his blare of colors gaped into her eyes. The box could tell her the way. It could make her journey.

A jolt to her shoulders as the motor hummed into life. The jolt was surprise. And pleasure. She investigated this sentiment. An odd, tingly way to feel. The car moved forward, hesitant, then faster. The box recited directions. Words some fastidious vestige of her understood.

It was easy enough to move straight at speed. Other cars might shout their horns, slam their brakes. She paid them no mind. The box made its suggestions. Her hands and feet became molded to this machine. Distrust at moving this way replaced by quiet exhilaration. Her purpose was coming toward her. Each turn of the wheels brought it near.

She made the car stop in the quiet street, in the quiet neighborhood. It took effort to make it stop but she moved her hands and something happened. There were no stores here. No glass towers. No bullets. No screaming monkeys. There seemed to be nothing but boxes of dark, facing across the blacktop. That residual instinct that brought her here, led her to this particular moment of street. This house with its driveway. Its yard and blackened windows.

“Can I help you there, Miss?”

A spate of anger through her blood.

“I say can I help you?”

She turned to the source of this wretched sound. A man, dressed in black. With lank hair. That thing on his face. A mustache.

Bizarrely, he seemed pleased to have found her. “It’s a little late to be out on your own. I got a fully equipped kitchen just over there. I could shoot you some hot milk.”

Her fist took his face to the back of his head and the back of his head to the concrete. He lay on the road, skull split wide, a black ooze of blood circulating through the fibers of his sweater.

Her attention went back to the darkened house. The door no more than metal and wood. It couldn’t deny her.

This house was an orderly place. Static and expectant. This room had a hard floor and was walled with machines. This room had a fiber floor and these places to sit. She picked a slim black box from the table. Pressed its enticing buttons. The big screen on the wall jumped alive with pictures of the institute. Some man with strangler’s hands talked

about monkeys. A warning. A repeated warning. Keep doors and windows locked. Any button sent it dark.

At the top of the stairs, this figure showed no surprise. The woman stared at her.

“Hello Michael.” Slater’s voice had the cool of a distant fall day. “It is Michael, isn’t it? Or maybe you don’t feel so. Do you have some other name?”

The woman detected no fear in this silk-skinned character. But need for maneuvers.

“Do you have a name?” Slater repeated, like to a child. “If you’re not Michael? I think you’re a special person. A special type of person. I’d like to understand who you are. Shall we talk?” Slater showed the way to the bedroom. “We can sit here and talk. I wondered if you might have some illness. Something you can’t control. I want to know, because I’m upset, you see? I had a husband. I don’t know what happened to him. Did you lose someone?”

The woman felt there was something not right to this creature. Some fracture that couldn’t be filled.

“Because I’d like to know.” Slater went on. “I’d like to know why my husband, not some other body. Was it an accident? Was the whole of this just accidental?” Heat warmed Slater’s skin. “I want to know if this was coincidence. A mishap. Who can I blame?” She took hold of the woman’s shoulders. “Talk, you thieving bitch. Who can I blame?”

Dragged forward in Slater’s grasp. She couldn’t tolerate that intrusion. Her fist put Slater down. But not like that object outside. She swung, she struck, but disappointment tempered her force. Dismay at such empty misery. She tilted Slater’s head to one side, not to choke on her puke.

Slater’s wallet on the bedside shelf. The woman cracked it apart. Out fell this picture. A woman and man. This woman on the floor and a man. Grown older, slower, a little grey. Thin on top under the sunlight. Thickening at the waist. An entirely ordinary man. She threw the picture on the floor and took the money.

Another female in the hallway. A child, with its fists up.

“I’m not scared, I want you to know that.”

The woman regarded this small, precious defiance.

“You’re different. I think I understand.” Leah sounded unsure. “They don’t like you because you’re different. Are you on the run? I know people who could help you. I know all sorts of people. More than she thinks. Do you want to talk?” She raised her phone. “We can livestream.”

The woman glanced at the figure stretched on the floor.

“Have you killed her?” Leah stepped back to her mom’s bedroom door. “You’re a fugitive now. I can help. Let’s talk. Can you talk?”

Talk seemed all they could do. The woman pushed by.

“I’m not scared.”

In the dead still of neighborhood night, the thickening squall of sirens laid a thread back to the cold city.

The woman stared at the child.

Leah stuck up her chin. “I’m not scared.”

Down the stairs in three long strides. Through the room of machines. The yard door gave with a music of shattered glass.

As the police cars wailed to a stop in the street, as Rahman leapt out, she realized it was the first time she jumped from a car holding her gun.

Years later, in a big city, in a different part of the world, a woman with a blonde drizzle of curls sat hunkered in a doorway. Begging money. Begging scraps. Sharp eyes on approaching bodies. Solid, tall, with the spring of unforced exercise. With clothes stolen off a rack some store left out for garbage. Among livid old men and fallen drunks. A strong woman. With good skin.

No one would see her or pay her no mind, except to avoid her. On the street no one questions who came from where, or why. Everyone had a story. A face, a name or two. This was her spot. Where she waited and watched.

And across the street, in the café with its waiters in neckties and tinkling pipes, the woman who sat every day to watch the blonde waiting. The woman whose hair was greyer. Whose limbs were slower. Whose days were spent. Amanda Slater.



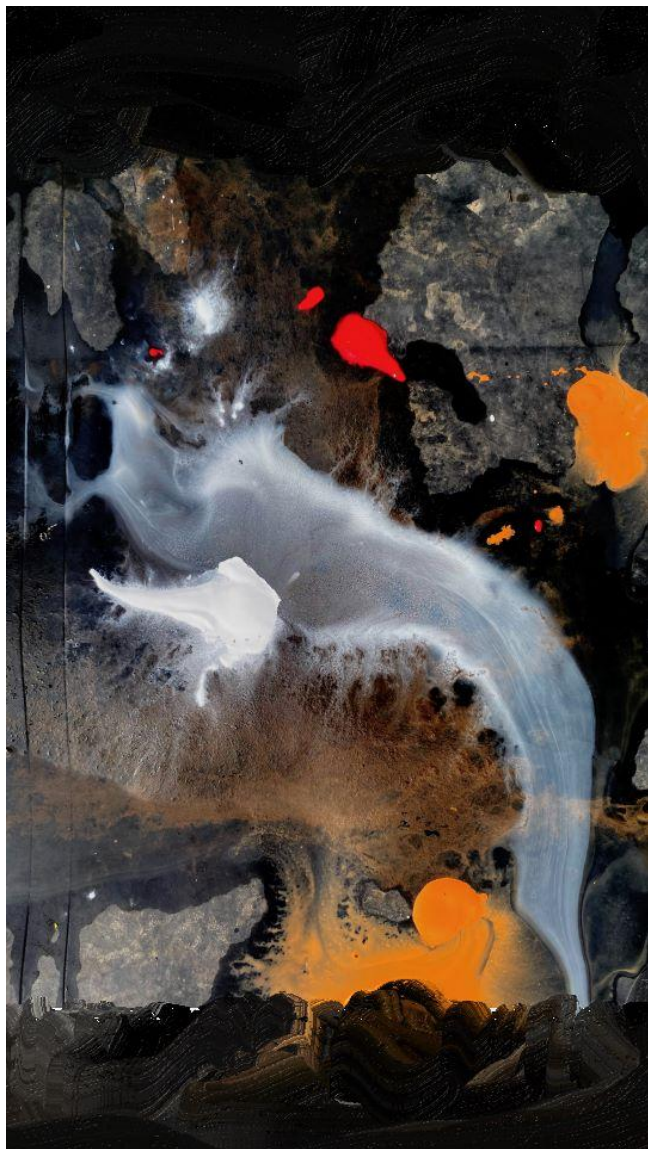
**Beginning Somewhere / Dave Sims**



In Outer Space / Dave Sims



We Rocked Left / Dave Sims



And We Rolled Right / Dave Sims



Stopped and Looking Around / Dave Sims



**Begin It All Again / Dave Sims**

## Violet Bruising at Dusk

Jeffrey-Michael Kane

Rigel 2026 Finalist

A starling keens out past curfew. Shadow and feather disturb a lace curtain. A woman, dawn, a sink scoured, teapot, glint off copper. The image of a man forms, briefly, then is exhaled on a sigh—the last syllable of a memory slides over the casement and settles on the magnolia as dust.

She placed the apricot on the windowsill the way you place a word at the end of a sentence — knowing it would darken there, knowing the light would finish what the hand began.

*Prunus armeniaca*. The Armenian plum. A fruit named for a country that no longer exists in the shape it had when the name was given. The Romans brought it west from Armenia through Anatolia, along roads that would later carry other things: columns of people, smoke, the silence that replaces a language when its speakers have been removed.

The apricot remembers none of this. It is a stone fruit. It does what stone fruits do: it ripens, it softens, it gives way.

The Armenians, though, they remember all of it, their own diaspora, unkind soil, the wont of water.

The fresh apricot bruises and rots in days. It cannot travel. But dried—pressed flat, leathered, darkened to the color of old amber—it crosses borders, survives months in saddlebags and cargo holds, arrives in markets thousands of miles from the tree. The Turkish word is *kayısı*. The diaspora fruit. The Armenians survived the way their namesake fruit survives: by becoming something harder, smaller, less recognizable, built for transit. What endures is not what was. It is what the original became when it had to last.

Her name was Élise. Or it will be. Tense is difficult here: she is forty-nine and has been forty-nine for as long as I have been writing this, which means she is permanent in the way that only fictional women are permanent, which is to say not at all.

She taught mathematics at a lycée in Toulouse. She had a daughter who no longer called. She had hands that were beginning to show the veins, the cording, the slow revelation of what the body has been hiding under the smooth version of itself.

She bought apricots at the market on Saturday mornings. She selected them the way she had once selected lovers: by pressing lightly with her thumb at the shoulder of the fruit, feeling for the give that meant ripeness without collapse.

The apricot is the most fragile of the stone fruits. It bruises from a touch so light the hand does not register the pressure. The damage appears hours later: a darkening beneath the skin, amber turning to umber, the flesh oxidizing where it was briefly compressed. The chemistry is simple: the cell walls rupture, the enzymes meet the air, the browning begins. It cannot be reversed. It can only be cut away or eaten around.

This is also how grief works, but I did not come here to say that.

*Amygdala.* Greek: ἀμυγδάλη. Almond. The small organ in the temporal lobe that processes fear, aggression, and emotional memory. It is named for its shape, which resembles an almond, which resembles the pit of an apricot — the hard interior that the soft flesh exists to protect.

Inside the apricot stone is a kernel that contains amygdalin, which the body converts to hydrogen cyanide. The sweetest fruit carries, at its center, a small and patient poison.

Élise did not know this. Most people do not. We eat the flesh and discard the stone and do not consider what the stone contains, the way we move through days without examining what sits at the center of them ... hard, bitter, shaped like the organ that remembers fear.

In her forty-seventh year, Élise's mother died. Not suddenly; the illness had been long, the dying longer, the grief longest of all because it began before the death and continued after it without any visible seam to mark where anticipation became fact.

She did not cry at the funeral. She cried three months later in a supermarket, holding a bag of apricots, because the smell—that faint, sun-warmed sweetness, halfway between peach and nothing—was the smell of her mother's kitchen in July, and her body knew it before her mind did, the way the bruise appears before the pain.

Darwish wrote: *A woman leaving her forties behind with the blushed ripeness of an apricot.*

He placed it in a list of reasons to live. He did not explain it. He set it beside the smell of bread at dawn and the writings of Aeschylus and the fear of conquerors from memory, as if a woman's body at the edge of fifty were a self-evident argument against despair.

The blush of the apricot is not a color. It is a gradient: the place where yellow becomes rose, where the sun has touched one side more than the other, where the skin has been exposed. On the tree, the blushed side faces outward. The pale side faces the branch. The fruit carries a record of its orientation toward light.

Élise, at forty-nine, carried something similar. The side of her that faced the world—composed, precise, her mathematics clean as notation—and the side that faced the branch. The side that no one saw. The side where the skin was still pale, still soft, untouched by the particular light that hardens us into our public shapes.

She bruised easily now. A bump against the kitchen counter left a mark that lasted weeks: purple fading to green fading to yellow, the body's slow catalog of minor violences. She watched them change color the way she once watched sunsets, with a detached appreciation for the spectrum.

This is what forty-nine is: the skin thinning, the vessels closer to the surface, the self more easily marked. Not fragility ... she was

not fragile. Permeability. The boundary between inside and outside becoming less certain. The flesh, like the apricot's, giving way more readily to pressure it once would have absorbed without record.

She placed the apricot on the windowsill on a Saturday in September.

By Monday it had begun to turn. The blush deepened. A brown spot appeared where her thumb had pressed: the touch she did not remember leaving, the mark she could not take back. The fruit was still beautiful. It was more beautiful, in the way that things become beautiful when you can see the leaving in them.

She did not eat it. She let it sit. She watched it darken the way you watch a sky after the sun has gone ... not because you expect the light to return, but because the colors that follow the departure are the ones you came for.

In Yerevan, a limb sags. The fruit flees the branch, drops, leaving memory on the skin of both. It rolls, wobbling where it bruised.



**Redhead** / Sara Stout  
Rigel 2026 Best of Art



**Jewelry Seller — Mumbai 2015 / William Lewis Winston**

Rigel 2026 Best of Photography

## Between Worlds, Refuge

Laura McCollough

Rigel 2026 Best of Creative Nonfiction

If you haven't been to Jersey, you'd be surprised by what lies beyond the Newark airport area. Coming home at night often looks like paused footage from *Blade Runner*: the shipping zone in Elizabeth, power stations near Newark, and sprawling industrial centers. The Anheuser-Busch brewery on US Route 1, just outside the airport, has a gigantic blinking neon eagle that's been part of my emotional landscape since childhood. Whenever I fly in—whether from Taiwan, Seattle, or Atlanta—I see that kitschy eagle blinking through smoke billowing from stacks, and I know I'm home.

I've lived all over New Jersey: South Jersey, Central Jersey, mostly along the Jersey Shore. But when I land in Newark, I always come south, even though Newark connects northward to Jersey City via the Pulaski Skyway. That bridge crosses the Passaic and Hackensack Rivers and the Jersey Meadowlands.

When my family moved out of Jersey City to the working-class suburbs below Newark, it was partly because we could still easily travel to visit my mother's father, Grandpa, and her siblings. We moved when I was young, so I don't remember much about living in Jersey City itself. But I do remember the Pulaski Skyway, the Anheuser-Busch eagle, the Colgate Clock, and the enormous toothpaste tube atop a building that seemed to stretch endlessly as we crossed the bridge. To my young mind, the Pulaski Skyway always seemed sinister, crossing what even then looked like a tormented, otherworldly landscape of the Meadowlands. I didn't feel like the bridge was taking me home but rather to some alien nest. But those landmarks—the eagle and the clock—became my guides, helping me mark time and distance.

Landmarks help us navigate geography. They also anchor memory. They shape history, culture, even ancestry. They can identify us by tribe. One of those tribal markers is the ten-building structure of the Margaret Hague Maternity Hospital on Baldwin Avenue in Jersey City. Built in the 1930s, around the same time as the Pulaski

Skyway, the hospital boasted some of the lowest maternal and infant mortality rates in the country. Everyone in Jersey City was born there ... or so it seemed. Somewhere between a quarter and a half million babies entered the world in that hospital. To this day, when I meet people from JC, I say, "I was born at the Margaret Hague." If they say, "Me too," we've forged an immediate connection.

People do that ... we try to place ourselves on the great grid of humanity, finding out where our dot started, where it's moved, and where it's ending up. Connecting those dots is part of mapping a life. Geography helps us figure it out. Like the Margaret Hague Hospital. If you were born there, it says something about your lineage. You're probably Irish or Italian. You likely have immigrant ancestors. And you share a history. It's a far cry from what people outside the state think of Jersey through shows like *The Sopranos*. The Irish had their own version of the mafia, after all.

Frank Hague, the Irish mayor of Jersey City and a political boss, wielded immense power. His influence brought funding for the Margaret Hague, named after his mother. The hospital brought state-of-the-art care to women throughout the region. Women's and children's hospitals often don't get the respect they deserve, but Frank Hague took care of his people.

My personal history with Hague's legacy goes deeper. My father's father, William McCullough, was a union leader in Jersey City during the Hague administration. And Hague had him murdered.

It's important to me to connect general history and cultural markers to personal history, and in the untidy constellations of family—biological and created—to understand the idea of groups, cultures, and families offering shared identity, while also admitting of the darker side of that legacy: the way power and violence coexisted with the immigrant experience, the way loss and shame exist in families. Time can make us forget where we came from.

Today, the Anheuser-Busch brewery boasts solar panels and claims to use more solar energy than any other brewery in the country. That's nice, I guess. But when I land and see that eagle, I feel a surge of nostalgia, its wings spread wide, anachronistic yet comforting. I don't love the thick smog below, that transition from the clear upper atmosphere into Jersey's industrial air quality alerts. Still, the sight of New York to the east, looming huge on the horizon, and those endless

lots of new cars from the shipping ports ... it jars me, but it means I'm home.

Home to a dot on the grid of my life, where my first tribe welcomed me. My mother, Irish. My father, Irish-Italian, a mix that raised eyebrows back then.

Once, my youngest son, Rutger, asked me about ghosts. He wanted to know if they were real. I worried this was coming from some pop culture fascination with zombies and vampires. We hadn't exposed him to that, but kids pick things up. So I said, no, there were no such things as ghosts.

"Of course, there are, Mommy," he said.

Rutger is transnationally and transracially adopted, a complicated condition for him. When we were in the process of adopting him from Taiwan, my father wrote a letter of support to the orphanage explaining his own time in an orphanage after his father's murder and his mother's death by cancer not long after. My father felt he could help give something to a child who had lost a family just as he had.

These connections feels disjointed, hard to pull together, like looking at stars or clouds and trying to see emerging shapes. Home, memory, loss, and re-assemblage, and spirits ... the possibility that ghosts are another way we mark our place in the world intrigues me.

My son, however, was not speaking metaphorically.

"How do you know?" I asked, expecting him to mention something from a friend or TV.

He answered seriously, "I know it myself."

Intrigued, I asked him to explain. He told me, "Ghosts are everywhere. They're the air. We breathe them. When we move, we move through them."

He waved his little arms, wiggling his fingers. "When we die, we become part of the air, all the ghosts together, holding us as we go around. Then when one is born, it comes back into the world."

When we were in Taiwan for his adoption, one of the things we experienced was the burning of Ghost Money, a thousands-of-years-old tradition of burning special "fake" money outside of homes and businesses as offering to ancestors, to ghosts, to spirits. This is done to honor those who came before, but also to get them to bring people luck and protection.

Our originating geographies might be different—Rutger was born on the southern end of the island of Taiwan; I was born right here along the Jersey coast—but perhaps his worldview includes all the ancestors, all the tribes. How could it not? I can't know his ancestors or whether he has some sense I don't, or whether he means all of the dead, all of *our* collective dead.

My father has passed now. He has become an ancestor. My son is a teenager and not inclined to the spiritual or philosophical these days. I don't burn ghost money, but as I drive through New Jersey, I think about ritual, how even driving can be a kind of prayer if done with mindfulness. I practice looking around me at traffic lights, the color of the sky, what birds might be passing through, and consider the breathing bodies in all of the cars around me, even when we are hurtling across these intersections and thoroughfares, wondering what was on this land before these black tops, who lived here before my ancestors came, what layers of past lives and the living still exist, like ghosts in the air. What if we, in New Jersey, are doing something similar to burning ghost money? Perhaps the industrial air I breathe, heavy with smog, is full of ghosts, too ... ancestors and memories in the air we can't quite see, but move through every day.

My son has been to Jersey City; he has seen where I was born, but may or may not ever see where he first lived. When my father died, my son mourned his grandfather, because this is the only grandfather he has known. Now, he has a complex of ancestral lines; for whom might he someday burn money to honor? And will he, if he someday visits Taiwan, feel, as the plane circles to land, a resonance, a body memory; will he feel as if he is coming home?

**Red Spot**

Marjan Sabouri

Rigel 2026 Runner-up

A drop of blood  
 on the peeled onion,  
     She cut her finger  
 in the middle of the night,  
 trying to feed herself—

How terrifying the spot can be  
 on the pure skins;  
 of the onion,  
 or of the Middle East.

**لکه‌ی سرخ**

قطره‌ای خون افتاد بر پیاز پوست‌کنده،  
 -انگشت‌اش را نیمه‌شب برید،  
 وقتی که ناگزیر بود شکم‌اش را سیر کند-  
 و چه هراسناک است این لکه، بر پوست‌های پاک؛  
 چه پوست پیاز باشد، چه پوسته‌ی خاورمیانه.

**Fire Tonight**

William Lewis Winston

Rigel 2026 Winner

The fire tonight is quiet, talking only in  
the hushed voice that last flames know,  
and the room is dark except for the remains of the fire's light  
and the sound of its desire to live until morning.  
And I am watching it burn down,  
reading Marie's poem about her brother,  
who died not of blindness but of fear of it,  
a sightlessness all of loss,  
of degradation that was his premonition  
along with the rest of the pain and  
the ravages that brought it to him  
in the end, as if in a room he shared with her,  
which, she says, like someone trying simply  
to stay warm he leaned into.

## Happy Hour

Stephen Priest

Geminga 2026 Finalists

In the gossip  
of the mirror's light,

the bartender's  
a handsome rat.

**on kilometer 16**

Julian Jacinto

Geminga 2026 Finalists

ankles turned to glass,  
my boy, five feet tall.  
one click. he folds inward  
& I keep walking,  
nearly envying  
the red wet sleep  
of him  
done.

**Herd and Felt**

Robert E. Shapiro

Geminga 2026 Finalists

With shortening days,  
she takes on lofting layers,  
like goats that grow down,  
soft on soft as a warm murmur.

**! check the rear seats !**

Sloan Asakura

Geminga 2026 Finalists

the car too  
is still in the habit  
of loving you



**Walk a Fine Line / Pamela Viggiani**

Geminga 2026 Finalists

**Choice**

Anna Sones

Geminga 2026 Finalists

Louisa goes to the supermarket with Mom. Mom is trying to pick out milk. Five shelves of bottles stickered with pasture scenes. Louisa steps back, trying to see every bottle, picturing milk tanks bigger than barns, milk lines like oil pipelines, and counts more expiration dates than the numbers on their girls' ear tags there at the end. The milk inside looks like theirs did, but she sees their mistake now. They shouldn't have hung onto that metal bucket Grandma taught her to use the old way. That milk was different. Thick, yellow, like the calluses on her grandmother's hands.

## **Compliance**

Adriana Rewald

Geminga 2026 Best of Poetry

I cannot be still like  
the frozen water. No.

I'm the stupid leaf,  
already dead, insisting  
on dancing along  
with the wind  
on its way down.

**Water Bearer**

M.A. Jessie

Geminga 2026 Best of Fiction

The top of my head is flat, sufficient to balance a pot. There is a line of ancestors standing behind me with amphorae on their shining heads, crescent-moon swoops of dark hair crushed under the weight.

Whatever grief they have passed on to me ... I bear it like water. It rises from the grave like the bucket I draw up from the well, and I take it home with the scent of earth and twilight coating my hands.

I carry my burden to the hearth pot and pour.

## The Pair

Chelsey Clammer

Geminga 2026 Best of Creative Nonfiction

Cowboy hat on his head, kombucha bottle approaching his mouth, he first takes a sniff, then says, “It smells like feet.” But cowboy boyfriend tried my hippie drink. Point. Hip-length dreadlocks sway with me on the dance floor, cowboy-hatted boyfriend with me, our awkwardness of country boy and queer hippie chick fading with each cowboy boot-clad foot move, each dreadlock swish, each kiss. Later, at the BBQ joint, his meat to my salad. I will place my vegetarian tongue on his brisket, lick it to understand his life experiences. And because of love, I’ll stay honest, say, “It tastes dead.”



**Red Carnations / Katie Haitema**

Geminga 2026 Winner

## Contributors

**Asem M. Ahmed's** work explores the human figure and objects through a dialogue between classical technique and contemporary narrative, reflecting on themes of migration, identity, and cultural fusion. Inspired by her Moroccan and Egyptian heritage, Ahmed aims to honor traditional forms while reimagining them within a modern context.

**Sloan Asakura** (she/he/they) is a poet and memoirist from Los Angeles. They are a '22 Periplus Fellow, a '23 Tin House Resident, a '25 Tin House Summer Workshop Alumnus, and a '26 candidate for their MFA in literary arts at Brown University. Their work can be found in magazines such as *Zone 3*, *Joyland*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and more.

**Allison Baker** is a visual artist, sculptor, and Associate Professor of Sculpture at the Herron School of Art + Design. Her work explores class, power, and intimacy across object-based practice and writing. She lives and works in Indiana.

**Lawrence Bridges'** photographs have been exhibited at the Las Laguna Art Gallery, the London Photo Festival, the ENSO Gallery in Malibu, and were featured in the Light Space & Time Online Art Gallery in November 2025. He lives in Los Angeles.

**Owen Brown** was born in Chicago, took an art class at 23, and all he's wanted to do since then is paint. Brown holds degrees from Yale, Chicago, and studied at CCA. Once a San Francisco resident, he lives in Minneapolis. His works are in collections in America, and abroad.

**Emilio Cabral** is an MFA student at North Carolina State University and holds a BA in creative writing from Northwestern University. He is the recipient of the 2025 James Hurst Prize for Fiction, and his work has previously appeared in *NEON Origami*, *Fork Apple Press*, *Miscellany*, and *Sand Hills Literary Magazine*.

**Chelsey Clammer** is the award-winning author of *Human Heartbeat Detected* (Red Hen, 2022), *Circadian* (Red Hen, 2017), and *BodyHome* (Hopewell, 2015). Her work has appeared in *Salon*, *The Rumpus*, *Brevity*, and *McSweeney's*, among others. She teaches online writing classes with WOW! Women On Writing and is a freelance editor. [www.chelseyclammer.com](http://www.chelseyclammer.com)

**Nick Courtright** is the Founder of *Atmosphere Press*, and a National Poetry Series Finalist with work published in *Harvard Review*, *Southern Review*, *Kenyon Review*, and elsewhere. He is the author of the poetry collections *The Forgotten World*, *Let There Be Light*, and *Punchline*. His latest book, on poetry

interpretation, is *In Perfect Silence at the Stars: Walt Whitman and the Meaning of Poems*. He also administers the Playa Flamingo Writing Residency. [nickcourtright.com](http://nickcourtright.com)

**Paul Flippen** was born in Berlin, Germany, and as an Army Brat bounced around between Germany, Texas and California at the whim of the Pentagon.

**Valyntina Grenier** is a multi-genre artist living in Eugene, Oregon. She is the author of three poetry chapbooks and one full length collection through Finishing Line Press and Cathexis Northwest Press. Her recent poems and visual art have appeared or are forthcoming in *Cathexis*, *Beyond Words Magazine*, *Beyond Queer Words*, *Wild Roof Journal* and *Querencia*. [valyntinagrenier.com](http://valyntinagrenier.com)

**Isaac Grimaldi** is a writer and artist from Grand Rapids, MI. He holds an MFA from Western Michigan University and teaches at Kendall College of Art and Design. His comics have appeared in journals such as *Parley Lit*, and his short comic, *You Will Never Be Alone*, was shortlisted by *Black Warrior Review*.

**Elizabeth Gunn's** poetry has been published in *Merion West*, *January House*, *Brussels Review*, *San Antonio Review*, *Loud Coffee Press*, *Passionfruit Review*, *Lavender Review*, *Past Ten*, *Wild Umbrella*, *Soul Poetry*, and others. She and her wife live with three rescue pups in Henderson, Nevada, adjacent to the endless Mojave Desert.

**Katie Haitema** created the work in this edition as a mixed media piece using watercolor, colored pencil, and graphite pencil. The artist draws the red carnations she bought for her father. She placed them in a vase on her windowsill. Outside snow falls and the starkness of the red carnation is captured.

**Joseph Mark Hansen** is a neon and stained-glass artist in Phoenix Arizona. You can find him and his work on insta @cliffdance and his website <http://dagne.org/josephhanson.html>

**J.C. Henderson** is an artist and poet. She works toward instilling a soul and/or telling a story in her paintings. Her works have been featured, some as cover art, in literary and art magazines in the US and England. Currently she lives in the Austin area with George, Kate, and seven cats.

**Julian Jacinto** is a Filipino American student writer from New York. Their work explores intergenerational memory, war, and the cultural legacies of history.

**M.A. Jessie** is a lifelong resident of the Canadian prairies. She is most at home among the mountains, or among friends (if mountains are inaccessible).

**Jeffrey-Michael Kane's** work has appeared in *Plough*, *Metonym*, *Dappled Things*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *Argyle Literary Journal*, and *Barely South Review*. Kane's book *Quiet Brilliance: What Employers Miss About Neurodivergent Talent* is forthcoming from CollectiveInk in spring 2026.

**Seán Kelly** was shortlisted for the 2024 Templar Straid Collection awards. His work has been published in journals such as *Poetry Ireland Review*, [rte.ie](http://rte.ie), *The Moth*, *High Window*, *Skylight 47*, *Crannog*, *Waxed Lemon*, *Abridged*, *The Storms*, *Cormorant*, *Cape Magazine*, and *Honest Ulsterman*. He reviews poetry and fiction for the *Irish Examiner* and is Arts and Culture Officer at University College Cork.

**Laura McCullough** is an award-winning poet and Professor of English with a doctorate in Medical Humanities. Her research centers on the nexus between narrative and trauma theories, and the vital role of story in healing intergenerational and personal trauma. Her forthcoming collection, *The Resurrection Jar*, delves into themes of grief, caregiving, and renewal. [www.lmccullough.org](http://www.lmccullough.org)

**Stephen Priest** grew up in Dayton, Ohio and now lives in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. His poems have appeared in *32 Poems*, *Barrow Street*, *The Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Subtropics* and other print and online journals, and his first poetry manuscript has been shortlisted for a number of book awards.

**Adriana Rewald** (she/her) is a writer and teacher who was born in Detroit and raised in Warsaw, Poland. She received her MFA from Hollins University and her writing has appeared in *Redivider*, *Artemis*, and elsewhere. She is currently based in Poland.

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. (Translator's Biographical Note)

**Morgan Rose-Marie** is a queer writer and an Assistant Professor at Utah Valley University. She serves as an assistant editor for *Brevity*. She has a PhD from Ohio University and an MA from Colorado State University. Her work has been featured in *The Normal School*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Tampa Review*, and *Pleiades*, among others. [morganrosemarie.com](http://morganrosemarie.com).

**Marjan Sabouri**, a forty-four-year-old Iranian woman, has master's in illustration and worked as a university lecturer. From a young age, writing

poems had been a special way to show the inner thoughts. Mostly, her poems are in Farsi, her mother tongue. She has started to translate her poems to share worldwide. Her deepest wish is to spread the message of humanity, peace and love, and to be a voice speaking about injustice and human rights violations in Iran and the Middle East.

**Robert E. Shapiro** is an unpublished poet and a professor emeritus of Neurological Sciences at the University of Vermont.

**Dave Sims** . . . continues to make art and music in the old mountains of central Pennsylvania. [www.tincansims.com](http://www.tincansims.com)

**Anna Sones** received a B.A. in Written Arts from Bard College. She was born and raised in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and is working on her first novel. Anna's writing is preoccupied with living and loving in a world that is at once full of wonders and catastrophically threatened.

**Max St-Jacques's** photography has been featured at BRIC Gallery NYC, Usagi NYC Project Gallery, J. Mane Online Gallery, Glen Echo Photoworks, Las Laguna Art Gallery, SE Center for Photography, Gallery 1313, Remote Gallery and others. Additional work has been featured in *Beyond Words*, *Lunch Break Zine*, *Up North* and *Stone Soup*.

**Sara Stout** is an artist, author, and public speaker. She lives with her family in Idaho and loves painting places she visits with her family. Originally from Utah, she gets homesick for the red dirt and drives her four sons back home every year to get the bottom of her car red. Favorite mediums include digital art, watercolor, pen and ink drawing, and writing fantasy novels in places she hasn't painted yet.

**Wally Swist's** new books include *Aperture* (Kelsay Books) and *If You're the Dreamer, I'm the Dream*. Poems, essays, and translations have appeared in *Anomaly*, *Chicago Quarterly Review*, *Commonweal*, *Healing Muse*, *Kestrel*, *Montreal Review*, *North American Review*, *Pensive*, *Poetry London*, *Rattle*, *Upstreet* and *Your Impossible Voice*. Bainbridge Island Press published his most recent collection of his poetry, *Discovering What to Say* (2025).

**Tianyagenv** uses light clay to make mushrooms, which helps soothe her existential pain.

**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. She began teaching art in 1986. Now in retirement, Pamela continues to foster enthusiasm and creativity in her students by teaching local after school art programs for children.

**Mark Wagstaff's** work has appeared in *The Write Launch*, *Bookends Review*, *Plentitudes* and *Sunspot Lit*. He won the 3-Day Novel Contest with the sci-fi AI-loving road-trip caper *So We Blush Less When The Phone Rings* (Anvil Press). Cinnamon Press published *Mascara* in 2025. [www.markwagstaff.com](http://www.markwagstaff.com)

**William Lewis Winston** lives in Oakland, California, where he taught history, literature, and literary composition for four decades. His poems appear in *Bearing Witness*, *Margie*, *Ink Pot*, *Comstock*, *Poet Lore*, *Essential*, *Close Up*, *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 age ten.

**Cynthia Yatchman** is a Seattle-based artist whose paintings and prints are housed in numerous public/private collections. Her work has been shown at Harborview Hospital, Seattle University, Seattle Pacific University, the Tacoma and Seattle Convention Centers and the Pacific Science Center. Her art has been published in multiple online galleries and journals.

**Artist Robin Young**, based in Borrego Springs, California, works in mixed media, focusing mostly on collage and contemporary art making. Her collage art uses magazine clippings, masking tape, wallpaper, jewelry, feathers, foil, etc., allows her to develop deep into the whimsical and intuitive.

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