Sunspot Literary Journal

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Changing the World
Through Words and Art

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Elias Peirce

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Vulnerable Shares

Sussu Laaksonen

We are sitting in my kitchen, five white women, with our wine. We are thirties to late forties. I have started a book club. It's time. I've lived in the United States, in the San Francisco Bay Area, for twelve years without very many of my own friends. My husband has always wanted to be polyamorous. I'm European, so I never assumed I would be faithful. We had a crisis and now we are trying to be polyamorous. These are my new polyamorous friends.

I had a fantasy of a book club where we read smutty literature to each other and attractive attendants feed us nibbles in a velvety Victorian room. I volunteered to host. I'm a bookish type. I felt I could offer something to the liberated women, combining my flair for fiction with sexiness. But Missy, the leader of the women's group, decided that we should read *The Journey from Abandonment to Healing* by Susan Anderson. I loathe self-help literature but Missy has been through Landmark. She is very assertive. Velvety rooms did not materialize, so here we are in my kitchen.

I have a vague feeling that I should have cancelled the book club. I already complained about the book in our online group. I acknowledge to my guests that I may have ranted but at the same time, I reiterate my position. There is a lot I don't like about Susan Anderson's world view. Missy interrupts me and tells me I have made my position quite clear. She says that my criticisms have been hurtful and overly judgmental. This book has meant a great deal to other people. We are here to discuss everyone's experience, and Missy hopes that I can participate in a productive conversation. I'm embarrassed. Who am I to invite people into my home and then tell them I don't like what they are reading? I apologize. Yes, of course I will participate productively. I profess my enthusiasm for hearing what everyone thought about the book.

Missy asks everyone to recount an experience of abandonment. This is a vulnerable book and we are going to have a vulnerable discussion.

Missy explains how her own long-term relationship ended. Missy had learned Non-Violent Communication, but her fiancée hadn't, and this led to conflict. Missy had several abandonment experiences in her childhood. Her parents separated. She didn't speak to her father for a long time. She was working on her issues, but her fiancée wasn't working on his, and eventually the relationship blew up. All her trauma came to the forefront during the breakup, and Susan Anderson's book literally saved Missy's life. She was able to move through the Five Stages of Healing and learn a lot about herself. She later had liberating gang bangs and transformed her relationship with all men, including her father.

I am not drinking very much because I want to be a gracious host and not drunk like a Finn. I'm still reeling from embarrassment that I made people feel bad about the book and myself look like a troll. My brain feels like soft porridge. I can't remember a single experience of abandonment from my own life. I look at the yellow salt shaker on the table. It was made by my best friend at home, a potter who experienced involuntary automatic writing when we were teenagers. It all started when he became the lover of a much older woman who was a medium. She taught him how to contact spirits, and two spiritual entities started speaking through him. At first he could control when he wanted them to speak. But eventually they started taking over. They seized his hand in the middle of the night or while he was doing homework, and writing poured out. Sometimes they grabbed his arm and it shot up in the middle of class. Then my friend joined the army and the spirits went away. I forget their names. I forget what they said. In hindsight it probably wasn't anything very important. This is not the kind of story I am expected to tell in this book club.

Now it's Kara's turn. She is in her early thirties and has brown curly hair. She is small, but not as small as my friend Vanessa. Vanessa is tiny but she is so intense you don't notice how little space she takes up. She is a person I met through my husband, and she has become my friend. I've invited her to the book club. She is often late, and showed up in the middle of Missy's vulnerable share.

Kara's childhood was very stable as far as she can remember and she has not been in a long-term relationship. She has studied to be

a shaman and has experienced the worst kinds of fear during her shamanic journeys. She has literally experienced what death is like. Kara doesn't think she was abused as a child, but then again, sometimes she has a spooky feeling that maybe she was, and can't remember it. She thinks that she can find out from her spirit guides. She definitely connected with a lot of what was said in the book.

This is America. You don't just walk around deserving things, unless you inherited them, in which case God has already deemed you deserving. We've come to the Land of the Free for salvation. We must demonstrate our remorse for our old ways by confessing and by laying bare the trauma that has led to our failures. There are people who can help. The already saved can judge our progress and help us along.

Romantic and sexual success can be ours if we work on ourselves. In her book, Susan Anderson explains how to work through all the five stages of abandonment trauma so you can find love again. There's a lot that goes into it, but basically you have your Inner Child, who is traumatized and vulnerable and your Outer Child, who acts out. For example, Outer (she mostly leaves out the word "child" to keep things simple) has arguments and eats chocolate. Then Inner is even more traumatized, and then Outer eats chocolate again. If you have a lot of arguments and eat a lot of chocolate, your husband can leave you, because obviously you are very argumentative and unhealthy. So then you reconcile the inner children and do your trauma work, and that's how you stop eating chocolate and being so nasty to your partner.

Most people do this one partner at a time, but imagine what skill it takes to successfully balance your inner children with multiple partners! This is why polyamorous people have such great communication skills.

Janice is a stunning woman with long, dark hair and full sleeve tattoos. She goes to boxing practice almost every day and went through a horrible lesbian divorce. She has a lot going on in her life but I am not listening to her, because I am attracted to her and trying to figure out if I might be able to sleep with her. I remember when I first met Janice, at a different event for the women's group. She walked in and the room stood still. She wears deep red lipstick. She is

magnetic. I will pretend to like self-help literature if that's what it takes to get in her pants.

So far I have had one sexual adventure since becoming officially polyamorous. A very young, very handsome man from the internet came to my house and I tried to fulfill his sexual fantasies about being dominated by an older woman. I suspect it was not very satisfying. I pretended to have an orgasm. Then I cooked eggs for him and listened to his explanation about why I should vote for Bernie Sanders. I can't vote in the United States, but there was still a lot he had to say about Bernie Sanders, and the 9/11 attacks which were a government conspiracy. Being so tall and athletic, he ate a lot of eggs. Then he left. The most interesting thing about him was the little massage balls he carries everywhere in his backpack. He gave himself a massage on the floor before and after we had sex.

While Janice talks about her life and experiences, I am starting to get worried about Vanessa. She is sitting at the head of the table, eating cheese, drinking wine and looking increasingly furious. She is like a gathering thunderstorm that only I can see.

I know what Vanessa has been through. I didn't think she was going to be asked to talk about it here. I don't think this book club is built to withstand her pain. Trauma is a form of currency here, and we are all expected to pay up to get past the red rope, but the transaction has to be the correct size for this social situation.

When Vanessa opens her mouth, I realize she is going to, as they say, make it rain. She stares me directly in the eyes, undoes her zipper and flops out her trauma dick. That's what Vanessa calls it, and I know what she is doing, because we've talked about this. Her dick is huge. Vanessa has survived many kinds of abuse and been abandoned at a teen re-education center and then survived more abuse and entirely made her own way in the world. She has a truly heroic American journey and I can see that she has let herself get angry about being made to use it as currency. The words tumble out of her like sharp little stones, occasionally accompanied by tight, cold laughter. She throws her word gravel at the book club women and they are forced not to turn away, not to flinch, they have to take it all right on the skin. Vanessa doesn't even go into most of the details, she doesn't

have to, we can imagine. The people you run into as a teenage runaway. The things you do to survive, the skills you learn, the shitshows you walk away from. I find myself clumsily making a point of knowing all of this already, posturing about what a trusted friend to a heroic trauma survivor I am. Self-loathing sits in my larynx like vomit.

Vanessa is done. Her eyes are wild and cold, she takes a deep sip of her wine and looks at me again. The book club members shift uncomfortably and try some platitudes. They ask her if she has had therapy. I want them all to turn to stone. I want to carry them out with Vanessa and stack them into a wheelbarrow and push them into my back yard. I have a very nice yard with sand and succulents. I want to arrange the book club members there as decorative boulders, and my poodle mix will piss at their feet.

I don't know how to salvage this situation. Missy is not actually qualified to lead a group therapy session, and we have to just move on now to the next person around the table.

That's me.

I have to do a vulnerable share. Everyone has done it. Vanessa made her choice, she has scrambled the game and there is a bit of a gleeful edge to her voice when she says that she didn't mean to ruin the party. She is not the one who is trying to be part of this women's group. I am. She has just demonstrated that she can take or leave this. She has backed me into a corner. I glance at Janice. I need to impress her.

I have to remember that we are all here because this is fun and we are the new frontier of women's sexual liberation. The sex positive community is where we can be seen and held but only if we do vulnerable shares and show the community our pains and fears. We have to deal with our traumas to be truly liberated, and we are not just doing this because we are desperately lonely or afraid of being left by our partners or terrified of aging and death. We are not trying to find a place, somewhere, anywhere, that feels like we could belong because we left our country and our friends to be with a man who turns out to want something different, someone different, someone who can attract a large number of lovers and never feel hurt and scared, someone who

is playful and free and not needy and jealous, who can flirt and be flirted with effortlessly and can have sex with strangers and friends and it's easy and fun.

I hear my own breath as I gather speed like a figure skater for a triple axel. I need to remember the right language, I have to be in my integrity and speak to my unmet needs and hold my own feelings and own my story and recognize my patterns. I have to demonstrate my ability to heal and the progress I have already made. I have to tell them about my BLANK and the BLANK and the BLANK and the BLANK and this is fun and it's time to pay.

Sunspot Suite / J. Ray Paradiso

Half Life / J. Ray Paradiso

Train Prayer

Aaron Graham

Locomotive, set at odds with us, like a dead god.
A god who always been dyin', dyin' down the track.
God—oh strange God—not trying to revive husks
of shucked corn—stillborn on cobs in Missouri fields
where buried effigies and pedigrees remind us—
expect a resurrection. We dream you, like the No. 16 Engine,
might just be slow in arriving. That, somewhere,
you still out there—chuggin', chuggin'
down the River Runner Line,
down to Kansas City—Dyin', dyin',
we been dying' like dust devils—
we been kickin' up muck, n' the shit that get stuck
to you—too hot, sticky, shine'n with sweat—
'Till that oil sheen becomes a mud pie,
with marshmallow eyes and smiles slide
down your face, dropping off into rich earth.

Dismemberment—the name given to coordinates
we do not possess—the place where infinite excess
touches absolute lack—hear the heart-hungry whistle.
Hierophant of cabooses—who will come to pass by
only in the later and last days. Conductor—paid spokesperson
and prophet—we remember your lumbering voice—
flooding like incandescent light, a soft white pouring from fixtures,
squeezing itself between door hinges and dining cars,
until—like a luminous moth, a cocoon-question that splits shell
and emerges as statement—*all aboard who's commin' aboard.*

I don't think, for example, I'm outta my mind.
'Cause, you see, the Missouri runs north and south.
So, you see, we're either going north or south.
My brother, Short, liked his train rides.
He tell me everything, he tell me this train

goes straight through to saint Louis,
just follows the old Missouri where
dismemberment is a mud pie in June
it feel like drying, cracking mud
—it just like the tracks—
crossing the entirety of you.

You see, I never rode the train before.
I only got close to the startling metal body
that once. Then, I watched the stars change.
The stars are a bridge over the water.
Crossing the Missouri,
I'm a bridge
crossing the water
of Missouri
I'm just right
I'm fine, it's this road,
It's just this road!
Don't ya see?!

Don't ya see that little town
with houses scattered everywhere—
there, they have tractors they don't use.

Benefit of the Doubt

Mallory Chesser

The police never admitted how Joel died, but we knew. The body facedown in the ditch was staged. The methamphetamine was injected by force. The bruises on his arms and grass stains on his pants were evidence he had been beaten, not the marks of a stumbling drunk, like the coroner said, and he had been clean for months anyway, had a wife and baby and showered with his wife's soap to show he was faithful. Joel was a good boy, if not a good man, Minnie said—Minnie, my grandmother, who I lived with summers—and I was never afraid of Joel the way I was of his brother, Shane, a born felon with shifty eyes who was not in prison only because he had never been caught. Shane was too smart to get caught, Minnie said, but Joel was not smart because he'd gotten an old egg from his mother. Minnie said Mrs. Turner had Joel after she was forty, and that was only to cover up a tryst with the Methodist preacher. On Mr. Turner's fortieth birthday she had brought him a beer and climbed on. Minnie waited until I was eighteen, on the occasion of Joel's funeral, to tell me his conception story, because it was not for young ears.

I met Joel at Minnie's when I was seven. Minnie was recently widowed and had renewed her zest for life by taking an interest in the lives of others. When she walked over to gossip with Mrs. Turner, I was sent out back with Joel, ten, and Shane, fifteen. I was too young to be of interest to either, but Joel, needing an ally against his brother, recruited me for his team.

While Shane dismantled old army men and crashed his brother's bicycle, Joel took me into the woods, where he had built a clubhouse in the ground using nothing but a shovel and a piece of plywood.

We ate Starburst from a tin and hid in the bunker all afternoon, smothering our giggles any time Shane got close, rolling on the dirt floor with silent laughter when Shane kicked a log and stubbed his toe. After our eyes adjusted to the light, Joel showed me the collection of treasures too precious to keep in his room: an intact-but-battered GI Joe, a collage of candy wrappers, a green glass bottle,

and a very dirty rabbit's foot. We hatched plans for revenge that would involve a ransom note, Shane's secret magazines, and a deep pit covered in leaves. We pretended Shane was the sheriff and we were the outlaws.

Nearly four years after Joel died I opened an envelope from Minnie, no letter inside, just a news clipping with a Post-it attached. "This is the man," Minnie wrote, and all that time later, I knew who she meant—the man responsible for Joel's death. The headline read, "Gang Member Indicted in Stabbing Deaths of Three," none of them Joel, but his mother knew this man was the killer, and that had to be enough.

Joel died at twenty-two, barely older than I am now—I will soon surpass him—leaving me a wound in the shape of a question mark. Every time the scab forms some fresh doubt appears, preventing the wound from healing. I have learned to ignore it.

Mr. Turner's grief was enormous, bigger even than he was. And his love was boundless.

How else could he have hauled his weight to work every day, or sweated his life away in the sun, or raised two sons born to cause trouble? Mr. Turner was round and red with a stomach that hung over his pants and a heart so big it could burst. A year after Joel died, it did burst. Within two months Mrs. Turner had married the Methodist preacher, and although both parties were now widowed in the eyes of the law and the Lord, Minnie said that kind of behavior was why she didn't think much of preachers. But Minnie was a good neighbor, a good friend. She had the new couple over for dinner, but she never would call Mrs. Turner by her new last name.

The summer after it happened, Joel's widow started a new job in an office, and I volunteered to watch the baby. Before he even learned to talk, I told him stories about his father, just the good ones, to plant the seeds of memory.

One visit Joel and I watched *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* and decided to rob Shane of his valuables. Most of Shane's floor was covered in junk, a de facto security system against intruders—broken toys he'd stolen from neighborhood kids and board games ripped along the seams, minus their game pieces—but his books were his treasure. While

Shane was at the movies—or so he said, before driving away in his mother's car—and Mrs. Turner was playing Bunco with the Ladies Who Lunch—or so she said—we perused Shane's bookshelf at our leisure.

"How about this one?" I asked, picking up a heavy collection of Jack London's greatest works. I was ten years old and imagined teaching the entire neighborhood to read. A thick book, I thought, would be most impressive.

"That's too big," Joel said, "too obvious. Put it back."

Joel pulled down two *Where's Waldo* books and put them in a sack. Whatever he touched, he carefully moved back into place. Being sloppy was how criminals got caught, he said. And it would be more fun if Shane suspected we'd done something but could never prove it. Bored with the books, Joel ducked under the bed. He was gone for a while before coming up for air, hair askew and covered in dust bunnies.

"Jackpot," he said. He was holding an old cigar box—the money, I hoped.

"Open sesame!" I said.

"Wrong movie," Joel answered. He sighed, sending his bangs ceiling high. Inside the box were several marbles, brightly colored. Pennies, nickels, a Sacagawea dollar—surely, Shane had something better. Beneath the pennies, opaque plastic squares, also brightly colored.

"What are these?" I asked, picking up one square and unraveling several, like a roll of stamps. Joel tore one off and snorted his superiority.

"Balloons," he said. "My brother's a clown." Joel ripped the package open and pulled one out, inflated it, and let it go. The balloon motored briefly around the room and sputtered to a stop on an empty pizza box.

My enthusiasm for the mission deflated too. "See you tomorrow at the bunker," I said, leaving Joel and the books behind.

Joel and I grew up close, as close as I could be to someone I only saw a few times a year. His hair got messier, and his brown eyes sparked with schemes. For five years, no matter how long it had been since my last visit, as soon as my parents' car left Minnie's, I could count on

Joel's knock at the door. But after Joel hit his middle teens, his family's love for him became more complicated, and our friendship too. He started calling me "bud," and his presence around the homestead became less frequent.

"Jenny, Jenny, Jenny," came Joel's voice in the dark. Dad and I were visiting Minnie for the weekend. Dad wanted to mow her yard, he said, but I knew he was checking up on her. He thought she spent too much time with her gentleman callers. After Dad and Minnie went to sleep, I'd gone into the yard to stretch my legs and kick over crawdad mounds in Minnie's rubber boots. I turned toward the voice and saw Joel standing in the road between the two houses, in the gravel crotch before the driveways became two. He was smoking—a new habit—and I wondered why I hadn't seen him before.

"Nice cancer stick," I said, in my snottiest thirteen-year-old voice.

"Want one?" he asked, walking over. Joel exuded a sour smell that I later recognized as beer.

"No thanks," I said, taking a big step back and fanning my face with my hands. "Weren't you paying attention in health class?"

"Only to the good parts," he said, stepping closer again. "I guess I like to live dangerous."

He was a foot away now, too close, and a little wobbly on his feet. He was taller than before—he dipped his head so we would be eye to eye. The night was cloudy and his whole face was dark, except for his glinting teeth. His eyes lacked their usual sparkle. I shifted uncomfortably.

"You should take better care of yourself," I said. "You stink." His smile collapsed, and the moment ended.

"Sure, bud," he answered. "I'll think about it." He turned toward his house and took a huge drag from the cigarette. "See you tomorrow, maybe."

I gave him a wide berth the rest of the visit, and the next time I saw him, four months later, things were back to normal. I could tell by his scent he was still smoking, but never in front of me. It was a sign of respect, I thought, a sign he knew I was right—maybe he was even trying to quit. I gave him the benefit of the doubt.

One Thanksgiving when he was seventeen, Joel took the turkey, and his brother told us he had stolen it to court some girlfriend or another's mother. Shane loved to be the bearer of bad news, like when he first reported that Joel was hanging out with the roughneck cowboys at school. Now Shane had grown a goatee and was full of talk about moral relativism and other college babble. I carefully avoided him, confining myself to a quiet corner and insinuating I was on my period. Just as Minnie and Mrs. Turner had resolved to serve fried chicken, and as the family began to talk of disowning, there was an eruption of honking outside. We all went to see—me, Minnie, mom and dad, the Turners, the Baptist preacher and his wife—Shane couldn't be bothered—and there was Joel in his truck, with two of his friends in the back unloading a propane tank and a huge pot. Joel winked at me, and I felt a sense of relief. My friend was still my friend; he hadn't gone crooked after all. The boys fried up that turkey in less than an hour.

"I had to steal it," Joel said, "or it wouldn't be a surprise." His words trickled out thick and slow, an accent I was proud to avoid but liked, coming from his mouth.

"That was a good trick," Mrs. Turner answered, dabbing her eyes and looking grateful.

The boys had fireworks, too, and between the grease and explosives, it was the most dangerous Thanksgiving on record. I heard the whizz of the bottle rockets and saw phantom explosions for most of the dark, two-hour ride home.

Another year and Joel would beat up a man who had gotten Joel's ex-girlfriend pregnant but wouldn't do the right thing. Couldn't do the right thing, he said, because he had two pregnant girlfriends and the other was prettier. That fight would earn Joel three months in jail. The first Thanksgiving without Joel was a sad one, and a premonition, Minnie said later, of the years to come.

Joel's wife found the body on her way to work the day after. It was like he had been left for Tina to find, Minnie said—laid carefully in a ditch, on the very shortcut she used to get to her job at the beauty

salon. The staging was an act of such cruelty that no twist of fate, no stranger, could be responsible.

His friends admitted they had been with him at the bar, but became evasive when telling what happened after. Somebody's house, razzing because he had to leave early—wife and baby at home—mysterious phone call, punches thrown. These weren't his real friends, Mrs. Turner said, but his prison friends—we knew the kind. He'd been trying to make a clean break, only met them for a drink to smooth things over. I couldn't imagine the person Joel had been, to get where he ended up. Minnie and I were indignant, stunned, crushed. Only later would I find my separate grief.

I had watched teen Joel's comings and goings whenever I was at Minnie's. I imagined the hometown Victory girls must be taken with him, felt proud when he gave me driving lessons, even in his brown and tan truck. We practiced at night sometimes, because Joel said I needed night driving skills. After I turned eighteen, he promised, he would give me drunk driving lessons: "Every girl needs to learn to drive drunk. You never want to be stuck at a party. That's how babies happen. And worse."

I nodded wisely, pretending to understand.

If only the girls at home could see us, sans the beaten-up truck. I wanted to meet some of Joel's hometown girls, and one Friday night in July, as we cruised Timberline Drive, I finally got my wish. They stood in a line outside TCBY, swirling their tongues in frozen yogurt and trying to get picked up. When I pulled up to the light and they saw Joel, each put her best feature on display: left, right, tush, tits.

"Jail bait," Joel said. "One of them got the vice principal fired last year. They found pictures in his desk."

I glanced to the right, curious whether these girls were like the girls that plagued me back home, tall and sculpted and skilled in the application of glitter shadow. We were paused at a light, and I was trying hard not to stall the truck—Joel said that if I learned on a stick I could drive anything—and though I'd be embarrassed by that old Ford back home, I realized those girls couldn't touch me.

"Hey, y'all," I called through Joel's window. "Careful eating ice cream at night. Anything you eat after seven goes straight to your hips."

One of the girls, who was wearing cutoff shorts and blue platform shoes, tottered over, pulling her top down low while she walked.

"Never seen you before," she said. "Are you a friend of Joel's?"

The light had changed and a couple of cars passed us, but it didn't seem to matter. Small town traffic, I wanted to say, take that girl down a few pegs. For Joel's sake, I didn't.

"You better believe it," Joel said. He slapped my knee, leaned away from the window, and pulled his hat down over one eye. He was putting on a show, and I wanted to see if the girl bought it. She rested an arm on the truck and inched forward to give Joel a glimpse down her shirt. There was not much to brag about, but she wasn't wearing a bra. Her tongue slid smoothly through the melting yogurt, and as she flicked at the cone seductively, a sticky pink glob of strawberry cream fell onto her chest.

"Shit!" she said, yanking at her shirt as the glob slithered its way down her front.

"What's wrong, Annie?" her friends called. They formed a hive around her, shooting evil looks at me and dabbing her with napkins. Joel was kicking the dashboard cover as he laughed.

A girl in a green bubble crop top glared at him.

"Hey, Joel, heard your ex-girlfriend's knocked up." She fixed her eyes on me, hoping she'd caught me off guard, waiting for me to blow. I didn't, and she locked in on Joel again.

"But it's not yours," she hissed, like a slow leak. Joel's face went hard.

"Shut up," said the first girl, the one with yogurt tits.

"Yeah," I said stupidly, sounding like I had a concussion. "What would he want with some high school girl anyway?" I hit the gas, wanting to drive off and leave them burning, but the engine sputtered and stalled. Stalled like this stupid town, like these girls with bump-it bangs and little minds. I turned the key again, hearing my

humiliation in the turning of the engine. No matter his hurt, Joel came to my rescue.

"I hope you girls get a ride home," he said, just as the engine caught. "Make sure he knows your real age first." Then he leaned over to me, and before we sped off, planted a hot kiss on my cheek, barely catching the corner of my lips. It was my first, and I was stunned. We left in a roar of smoke that I hoped those girls would choke on. I was too embarrassed to look at Joel and watched the girls in the rear view instead. They went back to posing by the curb. Joel turned up AC/DC and sang along. But back in the carport at home, he shut off the music abruptly.

"That baby's not mine, Jennifer." When he called me by my whole name, I knew he was upset. Everyone calls me Jenny.

"I know," I said. "You'd do the right thing." He flinched.

"Whatever I do, I'm stuck." His hand approached my face then pulled back, as if controlled by a string. The kiss was fading now, and if he touched the spot even a little, it would wipe away.

"That's not true," I said. The words bubbled out of me—I registered Joel's anguish only in retrospect, remembering how the skin around his mouth had crumpled like paper.

"You're on to bigger and better things," he said. "I'm just here."

"You'll go to college," I insisted. "Everyone goes to college. Shane did."

"I'm not Shane," Joel said. He hopped down from the truck and bounded toward the trees, a line of pines that started thin but quickly thickened into woods. He disappeared in seconds, and I was the one burning with shame. Not the embarrassment of stalling out the truck, or getting into a catfight at the TCBY, or of receiving a confusing half-kiss from a boy who was like a brother. Apart from the smoking, I had never seen the difference between Joel's life and mine—I was here for the summer, went home every fall. Joel never got to leave and never imagined any different for himself. Visiting Minnie was an escape for me, this small town and these people I wouldn't admit I thought were small. They were living on the margins, working in chemical factories until the day the doctor said they couldn't anymore. They were

ignored by FEMA after each storm, roads into town blocked by felled trees so that now the highway passed them by, some still living in temporary trailers, escaping into meth and God and bar fights and things that made headlines in Houston's "stupid criminals" page. I had never seen Joel's confinement, because it wasn't unusual in Victory, where almost everyone was poor, sick, or otherwise stunted. Even Minnie, who seemed invincible, lived on her social security. Joel had graduated that May, and I had been afraid to ask whether he would save up for a while first, or drive thirty minutes to the junior college. It never occurred to me that he wouldn't go to school at all. It was playing at living here, to think I knew about Joel's life. Some friend I was.

We weren't close after that. Joel went to Louisiana for a part-time job cleaning up the coast, and my only updates came from Minnie. Joel had a new girlfriend and a baby on the way.

I passed my driver's test, sent Joel a thank you note. Joel was caught with marijuana, intent to sell. Joel was on probation. My junior year was over, time to get serious about college—no more summers in Victory. Joel was married. Joel was in jail. At the next gathering at Minnie's, I was afraid to look him in the eye. He had let me down.

The last time I saw Joel was at my high school graduation party, a few months before he died. He filled his plate with soft foods—four different kinds of casserole, pinto beans, chopped brisket—and went for a walk, tipping his hat at me on the way out. I decided to follow, feeling guilty for averting my eye when he'd entered the room.

"Where is Tina?" I asked, after catching up to him by the old tree swing.

"At home with the baby. You probably noticed, he's not here either. If he were, you'd hear him."

He meant to be funny, I thought, but I wasn't sure, because he didn't smile. I remembered what Minnie had told me—Joel never smiled since coming back from prison, because he was self-conscious about the teeth he'd lost in a fight. I was glad he kept his mouth closed.

"Congratulations," I said. "I'm sorry I missed the baby shower. And the wedding. Studying hard, you know." I took a big swig of iced

tea and splashed it all down my front. "I guess I have a drinking problem."

Joel reached into a pocket and pulled out his handkerchief, and I thought about Yogurt Tits and the night at TCBY. I was debating whether to try a "do you remember?" when Joel extended his arm to give me the handkerchief; the top button of his shirt came undone, revealing a nasty-looking tattoo I was afraid to ask about. In his hurry to cover himself, he dropped brisket on his boot.

"Sorry," I said, and "sorry," he said, and we both looked away.

The funeral was closed casket, family only, but Minnie said we were as good as family, and anyway, we weren't the ones who killed him. The Turners were in the first car with Tina and the baby, and Minnie and I followed right behind in her Buick. Shane brought up the rear—combing the funeral home for something he could sell, Minnie said. Minnie had practically lived with the Turners the past three days, running along behind Mrs. Turner with a box of tissue and providing Mr. Turner with a continuous supply of beer. I arrived three days after the call and pried Minnie away from them. I expressed my condolences but mourned only in private—I'd kept myself away these last few years and barely spoken to Joel when I had come, so what right did I have to grieve?

"The preacher did a good job," Minnie said, once we were driving to the cemetery. "He was respectful to the family but didn't sugarcoat things, didn't try to preach him into heaven."

I felt queasy from all the snot and phlegm I'd swallowed. If I replied to Minnie, I wouldn't be able to control the vomit. I knew Joel wasn't heaven-bound. Not even close.

"I can't believe they're taking us past the spot," Minnie said. "The very spot!"

She slowed the car, holding up the line, but there were only five cars, and I imagined their drivers were gawking too.

"Here? This?" The words choked out of me. Only in Victory could a funeral director be so thoughtless. The driver of the hearse had taken us right past the place Tina found the body, to the left of a bent tree and a telephone pole. As the procession crawled past, I lowered the window and stared into the ditch, like I would find an imprint of

Joel's body. Of course I couldn't see anything—it had happened five days ago and rained since. That the evidence could disappear so quickly made the whole thing worse. The dam burst, and my grief broke through. We pulled up to the plot. The preacher's words were brief. I stayed in the car while they lowered the coffin into the ground, watching the scene through angry tears.

Back at Minnie's, I heard the rest of the story. The funeral had to be family only—present company excluded—because of the circumstances. His friends knew something they weren't telling, Minnie said, and maybe worse. They'd certainly been with him an hour before he died, filling him up with beer and whiskey, but they denied the meth, didn't know where he could have gotten that. Tina insisted that Joel hadn't been involved in drugs, using or selling, not since she'd caught him two years ago and cleaned him up. The stint in prison was a fluke. He was through with that mess, and he'd never have been friends with them in the first place, but for his own safety. He was getting out. To honor his memory, we should give him the benefit of the doubt. Family forgives, Minnie said, but people like that don't.

Friends could be murderers. A spouse could love you and cheat. Someone could be family and not family, your brother and your first love, a criminal and a gentleman. The police, the coroner, all were afraid to name Joel's death for what it was. The family kept their eyes on the news, looking for a sign. I was skeptical. I kept my eyes on Minnie, hoping to understand.

It was my first semester of college, and for the first time in memory, I hadn't gone to Minnie's for Thanksgiving—I was studying, I told my family; the airfare, I said. As it turned out, I would bomb those finals, cry my way into passing algebra and biology. I was back in my room after a cafeteria-style Thanksgiving. I missed Minnie's cooking. My roommate and most of the floor had gone home, turning the hall into a cold, fluorescent tomb. The ring was harsh and explosive.

"Hello?" I said into the phone. "Hello?" On the line was a heavy breather—probably some pervert who had called the same dorm room for years, lusting after the dulcet sound of coeds. I was surprised to hear my name.

"Jenny? Jenny?" Minnie had never sounded so old, or so little like herself. "Are you sitting down? Is there someone with you?"

I wasn't sitting down, and I refused to. Her tone warned me to prepare for flight.

"You need to come here," Minnie said. "It's Joel."

I felt cold in my arms; I couldn't hear Minnie's voice over the buzzing in my head.

"What do you mean?" I finally said.

"They found him by the road. They're not sure what happened. Not a car accident."

"You're not making any sense." The Joel she was talking about was not the Joel I knew, the boy in the bunker, my friend under the bed. Not the man who had given me his handkerchief.

"He was so young," Minnie said, in almost a whimper. "He was a good boy." There was a pleading note in her voice. If I agreed with her, it would be true.

Dance Structure Digital Painting (Life & Death, Poetry) /
Chihiro Ito

Dance Structure Digital Painting 2 (Life & Death, Poetry) /
Chihiro Ito

I Take with Me the Sound of the Leaving

Jeanne Harris

I take with me the sound of the leaving
Pull it from the low edge of the bed
With curled strands of hair–it is not the giving,
nor the thought of giving
quiet is muffled nearby
The leaving is of itself
Not under a blanket
Not in the goldenrod leaves outside the bay window

I take with me the sound of the leaving
Fold it quarter wise and place it in the box
The thought of giving
noise is blooming across the street
The leaving is of itself
Not in the coffee grounds
Not in the sugar

I take with me the sound of the leaving
Swing it sideways through the frame

It is of itself
Not in the ashes inevitable
Not in the clouds

Bisbee, Arizona / Michaela Overley

Dada's Home

Ron Pullins

Man enters door.

"Hello, dear. I'm home," he says. He sets his briefcase on a table that isn't there and it drops to the floor.

She reads the paper. Not today's, but a paper from some other day, because they don't take the paper anymore. They bought it once. No more. She reads in light from a lamp with tassels. The light shines on her lap filled with news and knitting.

"Pick that up," she says. "You're a pig."

She is not angry. No. She takes up knitting once again. Something red, and narrow, and not too long. The project barely reaches over the basket. A scarf, perhaps, or some part of a scarf. At least part of something red.

He takes off his hat and hangs it on a hook that doesn't exist in a closet that isn't there. "Hard day at the office, let me tell you."

She doesn't acknowledge his unremarkable hat or coat as they drop to the floor. Likewise, he knows how things should be. Gravity, after all, is life.

"This time I'm going to leave your crap on the floor," she says. "Your wrinkled, dirty crap. People will laugh when they see your dirty crap. But I don't care."

Like some red woolen worm, the scarf, or some part of a scarf, or some part of something red, wiggles off her lap and hangs in the air. She knits at the other end.

"I hope they laugh. I'm laughing," she says. But she's not. Not really. She folds her wool, buries her needles and her unfinished scarf, or some part of a scarf, or some part of something red, in a basket and stashes it to the back corner of the chair in which she has been sitting. She stands. She goes to the window, pulls back flimsy curtains that have been waving in the heat that rises from the radiator. She looks out the window for something that isn't there. It has never been. She sighs.

"I say," he says. "The sun is under the yardarm. Time I'd say for a drinky poo. Fix me something, dear," he says as he sits.

"A martini, I suppose," she says.

"Now that is a drink," he says. It always has been.

The ice is there, the shaker, the gin, the glass, and the condiments. She begins to mix and shake.

"You always say that."

"Say what, my dear?" he asks. He finds the paper in her chair, takes it, and shakes it open.

"The yardarm bit. It makes me sick."

"Yes. Join me dear, dear pumpkin doodle, for a drinky poo." By yardarm he earlier implies some geometry of sun and sky, earth and time, light and falling shadow that gives meaning both to time and place.

She understands.

"You drink too much," she says. "Every night you drink, and drink, and drink."

"Yes," he says. "One olive, if you please."

"You say that, too. Night after night. You come home, strip your soul of hat and coat, and say, 'Fix me a drink, one olive.' It makes me sick."

"Yes." The sports pages are buried deep within the print. They are often hard to find. And worn away as old sports are.

"Just one time I'd like to think I'd dare to put in something more than an olive," she says. "An onion, perhaps."

"Yes," he says, and turns to page 3B where a story that has been terminated on 1B is set to resume. "I love our time together, night after night, as you do, dear. Family. Ah, I just say, 'family,' and I feel the bliss."

"One olive, you lush," she says. "I've heard those same things, 'love' and 'family,' a million times."

The martini is ready in its wide brimmed glass with gin filled almost to the flaring brim, one olive, red toothpick, fog on the cool glass. She serves him, then pours one for herself. Sips. Pours.

"Thank you, dear. Come sit with me. Relax. We'll read the news now each to each," he says.

"Where were you all day?" she says. She sits, carefully, so the waves of her martini do not wash over the flare of the glass.

"At work, of course," he says. He sips. His eyelids narrow, but his eyes turn up to heaven. "As I am every day all day as I have been all year for all the years of my life. Doing the same thing. Taking pieces of paper from one pile over here and putting them in another pile over there." He sets his martini down on a table that isn't there and the glass drops to the floor and shatters.

"Your office is closed," she says. She picks up her knitting buried between her and the arm of her chair. She knits. "You were fired. Weeks ago. But you come and go from home, every day, and then come and go from work, like some skunk who comes out at night to dig up worms."

"A skunk?"

"A skunk."

"You've said that before, dear," he says. "The old skunk piece. Many, many times. I long for a new metaphor. 'Skunk' is funny. I don't mean otherwise. Very funny. But it's grubs."

"Grubs?"

"Grubs, not worms," he says. "Skunks dig for grubs. They always have. They always do. Every night. You've told me that story a hundred, hundred times, and every time you're wrong. Every time. 'Worms.' Ha. No, grubs. Now, that's funny."

"Grubs. Worms. Like a skunk, every day, the same thing. You come home. Take off your hat. Take off your coat. Sit in your chair. Say sweet nothings. Then drink, and drink, and read a paper so old it's yellow. You were fired, dear. You have no job, no place to go, except in and out of here. You make me sick." She sips her drink.

He sips his drink. But his glass is gone as well as the martini it once held.

"Yes. Join me, dear, in reading the news. We will endure together this celestial hour when the sun dips beneath the yardarm. Yes, yardarm. You always do. Every night. Can tonight be any different?"

She sets her martini on a table beside her chair which isn't there, and it drops and shatters on the floor. She acknowledges nothing. She knits. The long red scarf, or some part of a scarf, or some part of something red, edges away across the floor.

"Nothing ever changes," she says.

"Your scarf is lovely and grows lovelier."

"Is that this then?"

"And it grows longer."

"And later longer still," she says.

"And what is there to change? And why? Once you know a thing, I say, get comfortable and enjoy it."

"Out there," she says. "Every night…."

"What?"

"I wonder," she says.

"You wonder. Then, that's your curse."

"Here it is so much the same. Hat. Coat. Chairs. Martinis. You. Hat. Coat. Chairs. Martinis. You….."

"Newspaper."

"Newspaper. That might have been interesting for a while. But now I am afraid of it," she says.

"Of out there?"

"Yes. That, too."

"It's pretty much the same. Rise. Go. Paper, paper, paper, paper. Come. Lie. Rise. Go."

"Put on hat," she says.

"Yes."

"Put on coat."

"Yes."

"It makes me wonder," she says.

"I hope I don't sound like a Marxist." He shakes the paper and reads.

"Sometimes, dear. But I don't care." She reaches for her martini which isn't there and sips from a glass she doesn't have. "Thinking. It drags me back to the way things are."

He drops a corner of the paper just a bit and looks at her, with his broad smile and loving eyes. "Now you sound like a Marxist, too." He gently laughs.

The red scarf, or some piece of a scarf, or some piece of something bumps into a wall.

"Did I say they let poor Mattie go?" he says.

"Mattie, indeed," she says. "You say that every day. Poor Mattie. I'm sick and tired of hearing about dear Mattie. It's like you sleep with her."

"Fifteen years she gave the firm. And now they've let her go."

"Your office has been closed for weeks," she says. "Everyone's been let go. That stinking nest where you rats worked is boarded up, and you rats are left to live in parking lots. Where do you go all day?"

"We should go see poor Mattie sometime," he says. "Cheer her up. See how she's getting on."

"All this mooning over Mattie. You should be getting work. You can't go through the motions every day. We have no money. Soon we will be living in the parking lot with all your friends. Soon enough we'll have no food."

"Ah, dinner," he says, and the paper drops to his lap. "What do I smell…."

"Nothing."

"Let me guess. Let me guess."

"You're wrong."

"Roast beef! Of course. Another cut of roasted loin from some rough beast."

"No! No!!" she says. She stabs the wool with her needles, and pulls the endless scarf, or some piece of scarf, or some piece of something red back to her lap and puts it in the basket. "No roast beef. Whatever I fix, you say, 'Roast beef.' 'Roast beef this, roast beef that!' We never have roast beef. I hate roast beef! It makes me want to puke. You and your roast beef fetish. It makes me sick."

"Corn, too, unless my senses deceive me. Creamed, as I like it, I hope. I love a good helping of creamed corn with my roast beef. Fresh from the can."

"And no corn. Corn is pigs' food. You might eat that slop, but it will never pass my lips."

"And do I detect garlic in the air. Tell me, my beloved, it's mashed potatoes and you have fixed them like Aunt Betty does. Roast beef, and corn, and mashed potatoes exactly like Aunt Betty." He closes his eyes. "Perhaps, my little buttercup, before our evening repast,

another of your magnificent martinis. With an olive, please to tide me over until I have roast beef."

"Night after night. Dinner after dinner." She stands. She paces. She waves her arms. "You want something more than a wife who cooks, or waits on you, or roasts your beef, or washes your clothes, or picks up the hats you throw on the floor, you pig. You want a machine, that's what you want, a mechanical mother, as you suckle on martinis without end. No wonder you don't touch me anymore." With her back to him, she longs for something outside beyond the window.

"You chill them perfectly, dear," he says. "Always stirring, never shaking."

It is her reflection in the glass she sees, and it's as if it's outside, not in. "You come home, sit and drink until your brain is butter, and whatever you eat you call roast beef. Then you read that paper until you fall asleep. Every day, the same. I want to bite the head off a rat."

"Yes," he says. "The paper. The news. Shall I read to you?"

"The same paper night after night. We've cancelled our subscription. One paper which you read again and again. The same stories over and over about the same sorry people. We have no money for a newer newspaper so we can see how things change. We have no money for food. No money for roast beef. "

He stares into the corner of the room. He dips his brow. "Then, we're not having roast beef for supper?"

"We're not having supper."

"Well, one paper is about the same as another, I say," he says. "Nothing much changes, does it, really? But then again, it's good to know what's going on."

He straightens the paper and reads.

"See?" he continues. "It says people are still getting married. That's good."

"But different names on different days," she says.

"Yes. That's true."

She turns and looks about. "I seem to have finished my drink."

"And mine seems finished as well."

"Another then."

"Indeed," he says. "I'm hoping we have not come to the end of the olives."

"We have a barrel of olives. We always have olives. We measure out our lives in olive pits."

"Good, then," he says. "Then again, I'll have an olive in my drink."

"For me," she says, "I'm thinking onion."

"Onion? Indeed," he says. "Now there's a change."

"Yes, an onion," she says.

"But is it wise to change?" he wonders. "Change can be so dangerous."

"To hell with that."

"With change?"

"With dangers to our lives. To the hell of one day being like another."

"Well, then, yes, yes," he says. "To hell with that I say. Indulge yourself. Give onions there a chance. Live life with vigor. Be fearless facing the unknown."

"Olive for you," she says, preparing their martinis at the bar. "But I will do with onion." She pours the gin and vermouth into the shaker. Then with aplomb she drops an olive in his glass. An onion into hers. And shakes and pours. Then tastes her drink.

"And?" he asks. He has stopped reading, folds the newspaper in his lap and sits motionless.

"Nothing," she says. She shakes her head.

"Nothing?"

"Not at all."

"I supposed as much," he says. "After all, it's no martini."

"It's not?" she asks. "Then what is it?"

"There are those who call such things a Gibson," he says. "You see, the onion changes everything."

She sips her drink. "Yes." She smiles. "It's quite a different thing. I said 'nothing' only because I expected something else. And failing to be what I imagined, I came to think of it as nothing. It has a name. I feel like singing."

"Your scarf…," he says. He looks from her lap across the floor at the red thing she is knitting.

"Yes."

"It's growing longer."

"Than what?"

"Than what it was."

"And when was that?"

"When I came home."

She stops her work and looks herself. "Yes. I suppose that's true."

"It's not much longer, of course," he says. "But it's not the same as what it was."

"No. I suppose not."

"It's what it was only different," he says.

"Like the onion makes the Gibson. The onion changes everything. I don't feel so much like singing."

He reads. She knits. Time passes.

"Someone's worked my puzzle," he says, looking closely at page 13. His eyes are not what they used to be.

"You did that," she says. "Yesterday, I think, or some such day like that. Looking back they are all so much the same. You always work your puzzles. You talk on and on to me about your puzzles. But to me, they are all so much the same. Items that have answers and need answering. I don't care about your puzzles. I have never cared."

"It's a good thing it's not finished. There's still some work to do."

"Then do it, dear. You have time. Perhaps completed you will at last be satisfied."

"There are no pencils," he says, digging in the chair between the cushions and the arms.

The red scarf, or some part of a scarf, or some part of something, has fallen across the floor and wiggles against the wall. It then pushes against the wall and hits the edge of the page and then falls off the page. He has stood and gone to the window where he looks at his reflection in the glass. It's his reflection in the glass he sees, as if

he's outside, not in here. With his tongue he laps the olive from his martini.

"We should drive up to the farm again and see Aunt Betty," he says. "Ah, to taste Aunt Betty's garlic potatoes once again. Those memories wash over me like a thousand frightened horses."

"You know nothing about horses, dear."

"Like ten thousand frightened horses wash over me."

"And Aunt Betty is dead. She died years ago. I am not driving up there again and sit while you throw yourself on her grave and cry while your tears wash over the earth that covers her."

"Not all day, of course," he says.

He wipes away a spot on his chin.

"A short visit," he says. "All day would be too long. There can be no such a thing as too much time with Aunt Betty. God love her. I can't wait to have another helping of her garlic mashed potatoes."

"We cannot go on," she says. Her red scarf, or some part of a scarf, or some part of something, has fallen on the reader's feet. The reader pauses, looks down to the feet and sees the whole event. "Go on like this," she says.

"Go on like what?"

"Like you go on to work every day to a job that doesn't exist. Like me not going anywhere, waiting here all day for you, knitting something that has no end, the next stitch like the last. Always hungry. Always angry. Always horny. Hoping a man–a real man–any man–will walk through that door and do something, anything, to me, that hasn't been done a hundred times before. Who will say something, anything, that hasn't been said to me a hundred, hundred times before."

"Of course I have a job, dear. Why else would I go to work every day and until I've bloodied my fingers to the bone?"

She waits. She knits. The red scarf, or some part of a scarf, or some part of something red, grows longer, behind and around the chair in which the reader sits. The reader pauses, looks around to see what surrounds him or her. "I don't know why you go to work when there is no work to go to," she says. "I know no one who does know."

"Well." He fluffs the paper as if he is reordering the news. "I see where the city council has taken up that senior center business again."

"I told you yesterday they are not building the senior center. They cancelled it months ago. Why do you keep harping on the senior center? I'm sick of it."

"I doubt it will pass anyway. Higher taxes, who wants that? Not I," he says. "No. I daresay, let the old and the poor go screw themselves."

"You don't make money anymore," she says. "You don't pay taxes. You have no job. We are the old. We are the poor."

"I am thinking, of course, of quitting that dreadful job, once we have the things we need. Then let the tax man see if he can get blood from a turnip. I should buy a gun and join the revolution."

"You have no blood," she says. "You are a turnip."

"Come sit by me, my pumpkin, and we will watch the sun together sinking into the sea."

"I am no pumpkin," she says. "I will not sit. I've sat all day."

"Relax, and let things flow."

She opens the door and stands in the frame and sees herself in the glass as it rains outside and she looks out. "I want to stand in the rain drenched forest until my clothes are wet and you can see my body underneath. I want to stalk the unknown beasts and bring them unto me."

"We have made it our point in life to live inside this space. To stay dry together in our love. To spend our hours, you and I, in the gentle breeze of passing time. To bare our souls and share our sufferings," he says. "Speaking of which, how was your day?"

"I hunger for wild meat."

"Your scarf is coming along nicely, dear. That's nice. And very sweet."

"To kill the beast is my desire. No cooking, waiting, cleaning up your mess. No scurrying about the dark like a cockroach for your love."

"I see you've finished your Gibson, dear. Did you find the satisfaction that you seek inside the onion?"

"I want to hunt wild cattle, slit their throats with cold steel knives, hang their carcasses by their haunches so they bleed clean, then cut away a bloody rump to feed on...."

"If not, I'll share my olives. I'm sure there's almost still a barrelful."

"I want to harvest mushrooms in the morning in the garden, kill snakes that slither up my legs, pluck apples from the limbs of trees, dig onions and potatoes from the earth. As the sun falls in the west, I want to ward off the evil one who embraces me in the shadows. Then in the gloam, suckle our dear children, rock them into stupor, then set them on the cliffs and give them up to ocean gods."

"But dear, dear, dear," he says. "We have no children."

"The fruit of my body return to the earth, fulfilling my duty to Goddess Death, and sing to Moon as dreams suck us into Sea."

"School lunches," he says, turning the page, and shakes his head. He licks his thumb and turns the page again. "They are serving the same lunches as they served last week. Nothing changes."

She sighs and returns to her basket and to the needles in her basket.

"You haven't fixed dinner, have you?" he asks.

"I feed only demons out of Hell."

"No roast beef awaits me, does it? Nothing from tongue to tail."

"No."

"And, I presume no corn, then, too, creamed or otherwise."

"Are you hungry, dear?"

"Oh, peckish, yes, a bit."

"Then call the children in. They are out back playing. Wash them up and sit them down beside their loving parents."

"I would, my sweet, but we have no children."

"Then, let them stay outside and play in the failing light of day while we linger in the quiet. We will listen while our unborn children scream as beasts from our unburied past scurry out from the dark and tear them asunder. Let the blood of the unborn flow across the land. Let the undead rise and devour their unborn flesh."

"If we had children, dear… Well…. We would have to share what little precious time we have."

"We should strip down to our sweaty meat and share the heat of our burning souls."

"No fire, no heat. We have no fire."

"In the fireplace."

"We have no fireplace."

"Our flesh would melt and fall away from bones." The red scarf, or part of a scarf, or part of something, has twined its way up the reader's legs and tightens. But the reader will stop reading. So close to the end.

"All day I've been thinking about apple crisp," he says. "I'm thinking it would be nice to cap our dinner with just one scoop of apple crisp. Remember how dear Mattie made it? Remember? Oh, poor Mattie. Gone now what? Afer she gave them fifteen years."

"Mattie."

"How I loved her apple crisp."

"It was Aunt Betty's apple crisp."

"Poor Mattie. They let her go, you know. We ought to visit poor Mattie."

"So you can ravish her."

"We might take her some apple crisp."

"There is no apple crisp."

"No." He looks somewhere where there is nothing. Nothing at all. "There never was any apple crisp, now, was there?" He stands and folds his paper carefully and tucks it in his chair.

She pulls the scarf from the reader's legs, from the floor around the reader's feet, back into the page and onto her lap. She folds it in the basket and pins it down with needles.

"It was the onion, wasn't it?" he says.

"We'll start a fire."

"Every night you say, 'We'll start a fire,'" he says. "But we never do. You need a better metaphor, my love. Something new."

"You come home every night, take off your hat and put it on a hook that isn't there, hang your coat on a hangar we do not have, and drink, and drink, and wait for my roast beef, and corn that's creamed

or otherwise, and apple crisp. You dream of Aunt Betty's garlic potatoes. You long for children we have given to the beast. You lust for Mattie. Things must change, and so they have. Yes, I'll say the onion has changed everything. It's brought an end to your martini dreams."

"I thought it might be that." He stands. He puts on hat and coat. He picks up his briefcase on the floor. "Or something else that's just like that."

"Some day, my dear," she says before he leaves, knitting a long red scarf, or some part of a scarf, or some part of something red, "we must learn to love again."

"We should have stayed with olives. We have a barrel of olives."

"Some day," she says, looking closely at her knitting, the next stich exactly like the last one, "you will look at me, and see me."

But then he goes.

Then almost as soon as he is gone there comes a knocking at the door.

"I'm home," he says, and enters. Drops the briefcase on the floor. Hangs his hat and coat on hooks that don't exist in a closet that isn't there, and gravity pulls them down to earth.

Bee on Sunflower / Sophia Falco

Red Dragonfly / Sophia Falco

The Village with No Doors

Peter Coe Verbica

A voluble friend of mine
has photographed hundreds of doors.

Belize.
Micronesia.
Even Tibet

where air and wood
and liberty are rare

and strong tea is served with
pungent Yak butter
and toasted barley.

Most of the shots
have been taken, he tells me,
with a screw mount lens camera

his parents bought him
before the war.

Germans are ingenious,
he assures me,
describing the aperture ring
and range finder.

He wants to put the photos
in a hard-bound book
with an embossed leather cover.

I can't fault him for his obsession.

People collect images of

stranger things.

So a book of doors is an idea
which I can stomach.

The temple, cathedral, mosque and
synagogue doors seem to be
the sturdiest.

Rusted bolts.
Hammered bronze clasps.
Knots of iron.

But it is the village with no doors
which I find more curious:

The lore of a slab trapped in
the roots of a tree,
washing ashore after a monsoon.

Legend had it
that the elder had a dream
and took it as a sign that a shrine
should be built without doors.

And, so the homes followed suit.

The idea seemed so strange
at first.

Like horses without teeth.
Or plants without leaves.

Thieves, it is said, are few,
and are struck blind
or swim out to sea,

the madness of their guilt

driving them to drown
beyond the kelp beds.

At least, so claimed the elderly lady
wearing sandals,
trying to sell me a sugary treat.

The Quadrangle

Peter Coe Verbica

Callas dragged her hand in the water.
It was the Mediterranean, so not too cold.

Pearly razorfish, thorn-backed rays
and parrot fish swam silently
over the seashells beneath her.

"Aristo," as she called him, like to show
that he could sail even a small dingy.

It brought him back
to when he was a boy,

before the yachts,
the windfall of tobacco trades
and arguments with Rainier
over control of casinos.

To the days of
his mother's wood block
of phyllo dough, chopped nuts
and cinnamon.

And the regaling
of his grandmother's silence
as she wrapped sticky rice
with grape leaves.

Before his aunts and uncles
were burned alive in a church.

And, though his parents lost
everything to the Turks,

he was still
the son of Socrates.

And there was comfort in that.

The press liked the triangle:
Jackie, with her odd manner of speech,
and the two glittering Greeks.

But, on the level, it was really a quadrangle
because of Caroline Lee,
the sister time tries to forget—
though she outlives them all.

In the middle of this geometric shape,
the ghost of the Black Jack
eats a sandwich on a card table.

The man with a big heart,
a series of bad bets and a love
for whiskey.

Years later,
with John and Robert gone,
the widow with the fish eye sun glasses
was free to roam.

In a Swiss hospital,
she had the tattoo of poverty removed
from her forehead
by the finest doctor she could find.

No doubt the muscle of money
helped both Bouviers ignore
the stink of fat cigars and too-tight swim trunks.

Meanwhile, the public mourned for
Maria's supernatural voice,
the one which punched holes
in the acoustic ceilings of music halls

and pounded finishing nails
into the Twentieth Century
like a powerful hammer.

Part of me wonders
if when it was reduced to a whisper,
that the woman who loved horses
snuck by the convalescing singer
and into the Tycoon's arms.

Of course, he had been plotting all along.

What else could a man do
who had access to everything.

All of this was auctioned off
in 1998 and 2017, and I was there,
observing.

The Cartier watch, the childlike painting
of Stas and Chuck,
the famous speeches, black veil,
and engraved toothbrushes.

To each conspiring photographer
who caught it all,
even the picture with the Pope,

should we thank you
for the artful and poignant illusions

or just bust you in the chops.

The Power of Freedom

Shaun Haugen

Dear Brittney,

It has been a while since I have written you. In fact it has been since you were in prison that I last wrote. We have texted and talked but nothing endeared like the letters we exchanged then. I believe letters are more adorned than any other form of communication. Letter writing is the most sincere form of writing, and it is only with this sincerity that I can talk about the following events. And it is with honest intentions that I write to you in hopes of easing your apprehensions of what society thinks of you now that you are out. We first met many years ago at a mental health program and since then our paths have crossed an unduly amount. Your presence is with me now as I write; I feel you close to my heart and I address your spirit and character written through words that I hope will touch you. Letters are more real, more genuine, more authentic. They allow me to contemplate and to search for true meaning. This is why I write, to get a sense of you in my mind's eye and to share a piece of my heart that evokes feelings on subject matters that need processing. I want to recall these events, so you know you were and are now, not alone.

I was overcome with joy to see you at the volunteer event It's My Park Day. You looked older since the last time I saw you. That's how you know time has passed. The time I had seen you before was in the Travis County jail, you had recently been booked and were probably waiting to see a judge. I was being transferred. I saw you from across the room as the males were lined up and leaving. I raised my fist in a sign of power but was too afraid to call out your name. I tried then to make a psychic connection with you, but you were staring straight ahead. I knew at that time I had missed you. Your dark brown hair was long, very long, you looked strong, you looked hard, and yet you looked defeated of power. What were you thinking about when you were looking into space? You looked perplexed and angry. These two emotions go together well in jail. There is a lot of time to contemplate for the things we have done, to judge oneself and evaluate one's

conscience in order to understand what got us caught up in the first place. It is never the initial act that is the cause for our being put in jail, but a series of events and problems beforehand that cause us to lose our composure and commit a serious offense of power.

I remember your pose, your stature, your sternness. They say prison makes you harder. I know that was the truth for me. You get beaten down by cell blocks and iron doors. The locks are a high-power machine under the force of an apathetically abusive prison guard who has nearly all the power over you. Sometimes the guard would not let us out because they call in a lock down. Sometimes they lock us up from being out of our cells because they call a lock down. Lock downs are only supposed to occur when there is a fight, but this is not always the case, sometimes the guards just like to exercise their power, sometimes they are just trying to control and limit the amount of power an inmate has.

Guard power is supposed to keep us in line. Literally keep us single file when we walk, keep us controlled when we eat, keep us down when we look at them, keep us contraband free when they strip search us to the naked skin. Their faces show helplessness, a nonchalant type of oppression. They are not there to answer questions or be spoken to. There is a form to fill out for that. They are not there to hand out food plates, there is another inmate to do that. Their power is in the uniforms they wear and in the keys that jingle at their hip. Their power is in that key that opens a trap door within the cell door. I used to suck the air's life force in when the current would flow through, after all the miniature traps of each cell were opened. Anything to get on the other side of that cell block. Do you feel me?

They say prison makes you harder, maybe because living on cement surrounded by concrete masonry blocks is a form of cell torture. They use solitary confinement too. Solitary confinement is literally a method of punishment that prunes the synapses in your brain. I had been there too. Only once, I do not know why, I do not remember, I think I flipped off a prison guard and yelled at him up in his face. I was not the violent type, just angry, pissed off. Without self-composure I lacked tolerance power.

I remember walking in line with three other inmates. Walking anywhere out of the cellblock was a form of power. To get to go to the nurses station (where you would be able to see a female inmate), or visit your lawyer (the only person you could see in the flesh from the outside) was a glimpse of life beyond. Going outside the cell and into the halls was power. But an inmate once got ahead of himself by a couple steps and the prison guard tased him from five feet away and he dropped to the floor and convulsed. This was an exercise of power against power. I knew that this was a form of control, prison abuse. Another time a guard told me to behave because I was painting on the window of my cell door with jelly, mustard, and ketchup packets that I had saved up. The guard said the goon squad was going to come in and rough me up. This is a place where power goes unchecked.

Then there were jail visits. Inmates used to be able to see visitors through a window with a phone connecting each side of the window. But they got rid of this method because seeing a visitor through the glass was too much power. Love is power and human heat is power. You could touch your hand to your visitor's hand through the glass and feel their power, the warmth of love. Whoever enforces the rules wanted to stop that and so visitors were now only allowed to visit through a cheap computer screen that came in all pixelated.

I remember once writing to you saying that good people go to jail all the time. It is true, inmates, and nurses, and social workers, and visitors… My letters gave you power, I could see it in your response. I had been there and know what gave me power and I knew what it would take to get you through. Letters helped get me through. Letters with pictures of the outside and words of love. The guards would boast saying, "This is your home now!" But I knew this was not my home, this was a jail and this was not my home. I taped some of my favorite letters to the wall so that I knew where my home was. But I did not decorate, because I knew that this was not my home.

There were four forms of technology that gave me power. The visitors' computer screened monitor, the television, the radio, and the phone. The television was a constant distraction (sometimes you would see an interesting clip or commercial). We were never let out long enough to watch a complete program. Sometimes you would get

a cell where you could see the television through the window. But in order to listen to the television you would have to tune in to a special broadcasting station on the radio. The television gave me power under times of extreme duress and desperation. But I would rather use the battery on the radio for music and sports. The radio was my most comforting form of power. I would listen to music, Dodger's baseball games that came on at night and the Catholic station. These things gave me extreme power over the depression and sorrow I experienced. I would have to count the days that the battery would last in the radio so that I could buy new ones on commissary in order not to waste any commissary money. They would only give you two batteries at a time and you could not store any extra replacements.

Commissary too was a major source of power in the form of energy and relief. You could buy something but only people from outside of prison could put money on your account. This would allow you to buy a calling card. Calls were not free and they charged by the minute (power of the outside influence). This economic source of power was what got me through from day to day. I could buy soda pop and candies and chips and thermal clothes and socks and a phone card and paper and a pen and use them when I felt so sad that I wanted to cut my wrists but didn't have anything sharp enough. So, when I felt so feeble and hopeless I would sustain myself with an item off of commissary. I would eat a Milky Way, or Cheetos and soda, or draw a picture, or warm myself, something, anything to activate the power of dopamine receptors. I would write letters to family and one friend that kept in touch with me. I would write my dreams on paper, I would write my delusions on paper.

Besides books from the library–which caused me extreme gloom because the protagonists were always in a better position than my own, releasing in me power struggle/power dichotomy/power balance/power of comparison where I wanted to be right there with the main character–were the delusions. Delusions are the last form of power that kept me alive. The delusions saved my life and the insanity made it easier to cope because the fantasies were real in my head. I would auditorily hear the voice of Julia, a girl who spoke to me about her time in prison and how she got out. All I really remember was that

she was desperately suicidal when she was incarcerated and she would speak to me and tell me there is a better life waiting on the other side. I would hear the voice of India every time the sun beamed through the window in the mornings as I watched its golden light move across the wall. The voice of India called on me to come to this foreign land and I could hear the sounds of a bohemian culture ripe with beauty and imagined it to be some sort of massive holy shrine, a place to go to waiting on the outside.

When you have been ostracized by society you are stripped of all your power as a contributing citizen. You forever look on the outside in, you are labeled, you are indefinitely going to lack the power of exactitude and certainty with an assertiveness that you are doing the right thing. Going through the pen makes you question most of your future decisions for some time. Going through the pen makes you doubt, makes you fearful because you know what punishment is possible and what realities exist away from the confines of a blissfully ignorant community. Societal position will always weigh on you with an informal balance of power. In their eyes you have been rehabilitated or been restored power. But it is not the same. Now you have a more powerful conscience than most others because you have been forever changed by this event of succumbing all your freedoms of power. Now out, you can see the reckless acts and deeds in everyday society, committing both harm and virtue, you see how choice affects others not just oneself. Pain is evident all over the world, but the hardness makes the infliction of pain more tolerable.

I will say that incarceration has made me more pure than I ever thought I would be and I see it in you. Purity is boring though, the sin has been conscientiously cut out not because it is necessarily fire and brimstone, but because it feels better not to feel the guilt and carry that weight. I think most people just want to feel better about themselves and that takes self-discipline, or empowerment. What I'm talking about is purity at heart, what Dali Lama practices. Because purity isn't a constant feeling of bliss, I still get upset sometimes, it is a feeling of steadiness, persistence, and self-control, especially when impure things fall upon you. This is not my philosophy it is simply a way of living. I don't really feel up or down, because emotions should

be used sparingly in the moments of most poignant of times or those of tender joyous arousal. Your memory bank is a powerful vault of who you are and I pray that we crack the code upon death and see the beauty and make sense of the shame. I want to know you forever dear friend–infinite power!

When I saw you the first time from being released, at the volunteer event in the Austin park, I saw the soft you, I saw the born again you, I saw the hesitant you, I saw the reformed you. But I also saw the vulnerable you. You looked strong but bewildered, testing the waters, making sure not to upset or disturb the equilibrium of the state of affairs. You fully contributed to societal interaction, not because you wanted to but because you knew it was right. 100%.

Do you think there is some error in love that causes people to break the law? Love might be harder to understand than power. We love for the good and the bad. When we love and don't receive love back this alters our perception of what love is and maybe we find love in the bad, the drugs, the money, the lust, the violence, the hate; we all struggle over our own powers. Powerless gets tangled up in all that self-destruction, because there are different types of power as I have mentioned, just like there are different types of love. You have learned to love yourself. I see it in you. I don't mean vanity though. See how convoluted love and power can be? All this life seems rooted in pleasure. When you don't feel anything what are you to do? Go back to the habits that make you feel? I want you to remember the past, as difficult as that may be, so you never get lost in that darkness again. And now I ask, what are you going to do with all your newfound power?

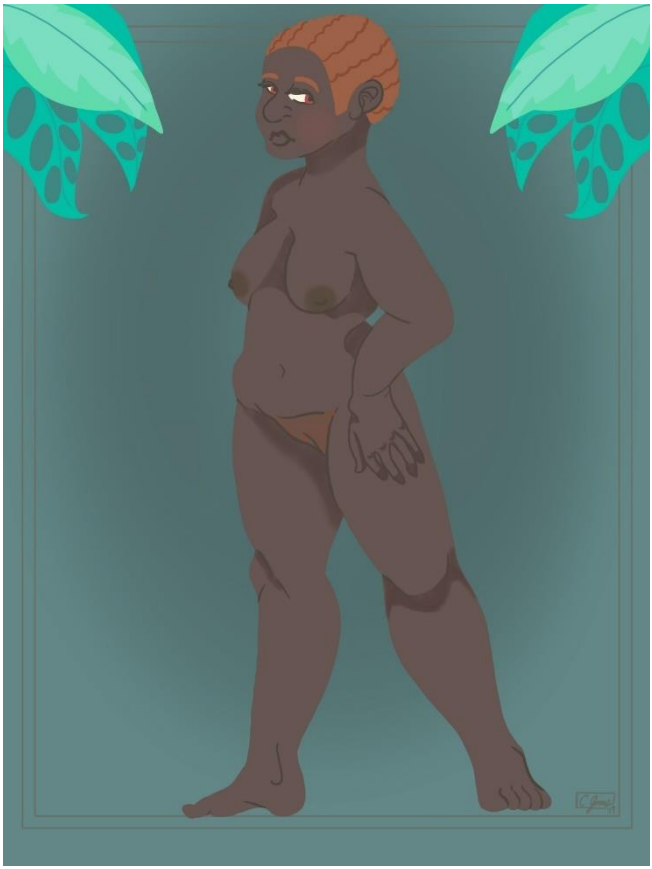
When I got out I felt a lot like a disease of society, like I shouldn't be there. Most inmates eventually get cut loose though. The power that society holds over others' past experiences and others' future choices either positioning them or limiting them towards opportunity, that's rank power. But now it has been three years since I was let out (upon understanding that I am now mentally fit) and I have been reminded that this is still the beginning of the rest of my life. Knowing that you have been stripped of almost all power and now have regained your will, you must realize your potential. You are more

powerful than most to have survived such administering of incarceration. And, remember too, this is still the beginning of the rest of your life.

All power to you!

With love,

Shaun



Natural / Chyna Jones

Dear Dorothy

Janette Schafer

A man holds you precious until he has fucked you. You are an emerald or a diamond but his eyes glaze over and soon you are a sheet of glass.

You were a girl from the Midwest and he said you made him lose his brains, turned him into a scarecrow. Then he was a man of tin because you stole his heart: made it tick, made it break. Your ruby shoes left footprints on his psyche.

Then he became a lion, all rage and roar until he fell apart. He told you he was afraid of the dark and of the monkeys swooping in from his past. He could never be brave again if you forgot about him.

So you gave him the key to the City, removed the tinted glasses from his eyes so he could see there was no green, no emeralds; only white.

You let him under your dress, revealed that you were neither witch nor enchantress; only a woman. Then he hid behind a curtain and his hiding made him powerful.

PS: "Fucked" does not equal "precious." This lesson is hard.

Love,

Aunt Em

The *Nikah*

Kayo Chang Black

Tears rolled down my powdered face, dampening my makeshift lavender headscarf. I bit my lower lip and cried without making a sound. I could have said no to Gökhan and walked away from the *nikah*, the Islamic wedding ceremony—but my conditioning would not allow it. Growing up in a Taiwanese family, the concept of "losing face" was ingrained in me. I understood how unforgivable it was to humiliate someone in public. I felt compelled to submit to the conditioning that I have willfully fought against my whole life, to maintain my future husband's honor in front of his entire clan. But the obligation to compromise my integrity, whether it was real or imaginary, was crushing me. I hated having to pretend to believe in something to please my future mother-in-law.

Gökhan's mother was a gregarious Turkish woman. Short and squat in stature, she was the matriarch of the family. She had moved to Denmark with her husband in the '70s, and all her children had been born and raised there. However, she held onto the customs from the old country and behaved very much like a traditional Turkish wife and mother. I never saw her without her headscarf, even in the middle of summer. Gökhan's father, on the other hand, had adapted to Denmark. He was a quiet man with a handsome, honest face. He owned a grocery store in the neighborhood, and when he found out that I loved strawberries, he'd bring some back from his store every day during my visit. He was the type who would go with the flow and let his wife take care of all the traditions and rituals.

I had just arrived in Denmark a week earlier and had met Gökhan's family for the first time. We slept in separate beds because his mother thought it was improper for us sleep together until we perform the *nikah*.

That summer, Gökhan and I were in-between places—we had just left Dubai and in the autumn moved to Bahrain where I would start a new job. My new employers instructed me to move to Bahrain alone, or marry Gökhan so I could sponsor his dependent visa. Since we did not want to break up, we decided to elope in Canada. We made

a pitstop in Copenhagen on our way to Vancouver to see his parents before we legalized our union.

Even though Gökhan's mother and I did not speak the same language, I wanted her to like me. I understood that the *nikah* was pivotal to his pious mother. I was not against it, but I also did not want to give her the impression that I was willing to convert to Islam. I am proudly secular, which caused major friction when Gökhan and I first started dating.

"If you want to be with me, and be accepted by my family, you will need to convert," he said—it was the only time I remember Gökhan being adamant about anything.

"No." I stared at him as if he had warped into a goat. Converting to Islam was *unthinkable*. Being secular is my mode in life, and I was not willing to change it.

He explained that all I had to do was to pretend, to do it for a show, which was what he had done his whole life. I still refused. He called me spoiled, stubborn and selfish. I cried but persisted. It was a battle of wills that lasted the whole day.

"If you love me, you will accept me for who I am," I argued, my eyes blazing. "You wouldn't ask me to compromise my integrity."

Eventually, I broke him down with a combination of persistence and tears. "You won't need to convert," he said, hugging me. "I will talk to my mother."

It was no surprise that Gökhan yielded—I was the girl who always had her way. "Don't smoke in the mall." Mama used to glare at me when I was on my way out of the house when I was in high school. "Someone might see you."

You don't want me smoking in the mall? I did just that with abandon. Don't want me dating white guys? I did, just to make you cringe. Oh, you would disown me if I got a tattoo? I did, just to test you.

Gökhan was right: I was spoiled. Mama relented, and Gökhan did too.

My initial experience with Islam was when I moved to Dubai for my first job as a librarian, about ten months before meeting Gökhan. My first impression was that it was strict and conservative. I had to abandon wearing skirts to work because it was indecent to show

my knees. The religion forbade many things that I enjoyed, such as alcohol and pork. During Ramadan, even non-Muslims could not have a sip of water in public. However, I kept an open mind. I wanted to be involved with my future husband's traditions.

When Gökhan told me about the *nikah*, I knew nothing about it. He described it as an engagement to tell Allah that he, Gökhan, had chosen me, Kayo, to be his wife. That did not sound awful—it seemed like a symbolic ceremony. I agreed that I was willing to take part in the *nikah*, as long as I did not have to convert to Islam. He talked to his mother who agreed that I would not have to. Overjoyed that her son would no longer live in sin, she invited the whole extended family, prepared an elaborate spread, and summoned the prestigious *imam*, a religious leader, who would officiate the ceremony.

I had no idea what I signed up for.

On the day of the *nikah*, I was in the center of the room wearing an ivory, ankle-length, cotton maxi dress with grey embroidered flowers at the hem. I'd bought the dress a few days before because it was long and covered my legs. However, the top portion was too revealing for Islamic taste, so I wore a grey cardigan, buttoned up all the way, which hid my tattooed arm and immodest cleavage.

Gökhan's three aunts were fussing around me, trying to pin a lavender pashmina over my head as a temporary headscarf. His little sisters, aged eleven and thirteen, whose room had turned into a bridal dressing room, stole curious glances at me. When I returned their stares with grins, they gasped, turned their heads and looked away. His boisterous aunts laughed and chatted in a combination of Turkish and Danish. They clamored and made animated gestures with their hands and clapped as they giggled over some anecdote I couldn't understand. I stood amid this commotion with a dumb smile on my face and nodded my head as Gökhan's only English-speaking aunt asked me if I was doing okay. Despite the chaos in the room, a part of me was having fun, soaking up his aunts' contagious excitement. I felt euphoric and found myself smiling more as time passed. I was putting the finishing touches on my makeup when Gökhan poked his head in the room. "Hey, can I talk to you for a minute in the next room?" he

asked in a quiet voice, avoiding my eyes, his thick, dark brows furrowed.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

How did I, my mother's rebellious and stubborn daughter, end up participating in a *nikah* with a Danish-Turkish guy she had only dated for less than a year? The truth was that the defiant teenager who continually stretched boundaries and pushed her mother's buttons found herself a lost and scared twenty-six-year-old woman in the Middle East.

I was born in Japan to Taiwanese parents and grew up just outside of Vancouver, British Columbia. I always prided myself on being an adaptable third-culture kid—I was fearless and foolish. Fresh out of graduate school, I moved to Dubai to start my first job as a librarian, even though I would not have been able to find the city on an atlas.

When I first got on the transport bus to the terminal of the Dubai International Airport, I burst into tears—the warm and humid air tinged with dust reminded me how far away I was from home. Homesickness was only one of the many challenges I faced in Dubai. For the first month, I tried to get an internet connection in my apartment to stay in touch with my faraway family and friends. I spent all my free time going to Etisalat, the national internet provider. Each time, I spoke to an indifferent woman at the counter who wore a black headscarf and emitted an intense frankincense perfume. Each time, she told me "two weeks, *inshallah."* Each time, I left the building defeated and depressed. Before I knew any better, I was convinced that *'inshallah'* meant 'go away.' It took over two months for me to have an internet connection at home.

On the weekends, I would roam around the city wide-eyed, trying to absorb this strange, desert landscape filled with glitzy shopping malls and imposing skyscrapers surrounded by endless construction sites. As I walked by in my short-sleeve t-shirt and knee-length skirt, South Asian workers gawked at me with their unblinking, saucer eyes. I ran away to divert their gaze. I was confused, misunderstood, and isolated from everything and everyone I knew.

Within days of arriving in Dubai, I cried on the phone to Mama. After three days of crying, Mama broke down and came for a visit. She cooked for me, helped me settle into my new apartment, and we explored the city together. We shopped in the souk, went dune bashing in the desert, and had afternoon tea at the Burj Al Arab. However, after she left, I was even more homesick and lonely, which drove me to go out to meet new people. Eventually, I made friends with other expatriates, young women close to my age who had also moved to Dubai for their careers. But they did not ease my sense of alone-ness. What I wanted was someone to come home to and wake up next to every morning. Someone who would understand me, someone to go on adventures with, someone who would take me away from this loneliness and despair. After dating Gökhan for a few months, I thought he could be that person.

The truth is, my definition of a good relationship was simplistic and naive. I did not know a thing about a healthy relationship—as a teenager, I watched my parents struggle with their marriage. At the tender age of fifteen, I found out that Baba, my father, had been cheating on Mama.

Baba was a travel guide and was often away from home. At this time, Mama was in her mid-thirties, but she dressed and acted like a much older woman—a dedicated mother whose husband was away for long periods. Since Mama spent her days cleaning and cooking, she paid little attention to her appearance. Her clothing of choice consisted of dowdy, faded sweatsuits. Her world revolved around Baba, my younger brother Davis, and me.

Before school one morning, I was eating my eggs sitting on the high stool next to the kitchen counter when I heard Mama scream Baba's name. I am not sure what business Mama had poking around Baba's black nylon side bag—maybe she was putting something in there, or perhaps she was looking for something for him—either way, she pulled out a love letter in Baba's handwriting, addressed to another woman.

Mama lost her mind with this discovery. She wanted answers. She needed reassurance. She demanded Baba explain himself. He could not. He ran out of the door with his luggage to catch a flight and left

behind Mama who had turned into a wailing mess. I do not remember how I got to school that day.

After school, I found Mama standing disheveled in the middle of the kitchen, wearing her frumpy, pale pink cotton nightgown even though it was three o'clock in the afternoon. With tears streaming down her face, she wailed and screamed that she wanted to die. She clutched a crumpled-up letter in one hand and with her other hand, made slashing gestures with a kitchen knife as if she was going to slit her wrist. I was terrified.

Several days later, I came home, and the house was silent. Before this whole fiasco, Mama always had a snack ready by the time I came back from school, like a brothy bowl of Taiwanese-style beef brisket noodle soup, savory braised pork with rice, or flavorful soy-sauce marinated chicken wings. But that day, when I wandered into the kitchen, she wasn't there. She was not at her usual station in front of the stove, engulfed in tantalizing steam coming out of a bubbling pot that she was stirring, telling me that my snack would be ready soon.

The eerie stillness was a stark contrast to what had happened in the kitchen only a few days before. I began to search the house to make sure Mama had not hurt herself. At the entrance to my parents' room, I held my breath, turned the doorknob, pushed open the door and tip-toed inside. I entered the room inundated with the stale, feminine odor of unwashed hair—the scent of desperate sadness. Mama was asleep and snoring loudly even though it was the middle of the afternoon. Her jet-black hair matted on the cream-colored pillowcase. Her usually smooth forehead crinkled with despair—even in her sleep, she was in agony. On the nightstand, I saw bottles of pills. Sleeping pills, seductive, secret sleeping pills that promised peace and a pain-free slumber. I picked up a bottle and rattled it—it was almost empty. I gathered every bottle in sight and took them. I rushed into my bedroom and threw them in the bottom drawer of my nightstand where I had stashed all the knives in the house a few days earlier.

At an impressionable age, I learned that my parents were not gods—they are flawed human beings. Watching my mother's meltdown caused by my father's infidelity, I discovered the dire

consequences of being emotionally dependent on a spouse. I told myself back then that I would never want to be in her position. I would never allow my love for a man to turn into ammunition that he could use to maim me. I also learned the importance for a woman to be financially independent—with no economic means, Mama could not leave Baba even if she wanted to. She was an old-school, conventional Asian housewife who had never worked a day outside of her home.

During this dark time, I was overwhelmed and did not know how to process my conflicting emotions. On the one hand, I was angry. How could Baba betray Mama when she dedicated her whole life to us? At the same time, as a Daddy's Girl, I was confused. Baba was indulgent, showering me with his affection and bringing me trinkets from his trips. When I needed help with my chemistry homework, he was attentive and patient. He was also a fun-loving father who took me and Davis snowboarding on the weekends. I knew he loved Davis and me, but his affair broke Mama's heart and spirit. I did not understand how such an amazing father could be such a shitty husband.

I developed unhealthy relationship patterns around this time—I worried about men cheating on me or leaving me, but I also desperately dreaded being alone. My strategy was to become infatuated with a person and charm him with attention—the goal was to have him fall hopelessly in love with me, so he would not cheat or leave. At the same time, because I never wanted to be dependent on a man for my financial well-being, I moved around for my education and career. I never stuck around for anybody.

On the surface, I seemed accomplished and strong, but underneath, I was insecure and lonely. The tough girl who smoked and defied her mother was just a façade. Since having my first boyfriend at seventeen, I had not been single for more than a few months at a time. Like a rabbit chased by an unknown assailant, I dashed from one man to the next, looking for someone to validate me, to calm the nagging, neurotic voice inside my head: *I will never find someone who would love me because I am always "too" something. I am too fat. I am too emotional but also too ambitious. I am too crazy, too free-spirited. I talk too fast, think too much, and have too many feelings. I am too strong-*

willed, and at the same time, too needy. Over and over again, this voice whispered to me throughout my relationships. With every failed relationship, it confirmed that I was unlovable.

When I met Gökhan, the nagging voice subsided. We connected on OkCupid and hit it off. He was living in Copenhagen and seemed like a reliable and attentive man. He was cute too, with wavy, dark brown hair, deep-set mahogany eyes, a straight nose, and a thoughtful demeanor. He quieted my anxiety with his patient, soothing voice. We fell asleep talking to each other on Skype many nights. I felt safe having him in my life.

The start of our relationship was a sweet and romantic internet fairy tale that spanned continents. After chatting online for three months, we met in person in Istanbul. On our second night together, Gökhan and I climbed several flights of creaky stairs to reach the rooftop of one of the budget hotels in the Old City. Opening the door to the terrace, the twilight before sunrise greeted us. Gökhan draped a blanket around me when he saw me shivering in the chilly, pre-dawn gust. Then, groping his way in the darkness, he led me to the shabby lounge on the far side of the terrace. We shuffled in our flip-flops, trying to suppress our giddiness. I looked up, enchanted by the constellation above me. As my gaze followed the horizon, I saw the flickering white lights from the boats and ferries dotting the Bosporus, the strait that functions as a border between Asia and Europe. The twilight was misty, making it hard to see where the sky ended and the Bosporus began. Over the railing of the terrace were the muted shadows of the shops, homes, and hotels of Old City, peacefully asleep. All around us, the shutters were drawn, the lights dimmed, and it was quiet. We sat bundled up on the lounge in the blanket. I was snuggling up next to a man whom, days before, I had only seen on a computer screen. He bent down and planted a kiss on my lips.

"Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar, Allahu akbar, Ash hadu an la ilaha illal lah…" The *muezzin* called out the first stanza of the haunting and melodic *adhan* at the crack of dawn to remind all Muslims it was time for the opening prayer of the day. My eyes flew open. To my surprise, my surroundings had transformed. Twilight had receded, and in its place, the sun emerged. The first pink and

orange rays illuminated the sky, chasing away the stars. I rubbed my eyes as the sunshine warmed my face inviting me to crawl out of the warmth of Gökhan's arms. At dawn, the Bosporus was no longer shrouded in a mysterious mist–it was bustling with ferries and ships moving back and forth between Asia and Europe. The city below was no longer sleeping; it was buzzing with horns and chatter as people arose from their beds to begin a new day. I was in awe of Istanbul's transformations between night and day. Looking at Gökhan's handsome face on this brand-new day, I kissed him before we headed back to our room. I was happy and in love.

Less than a year later, we faced a conundrum.

I followed Gökhan out of the room and closed the door as his aunts and sisters giggled behind us. We entered the next room, which was his parents' bedroom, and he sat me down on the edge of the bed. Averting my quizzical eyes, Gökhan said, "When the *imam* asked me what your religion was, I couldn't tell him that you didn't have one. So, I told him that you were a Buddhist. He said since you are of the Book—neither Christian nor Jewish, you would need to convert."

His words took a few moments to sink in. Once I understood the gravity of the situation, I started to panic. *Did he know this was going to happen before talking me into the nikah?*

"This is not part of the deal," I shouted, shaking my head. The pins keeping my lavender headscarf in place pricked my scalp. "You promised that I didn't have to convert if I go through the *nikah!"* I glared at him; my gaze was accusatory.

"I'm sorry I didn't know," he muttered, "You don't need to go through with it if you don't want to. It's completely up to you."

Is it up to me? No, it's not up to me! I started to cry. Gökhan looked at me with his thoughtful eyes. He handed me a tissue. I dabbed my eyes, blew my nose, and shed more tears. I looked up and saw myself in his mother's vanity mirror. The rebellious teenager inside me mocked my puffy face and smeared make-up—but I could not stop crying. Gökhan fidgeted next to me, occasionally patting me on the shoulder and repeating the phrase, "You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

Don't you fucking understand? I shouted inside my head. *From now on, we can never be truly happy together. If I don't convert, your mother is going to hate me forever, and I am going to feel lousy making you choose between her and me. If I do convert, I will resent you for as long as I live.* I kept my head bowed because I could not stand looking at the helpless expression on his face. I could not utter a word because if I tried to verbalize my feelings, I would start wailing. The teenaged me would have walked out of the door without looking back. She was, however, overpowered by the decent Taiwanese daughter who did not want her future husband to lose face.

Looking back, I realized that I put myself in this messy situation on an impulse and through deeply rooted fear. I was in love with the idea of being in love. I also loved having an exotic boyfriend who had grown up in a set of cultures that were vastly unlike mine. I bragged to friends that between the two of us, we had four passports. At the same time, it was my fear of being alone that drove me to this irrational decision to go through with the *nikah*. Knowing what I know now, I should have walked away—coercion and compromised integrity are not a good foundation for marriage. However, as a third culture kid, I have been crossing borders and adapting to different cultures my whole life. I thought I was ready to cross a new one with Gökhan.

I was wrong.

I wept for an eternity, shed enough tears to fill the Bosporus. The girl with a cigarette dangling between her fingers, who dated white boys and covered herself in tattoos had turned into Gökhan's bewildered bride. On the other side of the door, the *imam* was waiting for me to change my wicked, wayward ways and Gökhan's entire clan was expecting us to profess our undying love and commitment to each other. I cried and cried like a lost child. I did not know how to get out of this mess.

Out of nowhere, Gökhan's father walked into the room. He was *smiling*. He closed the door behind him and started *laughing*. I gave him a look of bafflement as he spoke rapidly in Turkish. He paused and nodded his head. Gökhan looked at me and interpreted what his father

had said. "My dad said you are taking this whole thing way too seriously."

His father grinned at me, said a few more words and nodded again. Gökhan translated, "He said it's totally fine if you don't want to go through with it. But you could also put on a show by pretending to convert, which would make everybody happy."

I stared at his father, shocked that he had just asked me to go out there and tell a lie in front of the whole family. He chuckled, nodded at Gökhan again and left without saying another word. What his father wanted me to do was what he had done, and what Gökhan had done his whole life: pretend and go through the motions to make peace. I felt defeated and exhausted. I forced my gaze back to Gökhan. *Oh, what I would do just to make this awful situation go away!*

After taking a couple of deep breaths, I asked Gökhan to fetch my makeup bag from the next room. I cleaned my face with a fresh tissue and wiped away the black smudges under my eyes. When Gökhan returned, I smeared on a thick layer of foundation and powdered my face. Then, I applied a sparkly lilac eyeshadow that matched my lavender headscarf. Staring at my reflection in the mirror, I grinned. My eyes were still puffy; my smile looked pathetic but convincing enough to those who did not know me. I smiled again and knew that my mask was secure. I reached for Gökhan's hand and led him out of the room.

Sadly, Mama's rebellious Canadian daughter did not have big enough guns to fight the rebellion in Denmark. After all, I was only one young woman trying to keep my integrity abreast in the face of a conservative, cultural tidal wave.

I followed the *imam*, who told me to repeat the *Shahada*, the Arabic script that would declare me a Muslim. *"La ilaha illa Allah wa-Muhammad rasul Allah,"* which translates to "I testify that there is no other God but Allah, and Muhammad is God's messenger." The *imam* said it slowly, pausing after every few syllables to allow time for me to mimic the foreign sounds. Afterward, I signed a piece of paper that the *imam* had prepared. Shortly after, he declared us husband and wife.

From that day, I resented Gökhan. I never forgave him for putting me through a conversion.

Our union did not last long. Four months after we arrived in Bahrain, the Arab Spring broke out. A series of protests swept across the Arab world. In Bahrain, the government cracked down on the demonstrations, which created an environment of fear and uncertainty. The turmoil made it difficult for Gökhan to find work. A year and a half later, when he finally secured a job in Dubai, our marriage crumbled. Instead of following him, I got a job in Hong Kong to be closer to my parents in Taiwan. We broke up.

Many years later, I found the lavender headscarf in my wardrobe. I am still in Hong Kong, but now married to a wonderful man who loves and accepts me just the way I am. Though painful, I learned so much from wearing the headscarf that day, like communicating expectations, and accepting the people I love for who they are, instead of trying to change them. Even though going through the *nikah* and living in Bahrain was challenging, I would not trade that experience for anything else. Without it, I would not have learned how to be in a loving and equal partnership. Taking one last look at the headscarf, I put it in the trash bin. I have come a long way— the girl who smoked in the mall has grown up and learned how to love herself. I now know that I am strong enough to be the person that I have become.

I'll Catch You Later / Leah Dockrill

A Mistake

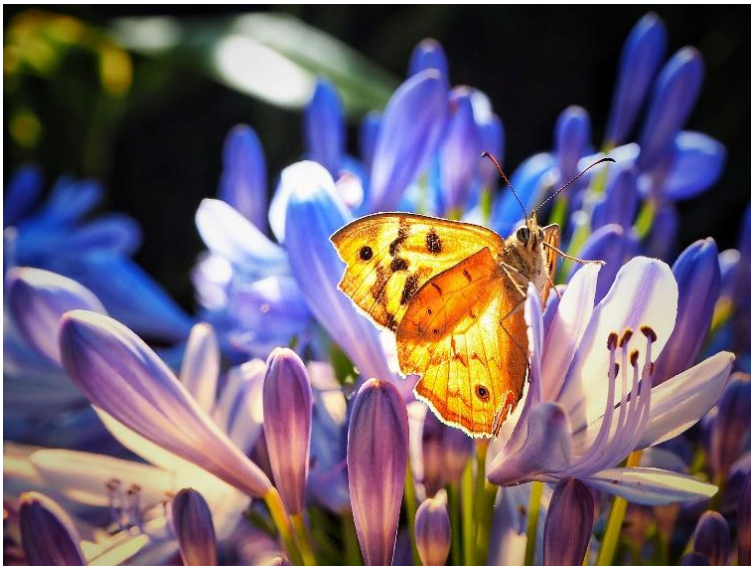
David Olsson

There is a play that is a mistake. It can only be performed by accident and its success relies on the audience being unaware that they are, in fact, experiencing a play and not a real-life event. The number of past and current performances of this play is unknown. There is no way to actively take part in it, but some people search for it anyway. Finding the play will make it unplayable–yet they persist. But perhaps they have misunderstood its nature. Perhaps their search is the play. Perhaps that assumption is mistaken.

The Meaning of Life

David Olsson

Go to college, be young, work hard, make informed decisions, have style, exclude people from your crowd, believe that you are in love, give your children more than you ever had. Golf. Die. Repeat.



The Glory of the Season / Derek Entwistle

Snow-day Friends

Roeethyll Lunn

When it snowed in early November in the Pee Dee area of South Carolina in the times preceding desegregation, only the grass felt slighted. If you were not accustomed to the harshness of cold weather back then, when it did come, it was well pronounced. Adjustments had to be made: Poor white people drank more coffee, rich white people never came outside much then anyway, and poor black sharecroppers felt mandated to add on still more clothes. Everything else was to be padded more. More and longer oak logs were placed on the fire. More rags were packed into cracked windowpanes, and more words of caution about the cold were dished out from the hearts of the elderly to the heads of the young.

On a particular morning, three women were crunching their way through the cold to Bannie Goodson's house. Another type of raw cold had somehow managed to slip past Aunt Bannie (as everyone called her) and gained entrance through her door. By the time they got there, it was near noon, and some of the ice was trying hard to get away. The women stamped the dirtied ice off their brogans and, in single file, walked by Helena, the bewildered young girl who answered their friend's door.

"Shut yo' mout', gal, be'fo you ketch flies," Teedi said laughingly as she playfully slap the girl's face. *"Ah ain't lying, Bannie! Jack is back! Let us in here, 'fo us freeze to death! Ol' wimmin's butt git cold. Long time since she had anybody to warm hit up!"* They all laugh as each woman individually began to place pots that they'd wielded from under their many layers of clothes onto the large table that stood in the middle of Aunt Bannie's floor. The copper-colored woman, Floy Thomas, hunched Teedi in her side as she nodded at the other woman that had come with them. "Give us a word today, Hattie."

Hattie Samuels reminded you of one of the many trees that had grown near the banks of Black Creek. She was tall and lean and swayed slightly to one side as she stood. Her skin was the color of their bark, and her hair was curly and greenish-gray in color like the moss that swung from their limbs. The sides of her left eye and mouth were

pinched in a way that gave onlookers the impression that she may once have suffered a stroke. She hadn't. Nature had given her this one thing in life (she thought) that served to her advantage. Hattie was not ugly. She just looked awesome, and she liked it. She loved the effect that she could have on people. She liked frightening the daylights out of people by her stare. She pretended that she could see right through them to their thoughts. *"Uh gift of discernment, the Bible calls it,"* she said, but Hattie's was more life experience than gift. It came from years of studying people because she was jealous of them. It was very effective in her *ministry.*

Hattie's *ministry* was *"visitin' the sick and shet in,"* or anywhere else where she thought that she could get into or iron out someone else's business. Her husband had been dead for years, *"God rest his soul."* And all of her children had thought of acceptable excuses to cut her completely out of their lives. She was opinionated and hard to live with. She was: *"Saved and Sanctified, Holy Ghost filled and fire baptized,"* she thought. Some people who knew her intimately believed that Hattie's *"fire baptism"* was the surprise that God had waiting for her at a lake in Hell in the afterlife. She not only believed that she was righteous; she really believed that she was always right. People, she thought, were suffering and always getting themselves into tragic pitfalls because they had not been fortunate enough to have had her advice. She didn't care for the unfortunates that she visited and had long since stop feeling sorry for them. She just loved acting respectable and being included. She also never had the courage to preach the sermon that she wholeheartedly believed which was: *"The Devil loves dumb folks."*

Hattie rolled a pair of powerful brown eyes at her friends. "Don't mess wid me today, Floy Thomas. The spirit of the Lord is upon me. Go head and laugh, but Ah'd mind if I was you." Floy straightened up her face. She was the youngest one of the three and hadn't told herself yet to not be so easily frightened.

Teedi loved a good fight. "When they do that, we ain't s'pose to pay them no attenshun, Hattie." Teedi cocked both her eyes as she said, "That is our Christian duty. Come on Hattie, ain't nobody up for nuthin'. All us come here for is to console these here chillun and Bannie

and eat some of yo' good ol' collard greens. Now shut up yo' ol' hard mouth, girl. We don't need it here today."

Teedi hugged Hattie. The latter was easily consoled if ever you would either compliment her, or admitted to her that you were hopelessly wrong, pitiful, and needed her help to straighten yourself out. Teedi pushed out her very ample butt at Hattie as she passed her on her way to the warm fire that Bannie had going in the hearth. "'Sides," she said as lifted up her dress and turned her backside to the fire. "All us here know the word same as you. We all might come at it in different ways, but we all come."

Two things ignited men about Teedi Simms: her hairy body and her unusually large butt. They would brag to each other about these things, even if they had never had sex with her themselves. Hair grew on Teedi's body like it did on a man's. It grew: short and thick on her scalp and above her upper lip; bushy and musty under her arms and on the face of her groin, slight and silky on her arms, legs and belly, and grizzly, some said stubby, in the two long sideburns that warmed each side of her face.

Teedi's butt was a work of art to "Corn" Jackson. Corn was a good-looking yellow man that kept his body in good shape too. Even though he was married, he loved Teedi. He'd loved her all of his life. Corn said that Teedi's butt reminded him of Alabama. It looked like two large pieces of ass cheeks bamming against each other all of the time. Mr. Lee, the rich white man that owned the land that most of the black people ended up sooner or later working on, surprised them one day by joining in on their humor after Teedi had just walked by. Only for an instant could Teedi's dress, the men laughed, no matter how bright the color, majestic the fold, swift the furl, and as large as the banner as Teedi's had to have lately, hide it. Your mind could not help it. It would not be long before some place in your mind was flagged and had to automatically venture on to see the fact that that dress was only a broad expanse of cloth trying hard to mask a whole lot of tail.

Teedi knew about their snickering and heard them whisper "Alabama" when she walked by. Over the years, she found a way to repay them. When she would catch one of them alone, she would stand

back in her legs and *unconsciously* tremble her ass cheeks by tightening and releasing them repeatedly as she'd talk to him. It didn't have quite the tempo of the motion, but it was ample enough to remind a man of the fervor that a he-dog had while he was servicing his bitch.

Sammie Cotton had inadvertently taught her how to do this. He did it at her on days when he was trying to proposition her while they were at work. One day he looked at her and said in a serious mode, "Teedi, don't!" Not understanding, she had stopped in her tracks and asked him in alarm, "Don't what?" "Don't!" he laughed, "Don't leave me a quarter!—take every penny that Ah got—if you ever let me git the chance to git a hold of you and all of that tail." Beauty is deciphered by what has been fed to you—fed to you as being good. It is not always in the thinnest body, the silkiest hair, or the bluest eye.

Teedi had other masculine features also. She had two large muscular legs and a gruff voice. Even though she tried to feminize her broad hands by wearing shiny, little, silver rings on them and blood-red fingernail polish, try as you may, you still couldn't help but to compare the skin on them to two big, black brim fish—even during the times that she would be extending them to you across your sick bed on the warmest and largest cup of kindness that she had. But in spite of it all, she was cute. Time had been good to Teedi's body. Muscle had seen to that. Muscle made her body become more improved as it had broaden, more so than it had aged. And masculinity had somehow allowed her to come as close to looking like a man as she could possibly be, before it gave her back, as if in a quick snatch, to a strange form of beauty that was charming to women and enticing to men.

Teenagers loved Teedi. She wouldn't hush as the others did when they entered the room. She would not let it be known that she saw them lurking in the shadows as the older group of gray hairs talked among themselves of personal problems, family problems, and sex. She respected them and pleaded their rights to hear. "Dem chillun' old enough to have teeths, and they is ready to bite. Tell'm what things taste like, and they won't bite off more'n they can chew!" She would wink her eyes at them when she was beginning to get risque. "Ah ain't like dem other ol' dried up saints that ya'll see in church all de time.

Most of them you find playing the piano. They insist on bamming them keys for a century if nobody don't stop'm. Got mo' teeths than they got tune."

Teedi would stop her monologues if new insights came to her while she was speaking.

"You notice that all them old piano players is high yellah? Yellah chile ain't never had to work much. Always had time to learn things. They white daddies saw to that. White man build universities for his real chillun' and state colleges for his black'uns. And even the black'uns better not be too black, less they couldn't git into them state colleges theyself. They put that shingle test at the door. You blacker than that shingle, yo' ass…oh… oh," she held her hand over her mouth modestly, "can't git in. Even put it up in some churches. Yellah peoples play'n in church with white gloves on; white man have to git his hand in ever thang!"

Teedi loved to use her eyes and hands to mock her subjects in parody. She mimed movements and overemphasized voice tones for her humor. "Nic-king at them piano keys wid they little white gloves on. Nick-ka-demons, Ah call some of them. Mean as the devil hisself. They life tied up wid nicking at them piano keys while de truth fly right over they curly heads."

Teedi bragged with humor how she had "come tah know God."

"See, Ah ain't like them. Ah didn't come to de truth like them ol' Nicademons. Ah live my life, and Ah ain't shame to tell'it. Ah was a whorish wummon," she winked. "I usta say that come to de Lawd by way of Peter: Ah cussed and fussed with every sinner in town. God is the God of de living and not the dead. Ah'm through with all that now, Ah got a new name. Ah calls myself, *'Tell'm Bout It Teedi.'"* She bragged as she held two index fingers pointed at them like six shooters from each side of her enormous breast. "Folks think Ah'm too gruff cause Ah talk about things that they wants to hide. Dirt been here, and Ah didn't invent hit.

"Why should Ah try to hide it? One gal Ah know had lot'so brothers over in Dillon County. Either one of them would have come to knock the fool out of her husband, if she had call'm.

"She dead now cause she didn't. My teeth hurt, don't tell you. Ah gots to tell you myself.

"Ah been young, Ah know what mens is. There some good ones. It them dogs Ah'm talking bout.

"The kind that'll make like they is just play'n with cha when they hit you. They is just seeing how much you kin take. Don't take nothing! Pick up the first thing you see and crown him with it, and you'll never have to worry bout that Negro no mo'. Most of them you don't even have to hit'm, jus' make'm think you can jump just as fool as they can! Too many wummons done wore eggs on they face, when all they had to do was to pick up the fry'n pan in the beginning. And Ah'll tell'm that till Ah die!

"Ain't nothing like a man…. Only reason Ah give up whoring was 'cause Ah find myself a better man. Ah'm a feeling wummon. Everybody else saw the light or got the call, Ah got called by a smell. One day Ah was in a room and Ah smelt a scent. It smelt like olive oil, but sweeter. Ah went all through that house…even outside…try'n to find that scent. Ah never did. Hit was only in that room. Ah thought that it was Jesus, so Ah been changed ever since."

The three stout visitors had only had their first plate of food by the time Teedi started in, in her humorous way, on what they had all come to Aunt Bannie's house for.

Roy Lee sat at his little side table eating and playing with a brightly colored cork. Aunt Bannie had taken it off of one of her fishing poles when she saw that he had found favor in it. Helena sat at the table with the women. She tried to eat, but couldn't. She also tried to assure the others, as they'd looked, that their food really did taste good.

Aunt Bannie was full. She had been awake every since she'd first heard what happened. She could only dip a small sample from each of the pots. She ended up only poking at it, like a lazy person does when he or she pokes and jabs with a pitchfork at hay—poking, and then looking around to see if anyone is looking. She watched her collards and chitterlings as their juice or *"pot lickuh"* turned into creamy little pearls that beaded into grains of fat. Aunt Bannie

wondered would the others understand if she would beg them to forgive her for going into her bedroom to rest her eyes for a while.

"Bannie," Teedi Simms asked, "Henry Lee as fool as they say he is…and is it true that he killed Rosa Mae cause he thought she was going wid the shownce man?"

Floy Thomas held her head down in her hand. Her shoulders jerked her every time she thought about what Teedi had just said. That one woman that never pull no punches, Floy thought.

"That's it," Aunt Bannie answered, "Ah don't kno'…. Ain't nobody come or sent word yet."

"Ah sho' God hope he ain't gone fool," Teedi said. "Somehow you gotta git to him and tell'm to keep his mouth shut…and play fooler than what they thank he is. That the only way out for Henry Lee. He gotta fool dems law mens and fool dem good!"

The rest of Teedi's friends agreed.

Hattie spoke first; she wanted the floor. "Teedi, you and Ah seldom see eye to eye, but Ah'm withcha this time. Ah say the same thang!"

Teedi took back the conversation that she had started. "It's a bad thang when a colored person got to go before a white judge. Specially uh old one; he done live long enough to have time to git to know how to git rid somebody from round here—legally."

"Rosa Mae work for Mr. Lee and dem a long time…Mr. Lee and Mrs. Jane love her."

"They bound to be one of the first ones to go in a courtroom and make a stank," Hattie said as she grabbed the other's attention out of Teedi's mouth. "Ah ought to know," Teedi cut in, "they love me for years 'fo they love huh. Ah the one broke Mrs. Jane in."

Hattie slung the final blow to outdo Teedi by using an old trick herself. Whenever you are trying to capture a small crowd's attention, talk loud and only to two people: the one that is least interested in what you are saying or the one that is farthermost away. Hattie chose Bannie.

"Bannie, the only thang a white person want a colored person to do is know how to stay in his place. If you kin manage to do that, then they'll leave ya' alone, and they'll be the first ones to go to bat for

you if you ask 'm too. Somebody need to go somewhere and speak up for Henry Lee fo' all them white peoples git together and fry'm."

Floy got very quiet sometime during Hattie and Teedi's duel. She didn't like the way that the conversation was going. It sounded to her as if they thought that Henry Lee should get off scot-free. She didn't agree with that. As much as she sympathized with the family, a woman, Floy thought, had lost her life, and by right, someone had to pay. If Henry Lee was crazy, then he should be kept somewhere until he came to his senses. She had to be careful, however, with her thoughts. She didn't want to be too selfish or unfair.

There was nothing seemingly that anyone could do. She wondered to herself if anyone should try. Henry was too strong-willed. He could always find a way to put himself into a place where no one could help him but himself. *"Henry Lee was always hardheaded. Can't never git it in his head to believe that sugar is sweet."* Floy's mother used to warn her. *"You'll never be able to git long wid that kind. Strong mouth ain't no good around here. Always land ya' into trouble—specially with whitefolks. Before ya kno' it, they'll git tired of his shit—throw him into Black Creek! Next day, ya'll find him wid his tail floating upward in the sun. And nobody will ever know nuthin…and ain't too many will come round to ask."*

There was certainly nothing that she could do. There was nothing she could do either some years ago, when Henry Lee had decided to love Rosa Mae instead of her. She'd loved Henry Lee first. He'd been her boyfriend before he'd met Rosa Mae. Rosa Mae "dazzled" him, he said, so much so until he didn't want to have anything else to do with Floy.

Over the years, Floy learned to quell the fullness that entered into her heart to make it pine whenever she thought of Henry Lee. Every waking minute of her day somehow found her involved in thinking of him. Eventually, she finally realized she could not continue to let that happen. Every time Floy saw Henry Lee and Rosa Mae together, she saw for herself that they seemed to be very happy. She saw that he was not coming back to her, and she had to make herself forget him. She'd just have to find a way. She started to include other things more and more in her life: food, humor, the company of older

women, church organizations, and occasional whomps in the woods with married men—until she had met Manny.

Manny was not handsome or ugly; he just had a face that was easy to remember. His skin was shiny, as if he always greased it, and he had short, gappy, white teeth. He blinked his eyes too much, as if they bothered him, and a frown was constantly on his face. Small dark scars, darker than he was, and brought on by zits that he'd gotten as a teenager, speckled his face. Soft, pearly, little bumps of white matter collected sometimes at both ends of his eyes. Manny's only saving grace was that he had never gained excess weight, and his clothes always fitted him as if he had modeled for the machine that had made them.

Floy, Henry Lee and Manny had grown up together. Manny knew how much Henry Lee's absence had hurt her. Manny also knew that she had taken, she thought now, too long to find a love to replace him. After they had been married (they both wondered if you could call it that; it seemed more to them like two old kingdoms that had merged together after having known the other too well for too long a time), Floy and Manny learned how to fight amicably. When they saw anything in the other that didn't suit them, it didn't matter. No real feelings were there on either side for them to be greatly hurt.

Five years ago, Henry began paying her attention again. She resisted him at first. She didn't care for what women during those times called a "Pump House Peter"—one that belongs to a man you were not married to and who had to leave the bed that you and he had lain in to go by the *pump* and wash his *peter* off before going on home to his wife.

"Things has changed," she'd told him, "I'm a married woman." It wasn't so much the sanctity of her marriage that she thought of; it was the fact that she'd had time to remember for so long, her pent-up pride. Rosa Mae and Henry Lee (whether Floy liked it or not) saw something in the other, and they thought that it was good. It was good enough to them for them to want to always be a part of it and live with it for the rest of their lives. "Ain't no body gonna to live with a rattlesnake," her mother used to tell her. "If something was so bad,

they'd want to git out of it; when they don't, there must be something there."

Henry Lee would get up out of the bed that Floy had let him into when Manny was away, saying, *"Ah got to git home to my wife."*

She'd felt like a fool. "Uh damn fool!" she'd yelled out to the wall after he'd left.

She had let him come into her sacred ground, and he had come knowing in his heart that it wouldn't mean a thing to him. He was there for a little while, and then he could leave. She had to stay on there without him.

"Ah was in there for her stuff and that's all, and Floy got a pretty one too," Henry Lee would tell his friends after he'd drunk too much. "Face of that thing bigger thanna face of a clock. Ah ain't told her to fall in love." Men were known to "fix'et up" that way in order for their conscience to let them get away with such behavior. Henry Lee was not a cruel man. He said these things to "save face," just in case some of the men that he was talking to had seen Rosa Mae riding with the white man that he'd seen her riding with that day. He also began doing stupid things, Floy heard, shortly after that. He would sweep the front yard before he left his house. Grass that grew in yards surrounding tenement houses then was chopped down rather than mowed. Rosa Mae and the children were not allowed to come outside while he was in one of his moods. He'd questioned his children, asking them who had come to visit while he was gone. Roy Lee, when he was just a toddler and trying to please his father, would tell, "Man been heah," sometimes before Henry Lee would ask.

"A damn fool!" Why should he be so lucky? Floy thought. When she was lonely, she had to comfort herself. Why should he find in her a glory train? He never called on her when he and his wife were getting along well. And he expected her to be cheerful, all of the time, out of gratitude. She suspected that he thought this was some type of repayment for the few minutes that he would allow himself to be with her.

"This has got to stop!" Her anger rose up in her to a boiling point one night shortly before he was ready to leave. "You got to git outta here!"

She was sitting on her bed after their lovemaking. Her hair was standing straight up in defiance, like small black twigs on her head. "And when you leave here tonight, make show that you know that dis was the last time that you could come back heah! Git yo tired ass out of here and go home to yo' precious wife! Go! Go fuck the one that you feed! Coming round here, making like you being kind to me…. Don't be kind to me! Don't make me depend on nothing that when you gone, Ah have to fight to forget it!" So he left her (literally), her and his seed.

If only she had maintained her anger earlier, she wouldn't be sitting here now looking at Henry and Rosa Mae's children and wondering will her baby resemble them.

This was the first time that she had ever been pregnant. She and Manny would never have children. She knew this some time ago, and she reasoned it was not because of her husband. No one would have to know. Everyone would assume that it was her husband's if Henry Lee could be kept away. Floy placed her hand on her stomach. Hattie Samuels saw her. And then the moment came, as it always does, when we are forced to face our opponent.

Hattie didn't speak. She watch Floy intensely, but only out of the corner of her eye, as Floy cleared the table. Floy pretended to ignore Hattie as she washed the dishes, swept the floor, and did everything else that was needed to clean up the area after the onslaught of a house full of guest and a large meal. As Floy passed her, Hattie stood suddenly, came close behind her and groped with strong hands the mounds of soft fat that sat just above Floy's buttocks. "Well, Ah see Ah wasn't wrong. Ah was thrown off first, cause of you being kinda old and all. But that dry look that a woman git…it was still there—white like…'specially round the mouth…eyes look uh little puffy…wid lil'dark circles round'm…look like she gonna faint if somebody don't catch huh… uh woman will git that long about the six week time. All that hinted too hard to me. Now that Ah done touch yo' back, Ah know for sho'. Ah ain't wrong is Ah? You is pregnant!"

Sometimes Hattie's accuracy amazed her herself. Floy just stood there and looked. She neither confirmed nor denied what Hattie

said. Hattie took Floy's silence as a golden opportunity to go further in exercising what she harbored as being her "gift" of discernment.

"What puzzle me is why ya'll ain't telling nobody bout ya'll blessed event. Taking it like ya'll got something to hide. Only person do that usually is somebody who ain' show of the daddy…or who don't know who the daddy is. Ah walks a lot through these woods," Hattie continued. "Cow shit ain't the only thing Ah runs up on all these years. Ah see things people don't think nobody know."

Older people at one time depended heavily on the fact that younger people would remember their age when they took it upon themselves to tongue-lash them, and that they would automatically honor the scripture that made them "Honor thy mother and thy father" and implied "and every other person that is older than you."

One thing about a woman, even if she appears weak, any woman that is worth her salt will affirm to you that she, and only she, will decide when it is time for her to go to war. A woman is very territorial, and when she wishes them to be, her borders are impenetrable. She sees to it that they are well manned. If you trespass what she has declared to be her ground by might or treachery, she will catch you and will personally find some way to annihilate you. She will excuse a lot that confronts her because she is by nature meek and obedient. She has a natural affixation that coerces her to subject herself to authority, but by one stipulation: that authority must be of a kind that will lean heavily towards her influence. It is called a "tender trap." In an entrapment of this kind, she will reign. She will reign until she glows. If these conditions are not met for her, she will perish. In Floy and Manny's home, these conditions were met. Floy could not have stayed there had they not been.

When Manny was happy, he was the good-time man that everyone hung around when they wanted to laugh. He was the kind of person that could make you see anything that was hilarious. He could pull laughter out of the air as if he were a very small mouse that came up out of the tiniest hole and danced for you. When his cronies asked him what was he going to act like on his marriage bed the first night of his wedding, Manny said, "Collards.

"Cause I'm gonna slide'it in easy and bring it out greasy. Come to me Mom-am-ma! Ah been waitin' too long! Wipe hit down, girl, and let me see what it is!"

At their reception, Manny held up a very erect and proper piece of white paper away from his chest and said, as if he was reading, which he could not, to his embarrassed bride:

"No mo' yakity yak!
Switching around and talking smack!
Time now sugar, to show me what ya like!
We going talk from now on ba-by,
most'ly wid our back!
And Hon-ey,
if you ain't like,
what Ah see what Ah like'
then one of us, Dumplin'
is show got to pack!"

Floy loved Manny for the laughter that he brought her. It made it easy around their house for them to get along, but her passion throughout the years remained with Henry Lee. Henry Lee just had a way of talking to her. He could get to her soul. His voice sounded like a trumpet that she could somehow hear way down in her vaginal area; it pulsated in sync with every vibration of his vocal cord. Manny saw this and turned to drinking. He was not an alcoholic. He just picked it up because he hung around in places where it was always prevalent—on a corner, on a barrel, behind a barn, bar or anywhere where men stood around with him with it in their hands to hear him make laughter resonate in their ears. A corner was their social club. There, they teased, drank, gambled, *goofed off,* and related.

Manny's ejaculation came in gallons. It oversaturated a vagina and spilled out in a broad circumference underneath its recipient's back and upper thighs. Floy took to taking a towel to bed. "His swimmers come," Floy told her mother, "in too much water. They drown before they git to where they needed to go."

When people asked the couple why they did not have children, Manny would stand up and place the blame on himself. "Ah don't know where to put the baby. Ask anybody who ever played

baseball wid me, they know Ah all ways had a hard time making a home run."

People would laugh and leave them alone. Manny was the king of the "comeback." He knew how to get back at you when you tried to "slam" him in conversation. You'd be laughing at him until you realized that the laughter had turned, and you'd been "hit." You had to stand there quietly, with egg on your face, while he and the crowd, that you had intended to join you in your jest, would go on shortly to something else.

Old kingdoms will unite for the defense of their emperor or empire. Floy knew that Manny loved her and loved being married to her. She had seen to that by being sweet to him. She washed and mended his clothes, never said no to his sexual requests, cooked his meals on time, fixed his plate, got up to serve him, and kept the cleanest house. He deserved to have something, she thought; passion was never there. Manny saw all of this. He allowed his love for his wife and his forgiveness for her to deliver him into a mindset that would always allow him to still think that his life with her was good. He had long since gotten tired of wayward women and living with his mother. He wanted a wife and was glad to have her. Common sense, Manny thought, didn't mean anything when it was four o'clock in the morning and your loins wanted to erupt.

"So…if ya' think that you goanna come between me and my husband, Hattie Sammuels," Floy said, *"you bettah think you another thought! If ya wanna fight…you is got one heah! And you bet not come like a cabbage…all head and no ass!*

"You might look fool, but you ain't fool enough to tackle us.

"Cause me and Manny both will cut yo' ass too short to shit!"

Hattie Sammuels didn't have to guess it. She knew now that she had gone too far. Her mouth had run her into a corner that Floy Thomas was not going to easily let her out of. She looked as if she was saying to herself, *the lightin' done struck the shit house; where I'm gonna run to now?*

"What going on out heah?" a startled Teedi Simms asked as she came out of Aunt Bannie's back room. The air was so charged; no one

could answer her. *"Ah know ya'll ain't carrying on and Bannie in there tryin' to sleep…. What wrong wid ya'll?"*

"Nut'in," a defeated Hattie Samuels said, gathering her bundle to go home. No one tried to stop Hattie before she closed the door.

"Nut'in." Floy cleared her throat. *"Nut'in at all.*

"Ah just finally gotta enough of a voice to read to Hattie Sammuels."

"Good!" Teedi said, *"bout time. Ah'm goin back in here wid Bannie…. Let me know when ya git ready to go."*

Floy saw the breadth of Teedi Simms's much-talked-about ass cheeks. She saw them as being soft enough to walk away and leave a delicate matter alone and tight enough to keep a secret up them. Floy was determined. The matter was settled. If anyone was nosy enough to want to have another answer (other than what she would tell them concerning who her baby's real father was) they had better be prepared to ring it out of her, Teedi Simms, and even Hattie Sammuels' ass.

Feeding on Men

Nina Wilson

Dark calls to Darkness.[1]
Like calls to like.[2]
I who have died a thousand times[3]
am a creature of flickering hope.[4]
Must I tell again the words I know for the ears of men?[5]
Theirs are the voices moving night to morning
Their voices are denials of all dying.[6]
Sometimes words are not enough.[7]

In my blood I heard the world's weeping.[8]
My soul is enslaved so many ways with bolts and bones.[9]
Must I really become dust?[10]
You mocked me, the master of my image.[11]
I do not choose to dream.[12]

For our old Lord lives all alone.[13]
Wherever I wander, wherever I roam.

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[1] Deirdre Wilson
[2] Edgar Guest
[3] Grace Mansfield
[4] Edgar Guest
[5] Louise Bogan
[6] Alastair Reid
[7] Lemony Snicket
[8] Rachel Korn
[9] H. Marvell
[10] Melech Ravitch
[11] Chaim Grade
[12] Ezra Pound
[13] Ezra Pound

My heart is not here.[14]
I gave you innocence, I gave you hope.
Return you me guilt and despair?[15]
I am tired of kings.[16]
Our priest is the muttering wind.[17]

Why was I forged as a link in this chain?[18]
If I can hear a symphony where tree tops blow[19]
While living beyond the river valley
So quiet green and still[20]
I'll find my place in space as big as a fly[21]
To kiss as winds kiss.[22]

The most dangerous creation of society
Is the man who has nothing to lose.[23]
If you win, you need not explain.
If you lose, you should not be there to explain.[24]

We come from one mind of human kind.[25]
We children are formless—slow to wake.[26]

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[14] Robert Burns
[15] Shelley
[16] Emerson
[17] Shelley
[18] Edith M Roberts
[19] Marian Killroy
[20] Mary Ann Cassiday
[21] Jacob Goldstein
[22] Ezra Pound
[23] James Baldwin
[24] Adolf Hitler
[25] Shelley
[26] Abbie Austan Evans

Our words are flame and ash[27]
Hatred which could destroy so much
Never failed to destroy the man who hated.[28]
So man cried, but with God's voice
And God bled, but with man's blood.[29]

Black, immortal ink[30]
I ask "what if the wind turned against the rain?"[31]
The wind fills our mouths with strange words.[32]
Great words, you frighten me.[33]
Words, they will tear you limb from limb
In the name of love.[34]
We don't see things as they are
We see them as we are.[35]
Where white is black
And blank is white.[36]

When God, was dying[37]
We listened
We have watched him die a thousand times.[38]
Death times death is being.[39]

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[27] Grace Mansfield
[28] James Baldwin
[29] Ted Hughes
[30] Silet
[31] Silet
[32] Ezra Pound
[33] Gerard de Nerval
[34] James Baldwin
[35] Anais Nin
[36] Ted Hughes
[37] WS Merwin
[38] Ezra Pound
[39] H. Lievick

The earth has music for those who listen.[40]
We grow never weary for we are old.[41]
Say not 'good night' but in
Some brighter time, bid me 'good morning.'[42]

We are the songs that were never sung.[43]
I, I am a salvaged half star
That managed not to be killed.[44]
But now I feed on men.[45]

[40] George Santayana
[41] Ezra Pound
[42] Anna L. Barbarid
[43] Viola Perty Wange
[44] Jacob Goldstein
[45] Edmund Spenser

Contributors

Kayo Chang Black, a librarian-turned-writer, is a Taiwanese Canadian who lived in Dubai, Bahrain, and finally decided to settle in Hong Kong. She has lived between the intersection of cultures and the clash of expectations. Currently, she is working on her first book, a collection of interconnected memoir-essays titled *In the Shadow of the Middle Kingdom.*

Mallory Chesser has an MFA in fiction from Texas State University. She works for the University of Houston and serves as managing editor for *Story|Houston*, an online literary journal focused on short fiction and creative essays. Her work has appeared in *Electric Literature* and *Moon City Review.*

Marieken Cochius is a Dutch-born artist who has lived in New York City since 1987, and in the Hudson Valley since 2013. Her work encompasses drawing, painting, sculpture and printmaking. Cochius' work has been exhibited in places ranging from New York City, Berkeley and Los Angeles, California, Austin, Texas, to Japan, Germany and the Netherlands. Her work is in numerous private collections in the US and Europe. She has collaborated with musicians and other artists. A public sculptural commission was completed in 2017 for the Village of Wappingers Falls, New York and will be installed in 2018.

Peter Coe Verbica grew up on a commercial cattle ranch in Northern California. He obtained a BA and JD from Santa Clara University and an MS from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He is married and has four daughters.

Leah Dockrill is a visual artist residing in Toronto, Canada. Her academic education includes degrees in education, library science and law. With informal art training, she developed a thirty-year art practice of painting, digital art and collage. Her artwork has been exhibited in Canada and the US. She has won numerous awards, including the Gold Artist Award from *ArtAscent : Art & Literature Journal.* Several literary reviews have published or will publish her collages and paintings. Among these are *High Shelf Press*, *Glassworks Magazine*, *The Esthetic Apostle*, and www.understoreymagazine.ca. She has been an elected member of the Society of Canadian Artists since 2000.

Derek Entwistle finds that living in Japan offers many a photogenic opportunity. Finding and capturing the beauty of a moment is part of the adventure.

Sophia Falco is a photographer whose work has been published in the *Fredericksburg Literary and Art Review* and *The Esthetic Apostle*, and been featured on the cover of *Tilde: A Literary Journal*. In addition, she is a poet whose work has been published in *Inside the Bell Jar* and in *The Mindful Word*. Sophia studies literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

Aaron Graham hails from Glenrock, Wyoming, population 1159, which boasts seven bars, six churches, a single four-way stop sign and no stoplights. He served as the assistant editor for the *Squaw Valley Review*, is an alumnus of Squaw Valley Writers Workshop and The Ashbury Home School (Hudson), and was recently the Cecilia Baker Memorial Visiting Scholar for the 2016 Seaside Writer's Conference. Aaron is a veteran of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq where he served with The Marine Corps' Human Intelligence and Counterterrorism Task Force Middle East as an analyst and linguist. His work has appeared in *Cleaver Magazine*, *Print Oriented Bastards*, *SAND*, *The Tishman Review*, *Rising Phoenix*, *The East Bay Review*, *Zero-Dark-Thirty* and *f(r)iction*.

Jeanne Harris holds an MFA in Acting from Columbia University. When not teaching English to sixth-graders, she works with a theatre company in Houston, Texas.

Shaun Haugen is a writer and artist who enjoys paying attention to the details even though he is still very much influenced by the world of the abstract. Combining reality with what it is versus what it should be and what it could be, he hopes to encourage into light, expose, and tackle age-old social injustices such as poverty, abuse, addiction, mental health, personal/internal war, and incarceration, while emphasizing general tolerance and compassion. Relying heavily on poetic prose, the writing can get lost in the abstract and deep emotions, but bringing it back to the concrete is an enjoyable challenge. He hopes that through his literature, social issues that plague society's core and that have been pushed aside from mainstream concern will be addressed. Limiting political boundaries to left or right is not the goal. Revealing how society leaves part of the moral psyche ignored is the focus.

Chihiro Ito was born in 1980. He grew up in Tokyo and now lives in New York. This contemporary painter came from an artistic family; his parents are sculptors, and his sister is a dancer. His works have been exhibited in galleries and museums in Tokyo, France, Portugal, Serbia, Cyprus, China, Korea, and America. He serves as the director of Asagaya Art Streets and Panphagia. He received a US-Japan Creative Arts Fellowship and was sponsored by the Overseas Study for Upcoming Artists through Japan's Agency for Cultural

Affairs. He received the 32nd Holbein Scholarship, and writes for *The Asahi Shimbun* newspaper. See more of his work at chihiroito.tumblr.com.

Chyna Jones lives in Detroit, Michigan, where she is a part-time art student at Wayne State University. Since she was young, she's always had a passion for art and making things with her hands. Jack of all trades, she practices with different types of media from doll making to illustration work. The illustration in this edition is a venture into embracing the natural beauty of the Black female form. Body image, especially as a Black woman, has always been a struggle. So, this piece is her way of showing that, to herself and others, your body is fine. The smallest imperfections or "ugly feature" can be seen as uniquely beautiful and be treasured aspects to being you.

Sussu Laaksonen is a Finnish writer living in the Bay Area. She believes that monogamy is overrated, and polyamory is also overrated. She has written for Finnish television series and films, and published a cookbook based on one of the TV shows. Then she married an American nerd, and now she is in San Jose. She pays the bills by measuring translation quality in high tech using a system she developed, which turns out to be more interesting than it sounds. It took her a long time to get over language shock and start writing in English.

Roeethyll Lunn was an English instructor at a community college in eastern North Carolina for many years. She considers herself "an experimental writer" of essays, short stories, poetry, and articles about people living in the Pee Dee area of rural South Carolina just before desegregation. She holds a BFA in Broadcast Media from Morris College and an MFA in English and Writing from Long Island University. Her publication credits encompass newspaper articles, online magazines, college publications, and various poet society anthologies.

Haylee Massaro believes that photographs can provide a fragment of a larger story about a place, a time or a person. Even as a child, she was drawn to photography. Many of her photographs examine the inanimate or the often overlooked, and contain fragments both of what is and what once was. The subject matter is random and captured in the everyday. She is a teacher living and working in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She enjoys both photography and the written word. Her photography can be seen in *Ink in Thirds* magazine, *805 Lit & Art Journal*, *Gravel Magazine* and the *Virtual Artists Collective*. Her written work has appeared in *Better than Starbucks: Poetry Magazine*, *Five 2 One Magazine*, and *The Opiate*.

David Olsson lives in Stockholm with his family. He writes essays and fiction and is the founder of the Instagram account @p_r_o_j_e_k_t_e_t. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Microfiction Monday Magazine*, *The Esthetic Apostle*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *From Whispers to Roars* and *Sonder Midwest*.

Michaela Overley is an emerging artist currently studying at the University of Central Arkansas. Originally from Colorado, she moved to Arkansas at the age of sixteen. Through moving states and towns, she was able to experience a wide variety of cultures and environments that often inspire her artwork today. She aims to capture the stillness and quietness of forgotten landscapes and scenes. She uses realism to show the environments accurately and hopes to convey the moods and feelings of the buildings portrayed. The photo in this edition is from a two-part series she hopes to expand in the near future.

A confessed outsider, Chicago's **J. Ray Paradiso** is a recovering academic in the process of refreshing himself as an EXperiMENTAL writer and street photographer. His work has appeared in dozens of publications including *Big Pond Rumors*, *Storgy* and *Typishly*. Equipped with cRaZy quilt graduate degrees in both business administration and philosophy, he labors to fill temporal-spatial, psychosocial holes and, on good days, to enjoy the flow. All of his work is dedicated to his true love, sweet muse and body guard: Suzi Skoski Wosker Doski.

Elias Peirce is a new writer with work forthcoming in *SIREN Magazine*.

Ron Pullins is a writer, playwright, and poet working in Tucson, Arizona. His works have been published in numerous journals, and his plays have been produced across the country. He sees his work as an adventure in thought and language. Much of his work attempts to blend theater, poetry, prose and graphical/typographical arts.

Janette Schafer is a freelance writer, nature photographer, part-time rocker, and fulltime banker living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her play *Mad Virginia* was the winner of the 2018 Pittsburgh Original Short Play Series. Recent and upcoming publications of her writing and photographs include: *Watershed Journal; Yes Ma'am Zine; Feckless Cunt Anthology; Nasty Women & Bad Hombres Anthology;* and *Unlikely Stories V*. She is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at Chatham University.

Nina Wilson has published a novel called *Surrender Language*. Other credits include poetry, photography, essays, and short fiction in *Adelaide Magazine*, *Rascal*, *Dark River Review*, *Fishfood Magazine*, *Coe Review*, and many others.

She enjoys photography, hiking, reading horror novels, and fishing. The poem in this edition is the cento form as she loves reading poetry, collecting lines and verses, and connecting them to make something new.

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