

Bear Flag Review

Issue 1, Vol. 1



Cover Art by Terry Ann Wright and Robert Negrete

Contents

State of the Magazine.....	3
Interview: A bit more about us	4
JL Martindale Introduction	10
Snake.....	11
For Poseidon’s Violation	12
Pull You with the Weeds	13
Dirty.....	14
The poem about the straight girl who decided I needed a coming out intervention after she kissed me first	15
invisible light:	16
The Juniper Tree	17
Cataract	18
Roans	19
Nancy Nguyen Introduction.....	20
At Your Convenience	21
TRACKING THE ECONOMY OF ELK	31
Frank X. Gaspar Introduction	39
The One God Is Mysterious.....	40
It Was So Dark Inside the Wolf.....	41
Sea-green.....	42
Old Life.....	44
Crushed	45
I Rise into Dark Waters.....	46
Ashley Jae Carranza Bio	47
Slice of the Good Life.....	48

State of the Magazine

by

Eric A. Loya

This issue is a labor of love and, honestly, a little bit of self-promotion. Bear Flag Press was created through the hard work of our board of members who want to contribute to the literary world. We've dedicated ourselves to creative writing, academia, or both. And we want to share those voices and stories that often go overlooked because of a simple lack of space in our writing community and sometimes because of a difference in appreciation of what quality writing looks like. I hope that will be more evident in future issues.

For now, our purpose is to introduce you to our work and those people we have been inspired by. In this issue, we've asked for contributions from friends and colleagues, fellow travelers in the written word and lovers of letters. And we are grateful for their contributions, not only to this magazine but to our own writing and experiences. You'll find their writing followed by the work of the editor who asked for their contribution in this issue.

We look forward to sending out a general call for submissions and reading your stories. That, after all is said and done, is our purpose: to provide a place for writers and artists to share their experiences of the world with others. This community of writers and artists is important to us because without it, we fall into the trappings of isolation. And we are much better together.

We hope you like our initial offering. As we continue to grow and expand, we hope you will join us along our journey. And we, in turn, look forward to joining your journey, your story, your work, and your passion.

Interview: A bit more about us

Interview Questions Asked

by

Maria Cecilia Azar

In the spirit of highlighting longer and more pieces in the magazine, each issue includes an interview section. Each issue will feature one artist or writer. The interviews are intended to engage in deep conversation with authors about their work and process. This section is born of a desire to think about publishing, genre, and form through dialogue. This section is spearheaded by Cecilia, who is an interdisciplinary scholar, writer, and artist. This issue's interview features Eric Loya, John Thurgood, and Terry Ann Wright, editors at Bear Flag Press. We hope this is an opportunity for readers to get to know a bit more about the editors, their interest, and thoughts on writing.



Maria's Workspace (with cat)

1- What's your writing history?

EL: I've written since I was 8 years old although, admittedly, my early work was quite plagiarized (I wrote comic books with a character strikingly similar to Batman, and no, it wasn't fan fiction).

I started writing seriously when I was 20. I watched Lord of the Rings and thought, "I can do that." So I tried and failed miserably. But afterward, I realized I needed help. So I took a class at

Long Beach City College where I met Frank Gaspar (who you'll read about in this issue) and developed a real love for storytelling, not just passing time entertaining myself although that's still part of why I write.

Since then, I finished an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, I've finished several novel and poetry manuscripts, published in various magazines. I've placed in some writing contests and worked with a couple of magazines in Southern California.

JT: I published my first story in 2006. It was in the student-run journal at San Diego City College. I had been taking classes there off and on--just getting into the idea of going to college, you know-- and before that I had taken a writing class with Jim Miller there. I had been writing before that class and I'd always been a reader, but after that first writing class I took the lit journal class, and as part of that class, everyone submitted a couple stories for consideration. Both of mine got in. I don't think that really pushed me toward writing more consistently, but it was my first peek into this new world of literary journals and what I think of now as a writing community.

TW: I was a voracious reader as a little kid, and I think that's a big part of my writing history. From that I became The Good Student in English, which when I was in high school seemed to mean some vague future as A Writer. My best friend in middle school and high school was a brilliant student and writer, and she and I wrote epic notes to each other, and I think that's really the heart of my writing history. There was a secretiveness to it, and deeply personal things examined in minute detail, and a built-in audience who read eagerly and without judgment. I started college as an English major, but then switched my major from creative writing (in fiction) to history, and then film history. It may seem like a weird left turn, but I loved movies at least as much as I loved reading and books, so it made sense at the time, and since I wasn't a production major, I still spent years cranking out writing—it was just writing term papers about movies. I sort of drifted away from English-related things while that best friend started writing poems in undergrad and went on to grad school in English. I always felt second-best to her in intellect and creativity and discipline, which I think is one of many reasons I gave up on English. And honestly, I just started writing poetry in pure adolescent envy and adulation of her. Maybe even in some unconscious desire to go back to that private hothouse creative fever that I had left behind. I still wrote some fiction, but I wasn't really very good at it, so I just...stuck with poetry.

2- What does your writing mean to you?

EL: It means sanity. If I'm not writing, I'm cranky and, to paraphrase Melville, I kinda want to start knocking hats off people's heads.

But it also means sharing a part of myself that I'm reluctant to share in-person. I remember my mother crying at my final M.F.A. reading and being the first to clap when I stopped reading. Obviously, she's my mother and loves me, so this shouldn't be surprising. But she told me later that she didn't realize how or what I felt about my father's death, which was what many of my poems that night were about.

Writing is communication, sharing, and for me, it's a way to share what I often don't have the words for one on one in the moment.

JT: We tell stories to make sense of the world, and I believe that. Specifically, lately, I've been writing a lot about skateboarding. It's helped me think more clearly about some of the mistakes I've made in my life, and why I made them. It's been helpful for me, I think, and I'm grateful for that time, the time to sit down and think through some of these stories I've been telling myself about the world I grew up in. Not everyone is so lucky.

TW: I think my writing means a way to share deeply private things, sort of cloaked in a protective layer of "Oh well this is all just a creative exercise." This way I keep up my generally sweet, friendly front while writing really private things about fury and envy and passion and longing and vengeance. (A lot of my writing is vengeance-based, ha.) It's a way to excavate and examine ugliness while still keeping people at arm's length.

3- What does a community of writers look like to you? How is writing a community practice to you?

EL: It's community in that we read each other's work. It's almost like letter writing, without the tedious "It was really warm today here in L.A...."

We get perspective. We get insight. We get art. And usually, we pair that with some decent wine when we're able to get together. It's an exchange of ideas like any think tank or activist group, and our goal is the same: to get people talking about new possibilities.

Hopefully, this looks like writing groups meeting weekly or monthly, phone calls discussing our latest work, what we want it to be, how we hope people will receive it, readings at bookstores, open mic nights, etc. While writing might be a solitary act, it doesn't have to be isolating, and it shouldn't be. A writing community, like any other community, means people coming together.

JT: When I was younger, I had a much different expectation for what a writing community would look like. I pictured dinner parties with lively conversation or late nights commiserating over beers about rejection letters. The reality, for me at least, has been something quite different. It looks more like witty banter over social media posts or text messages about progress on this or that project. But most importantly it shows itself most in those moments when you get to celebrate the work. The work of your friends, the work of your acquaintances and the work of your heroes.

TW: Well this is a really interesting question, because as far as writing practice itself, I've taken part in a handful of fiction-writing workshops, but I've never workshopped my poetry in a group or community. I generally only show my work when it's done. Every once in a great while I'll ask for help on a poem if I'm really stuck, but that's very rare. I do have a friend who lives in another state, and we have done a regular writing-exercise practice via email for years, but even that is more a way to force us to write, or try new ways of writing, and have a deadline, rather than a true workshopping process.

For me, the community part of it comes from the publishing and the publishing-related events. For several years I was lucky enough to be picked up and carried along by some other writers who had presses or creative projects they were working on, and I got to contribute and edit, both the proofreading kind of editing and the more general submissions-editing and book-organizing

kind of editing. I've enjoyed that tremendously, and I loved being able to perform at readings as part of those larger projects. That is always joyous and often raucous. But of course...the pandemic really shut all that down. I actually just participated in a reading for the first time in years and it was surreal—surreal to think “oh we used to do these kinds of things all the TIME” and “I can't believe it's been three/four years since I've seen all these people!” and “...is it really a good idea to be doing this, still?” I've missed that part of the community of writers, but it feels a bit tainted, now, sadly.

4- What does Bear Flag mean to you? Why do you want to be a part of it? Why do you think people should want to submit their work?

EL: Bear Flag is another outlet, hopefully for those who haven't been able to publish elsewhere, who've found the process of submitting so often to only have one piece of work published, if that. It's also a chance to set the standards of what we think is good/interesting/brilliant/creative writing. And in that way, we can connect with our community in a new way, as publishers, and maybe even shape the discussion. All the while, we get to reach out to writers as writers, as people who understand how important it is to share our words and thoughts and who are, in fact, in the process of writing our own novels and poems and sending out submissions. We get to receive and provide community in our little corner of the literary world.

JT: Bear Flag is a space for writers and readers to collaborate. I'm hoping it can be a place where storytelling becomes more of a conversation, where each story helps tell a larger story about who we are and what we've done to get here--for better or worse.

TW: I think the losses from the pandemic have made Bear Flag really mean even more than it would. It's been great to be able to pull this together with editors living in three different states, three different time zones. I don't know that this would have been such a matter-of-fact way of doing things without the pandemic, really. So I think that's a great thing—we're still able to meet and work together on a creative project, just in this slightly different way. I want to be part of it because I really just want to hang with these people! I also want to be part of it because I'm excited about sharing writing that we all love, and hopefully finding writers who are new to us, and giving them a place to share their work and, practically speaking, add to their publication record and become a part of supporting their overall career as writers. Finally, what I really love about Bear Flag is our determination to publish fewer writers but more writing [insert *Jerry Maguire* mission statement joke here]. Instead of taking one poem each from multiple writers, we're going to take a whole bunch from fewer writers per issue—I think that's so great. It gives a poet a chance to really show off their writing, their aesthetic or thematic passions, tell a story through their poems—I think this is something rare in publishing, even with online presses, and a great opportunity as editors to spotlight writers and a great opportunity for writers to become better, more deeply known.

5- What are you reading right now?

EL: I'm reading *On the Road* and rereading Neurda's collected poems. Both are good reads, but I'm also a believer that all books are good reads, even if it's for not so good reasons.

JT: I'm reading too many things right now. I have an early copy of Camille Dungy's new memoir *Soil* that explores her experience as a Black mother who gardens. It is so compelling how she

braids her own experience with her knowledge about plants and ecology and the history of gardening that runs through her family's history and the history of Black Americans.

I'm also reading *The Knockout Queen* by Ruffi Thorpe. I had met Ruffi at AWP in Seattle through a friend, and later that same friend texted me the opening page, which blew me away. I've been surprised by the pacing of the book and how gripping the plot has been so far. I would have probably ripped through it already if it weren't for all the other reading I have to do.

And the last book I'm reading right now is a self published book by Walker Ryan, *Off Clark*. Walker is a professional skateboarder who has been publishing books recently. This is his second! I really enjoyed his first book, and the second one has been even better. I'm hoping to write a short piece about this one once I've finished reading it. It focuses on a topic I've been interested in for a while, one that I've been researching in connection with the doctorate I've been working on at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (go Panthers!), and it has to do with the question of what we teach when we teach about skateboarding. I should also mention that I've been riding a skateboard since I was ten. Just can't seem to quit it.

TW: I'm always embarrassed to reveal that as a poet...I don't read a lot of poetry. Or maybe I should say I don't seek out a lot of poetry. I subscribe to the Poem-A-Day emails, and I follow poets and writers online, and those are the ways I learn about and get excited about writers and poems...other people discover them first. I just think that's something really shameful to admit as a poet, ha—that I don't exclusively read poetry. I mean part of it is honestly I end up feeling discouraged as a writer! There's always a better writer out there, someone saying what I wanted to say a million times better than I can ever say it! I actually stopped reading anything but online junk altogether for a few years—I completely lost my identity as A Voracious Reader, and that was awful. I've started reading books again, but it feels weird. I think part of my voracious reading history was just a method of disassociation, and so I'm still trying to redefine my relationship to reading now.

6- What kind of work do you like to read?

EL: I think my last answer suggests I like to read everything, and I do. But I have a soft spot in my heart for nerdy things like Fantasy, Sci-Fi, and Steampunk. Also, I love poetry (I should since I got a degree in it).

Mostly I like reading things that have the audacity to be vulnerable. "Write hard and clear about what hurts," said Hemingway. I couldn't agree more. It goes back to that idea of sharing, and sharing is always a risk.

JT: I'm not religious, but I heard St. Vincent say once about her own spirituality that isn't it more exciting to believe in something magical? I think about that when I'm really getting into a piece of writing, whether I'm reading a novel or short story, poem or nonfiction. I gravitate toward narrators and characters who are tapping into the unexplainable. I like a mystery, but it need not be a thriller. I like the supernatural, but it need not be total fantasy. Sometimes the best stories feel real because they find a place somewhere between reality and the uncanny. Those are the stories I remember most.

TW: I'm assuming you mean this question as what kind of work I'd like to read as a poetry editor for Bear Flag Press. I'd answer that by saying...any kind of work, any kind of poetry. The poems I contributed as our "meet the editor" sample—I tend to think of myself more often as what I call a "narrative" writer...those poems are technically free verse, I suppose, but I refer to them as "narrative" in that they're not particularly structured other than stanza breaks, and they are more directly inspired by or record basic daily life—"Cataract" is most like that; although "Roans" is a little more lyrical and a little more cagey, so to speak, about its inspiration, it's still rooted in day-to-day (well...day-to-day to ME) emotions like grief and envy. They're more conversational, more accessible, at least in my opinion. They're designed to be read/heard aloud. Poems like "invisible light" or "Juniper Tree" are much more highly structured; "Juniper Tree," for example, is modeled on the sonnet format, from a larger sequence of poems based on Grimm's fairy tales. "invisible light," like "Juniper Tree," directly quotes other sources, and is from a larger sequence of poems on the history of the Radium Girls. I don't know that I'd feature those poems if I was doing another reading; they're more designed for the page. Finally, even "Cataract" is a Golden Shovel—so, I do appreciate more formally structured poems—and it too is taken from a bigger project—writing Golden Shovels based on my own failed (i.e., failed to find publication!) poems. That's one of the things I love about Bear Flag—I'm hoping other poets will submit their sequences, or otherwise unified series, of poems. So I'm open to all formats of poems, all types/structures; what I'm hoping for is that we get some poem submissions that are linked to each other, or tell some sort of story or arc of experience. But I don't want anyone to limit themselves.

JL Martindale Introduction

Written by

Terry Ann Wright

There's so much I love about JL Martindale's poetry. I love her wit. I love her spare, unflinching truth. I love her groundedness as much as I love her Plathian allusions to myth and the ocean. I don't know how you write about our West without writing about nature, even if it shows up in your writing in the subtlest ways—and whether you mean it to or not. When I first reached out to JL Martindale to ask for permission to include her poetry in our first issues of *Bear Flag* (as part of our way of introducing ourselves), I said to her, “It is so lovely to sit in your words. In the sun-baked heat, under the sprinklers, in a cool pool of water.” And that's exactly one of the (many) things I love about her poetry, and why I picked her work for our first issue: she captures precisely the nuances of Southern California's hyper-specific climate (insert obligatory snide remark about our lack of seasons), even when writing about things that have nothing to do with *climate*. I know there are deserts elsewhere, and mountains, and valleys, and yucca plants, and unrealistically hyper-green swaths of lawn—but unless you've lived *here*, you can't really understand it. Just like Didion writing about the Santa Anas, Martindale is able, in the most spare way, to make a reader *feel* that sense of stored heat radiating off cinderblock walls; the subtle menace of fire season in a wisp of cigarette or barbeque smoke; the sensuality of the salinity of the ocean air when the breeze shifts just the right way; the wild riot of roses that don't fit our desert clime but somehow flourish here anyway. There's a weird lushness that crashes up against our arid, low humidity, and that weirdness permeates Martindale's poems, where mythology crashes against banality, where romantic love crashes against fucking, where Rappaccini's garden crashes against Ronald Reagan's air-conditioned tomb. In the most hyper-specific place, she writes about the most human themes: parents and parenting, love, sex, mental illness, war. I love her work, and I hope you do, too; against my knee-jerk, East-Coast-born snobbery, she makes me admit *I could love it here, too*.



Photo by Sonnie Hiles

Poems

By

JL Martindale

Snake

On Independence Day we burned black pellets
that lengthened then slithered and squirmed
on cracked concrete until they crumbled into black ash
and disappeared like the overextended tip of his Marlboros.
Dad didn't need a jack to work under a car, able to slither beneath
with his tools beside him on an old quilt.
I never learned to fear the hiss and shake like normal kids.
Instead, I was fed barbecued rattle snake.
It tastes like anything else cooked naked in fire: burnt.

For Poseidon's Violation

What if instead, our goddess, Athena chose to crown the priestess
with flowers that bloom in crimson flame?
Opiate-scented seasons could trade fear for hope
despite rising venom of haunted memories,
Isn't that pain enough for deflowered Gorgon?
Revise her from haggard horror, free her from shame,
from all the hunters who'd sever what remains
between her mind and her sex.
Would Perseus still behead Medusa?
Or would he brave staring the rape burning behind her eyes?
Might he see: it was never Medusa turning men to stone
but trespassing stone-hearted men
picking flowers,
planting poison
like snakes
in sacred gardens.

Pull You with the Weeds

We never fucked on Reagan's tomb.
Searched that whole library
Pretended we were in love
and Republican
but could not find where they hid his corpse.
Somewhere under concrete and rose bushes
or in that menthol stench helicopter.
Maybe I was only half pretending.

When there are no eyewitnesses,
I contemplate the blue lines in my arms,
you smash another tablet in the kitchen.
Your girl named sin waits in your bedroom
and the ghost of your father yells over
Ginsberg, "It's time for dinner!"
He drops F-bombs and stomps around downstairs
so any proper goodbye becomes impossible.
I leave you there and go to another page.

Your body hunched over the cutting board
head in prayer pose; I can't watch.
Ice slams against my glass,
I drink the last of your bourbon.
You take a long snort and rise from the waters,
bitterness and vertigo flavors your kiss.
We toast dead drunks who finished what we could not.

We are drunk and fucked
stained your white linens
cried for all the art we failed to make.
We are not the intellectuals, academics, writers
not those special fuckers everyone promised we would be.
We finish another bottle
or was it the bottle that always finished us?

Your phone buzzes against the table; it's your woman.
But you are passed out on your back with your mouth wide open,
like a scream.
The radiant heat pops,
I think it's morning.
The rain outside falls sideways
hits window like hungry sparrows peck
my dry lips crack, bleed black.

The Bottle and the Boot, co-written with Daniel McGinn; limited release hand-stapled
chapbook and CD, Sadie Girl Press, 2015

Dirty

We attend church base-
ment meetings: mother-daughter
connecting over
coffee, blue label creamer
force confessions for strangers

to AA, NA,
ACA sponsors, judges
we're hoping to prove
her recovery happened.
Later, in her Civic, off

Reseda alleys
she dives for treasure on trash-
day and says, off-hand,
“relapse is normal” and “the
cat piss smell will fade, in time.”

Cadence Collective, April 2015

The poem about the straight girl who decided I needed a coming out intervention after she kissed me first

She painted her nails with whiteout
carving skulls, hearts by ballpoint
claimed she liked my apocalyptic poetry
and sharpied epics down my leg.
Gutted men and pierced appendages
bled black through my blue jeans,
down our naked thighs.
She injected love letters in red-inked Bic
over my neck and shoulders
during duPratt's lecture on the gilded age
where pretty girls' affections destroy
only men.

Like a Girl: Perspectives on Feminine Identity, Lucid Moose Lit, 2015. Reprinted
in *Making Up*, Picture Show Press, 2020

Poems**by****Terry Ann Wright****invisible light:**

angel's trumpet, devil's trumpet—
a guide for planting a moon garden:

often confused, but easy to tell apart:
some open quickly in the evening

and stay open until after sunrise. only take care:

only one moonflower is edible—

fat white petals you can lay on your fat pink
tongue. it's when the trumpet turns toward you

in the twilight—watch what you taste,
what poison you dip your tongue into.

at night they watch their new element glow
in the dark. *fairy lights*, she calls them.

in their garden: green veins in white throats
gleam, shot through, x-rayed by the moon.

**Photo of Terry**

The Juniper Tree

The Christ-figure in your third story has no children.
Did you ever ask about the lack? Maybe that was part

of the attraction from the start. A bear adopts a son,
and it's a love affair from the start. You adopt a panther

and name it after a serial killer. You take a nephew
camping and make a fire in the pit in front of the cabin.

Your husband wears a kilt. Your poems are your children,
birthed in austere circumstances where you tie lines and

fishing knots. You cook the poor children and
feed them to your father. You bury the bones underneath

the juniper tree. Juniper: *a hardy, but slow growing shrub
or tree that remains evergreen in most climates.*

O father! O mother! your poems, your children, you bury
beneath the juniper tree and hope they turn into gold.

Cataract

For an uncountable amount of time, I thought this was someone else's poem. Turns out, it isn't; I had only forgotten that I had written it. *Love*

was the poem I was writing over and over; this was something else. This was—I won't use *is*—yet another reminder that when I wasn't watching,

I was doing something else entirely. All the water could not restore the right memory. I tried to run out some internal clock, but here now proof I was out-

foxed by the same consequences all of us liquored up and drugged up (and all my addictions) bore: this damp fledgling in my hands.

Terry's Workspace (with her laptop)



Roans

It may be forgiven. The postulant deserves
her solitude. She is seeking, her heart is singing,
the fields where she goes to measure her steps
are blanketed, herself wrapped for warmth.
She has seen her future and can taste the
dance of her days on her tongue. She is betrayed

not in the heart of winter, asleep or dozing
with one eye open in case a mouse creeps
from the heater vent, a herald of a realm
behind the wall, crib of heartache & excrement
hanging between one room and the next.
She believes herself wide awake, a deep pleasure

in being a tree in which the parrots of truth roost.
The next year isn't so far away after all. A girl's
neat handwriting stays neat. A girl's song
stays in one key. She hears keening, makes
bread under floury thumbs, presses the
pedal to the floor and lets Texas sunlight

blind her, pretends to hear horse hooves, makes
sure to put the ponies in a poem. The mouse nest
crumbles to dust. The breeze comes in through
the open window, that opened eye. A creep
up the coastline leads to a basement apartment,
the damp muffled by the arms that cradle.



Nancy Nguyen Introduction

by

John Thurgood

I met Nancy Nguyen at a dinner for Phong Nguyen. Nancy and I are doctoral students at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and the Creative Writing Department was hosting the dinner to celebrate Phong Nguyen's latest novel. He had graduated from the program in 2007, and in a way, the dinner was to celebrate a returning graduate's success, though he had had many successes to brag about over the course of his career.

During the dinner, I sat beside Nancy, and we chatted about MFAs and writing mentors. She has a great sense of humor, and we joked about surviving on stipends and finding work once the stipend money inevitably ran out. At some point she mentioned the story she had recently placed with Crazyhorse (now swamp pink). Admittedly, I was impressed and jealous, too! I had always loved that magazine, and I've had a subscription on and off for years. The next day, I looked it up, and it blew me away.

I loved the writing immediately. It's funny and sharp, in a way that makes me think of George Saunders, though maybe filtered through a millennial sensibility. Think of Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's work, and how he manages to take the speculative comedy that is so palpable in Saunders' stories and filters it through all the burdens of growing up as a millennial. Adjei-Brenyah and Nguyen both manage to capture the trauma of someone coming of age during the era of 9/11, the financial collapse and rampant gun violence that has brought satire full-circle, to a point where realism is often harder to believe than fantasy or sci-fi.

Nguyen's story "At Your Convenience" does this so well. It pushes against satire until it feels real enough to have existed alongside all the tragedies of the past three decades. From the first sentence, which sets up the story perfectly, pitch and all, we get the sense that Nguyen is controlling the narrative with a sure hand. The protagonist in this story gets what she's always wanted, and that becomes the main tension. It's hard not to connect with Lien as she struggles to deal with the envy she has for her sisters, the pressures she feels from the world around her and the expectations she has for herself as a woman in this world.

I truly hope that you enjoy this story as much as I do, and I hope it gives you some incite into what we're hoping to publish here at Bear Flag Press.

Nancy Nguyen Bio

Nancy Nguyen grew up in Orange County, California and currently resides in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where she is an Advanced Opportunity Fellow and earning her PhD in English and Creative Writing. She was a 2019 Aspen Words Emerging Writer Fellow and a 2021 Susanna McCorkle Scholar at the Sewanee Writers' Conference. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *swamp pink*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Pigeonholes*, and *The Rumpus*. Nancy is at work on a novel and collection about women, magic, bodies, and war.

At Your Convenience

by

Nancy Nguyen

Old Lien wanted a son so badly she decided to make one. She found a how-to kit on eBay. Her sisters thought she was crazy for spending a chunk of her savings on a scam, a dream that died because it was wasted. Lien, however, was no fool. The seller had 98 percent positive feedback, and she'd read all 39 verified reviews. "Amazing seller!" they said. "This works great. Highly recommend!!" And in two weeks, a box the size of a cooler arrived on her porch. Lien made the mistake of trying to pick it up and nearly threw her back out. The seller had warned her about the weight, as he usually only sold enough material for babies or small children. He also warned her about the difficulty in creating something full-grown, but work was what Lien's muscles knew best.

Lien pushed the box into her house by scooting it with her right foot, her strong foot. She pushed it until it was in the middle of her kitchen. After locking the door and closing the blinds, Lien used her sharp thumb nail to cut the tape and took out the instruction booklet, small dark bottles of ingredients, glass beakers covered in bubble wrap, a funnel, an inflatable kiddie pool (after Lien expressed concern over not having a bathtub), and eight paint cans, which explained the heavy weight.

The cans were without the usual paint labels and replaced with thick marker on masking tape. "Condensed Flesh™," it said.

Lien worked half the time recommended, laboring for the entire night and much of the morning. The tasks were not unfamiliar, as the instructions required pouring, stirring, and working with her fingers after the Condensed Flesh™ with water became more malleable in the kiddie pool. The only difficult part was deciding what to put in the drawstring pouch that was to go in her son's chest, where his heart was supposed to be. Lien eventually chose things that represented her best accomplishments: a copy of her GED diploma folded into a square, a yellowed receipt from her first sale at her convenience store, and her late mother's ruby ring, which Lien managed not to lose coming to America.

More than anything, Lien didn't want her son to resemble her. She had come to look unremarkable in her old age, but when she was younger, she was clearly the plainest of her

sisters. Wispy thin hair, a big and bulbous nose, a face as large and round as a dinner plate. Worst of all, she had an under bite and a habit of bowing her head to make her chin less noticeable. So, Old Lien modeled her son after a realtor named Johnny Tam, who posed in a real estate ad in the Vietnamese newspaper. He had a good dimpled smile, and in a gray suit with his arms crossed, he seemed like the kind of man who provided.

After she molded and shaped her son to her satisfaction, the water in his flesh evaporated, leaving skin that felt softer than silicone. He looked uncomfortable: his legs spilled over one side, his feet splayed in a plie, and the crown of his head rested on the kitchen tile, making his chin point to the sky. It was time to incant the words to galvanize the Condensed Flesh™, but first, Lien retrieved a pillow and blanket from the nearby closet. Even when he was covered, Lien waited a few more minutes, nervousness gripping her heart.

"I will love you," Lien said, her voice trembling. "I will care for you. I will protect you."

After a few seconds, his eyebrows miraculously furrowed, and he took a deep breath, as if waking from a long sleep. Lien's ears warmed.

He opened his eyes and squinted into the kitchen light. Then, he looked at her, his eyebrows still furrowed, as if Lien had done something to offend him. To her relief, his eyebrows smoothed and then raised into a more innocent expression.

"Hello, Mother," he said in Vietnamese, and Lien was thankful he spoke with the accent from the south. "What is my name?"

"Johnny," she said before she could stop herself.

"Hmm," he said, considering this, and Lien felt guilty for not thinking of another name for him but decided to throw out the newspaper with the recycle. "Johnny," he nodded. "And what kind of man am I?"

Now, it was her turn to think. She looked down at her son, who was someone she didn't know, someone she had just met.

"You are strong and protective," she said. "And a very good businessman."

"Okay." He yawned. "I can be those things."

Lien helped him to the pullout sofa in the living room. The sun was rising. The birds were beginning to chirp outside her window, but Old Lien rewarded her own hard work with sleep. As she lay on her pillow, her eyes closed, Lien decided motherhood was going to be easy.

*

She had come alone to America 40 years ago and worked her young body into knots and sore joints to save money and sponsor her four younger sisters, but they seemed to have forgotten. Their respect for her dwindled to strings because Lien had opened a convenience store instead of marrying and having children, like the rest of them. So, when it came to Lien, they often posed their opinions as concern. A week before Johnny was created, the sisters convened at Minh's house in Claremont. Minh was the second oldest, and after the divorce from her optometrist husband last year, she had been hosting gatherings at her house, which she received out of the settlement.

"It isn't right," Minh said, pinching the pendant on her necklace. It had three small diamonds arranged in a triangle. "It's just not what nature intended."

"Yes," Loan, the middle child, said. "I agree." The younger two, Bao and Thao, nodded.

"Some things shouldn't be that easy," Minh said. "Lien, you don't understand children. You can't help how they come out into the world." She brought her cup of tea to her mouth but didn't sip. "I just don't want you to do something you'll sorely regret."

"Fortunately," Lien said, her voice quavering despite how confidently she tried to speak, "my decision is really none of your concern."

They were quiet for a moment, but they went on to talk about the cousin who had a bad Botox procedure and how a corner of her mouth had become downturned.

Sometimes, Lien did not recognize her own family. Her sisters had become too concerned with appearances as they'd gotten older, Minh especially. Minh, the one Lien used to be jealous of for her good looks and charm, had become the most pitiful. Every month, she dyed her hair auburn with bright orange highlights. It was no secret Minh walked with a cane for her hip, but when people were around, she always hid it in the pantry or under the stairs. Also, Minh had stopped speaking to her lawyer daughter after she eloped with a woman. As for her son, he still lived in Minh's house. Despite his unemployment, Peter spent very little time at home unless he needed food or money.

"Why exactly are you doing this?" Minh asked. Her sisters looked at Lien again, so Lien looked down at her wringing hands. "Is it because you're lonely? If you are, I can have Peter go to your house to keep you company." Minh's eyes rounded the same way they had when she had suggested Peter work at Lien's store. Lien, however, let him go shortly after hiring him. Often, he would play hooky or steal twenties out of the register. "Tell me what you need," Minh insisted.

"Clothes," Lien said. "Give me whatever clothes Peter doesn't wear anymore. My son will need them."

*

Lien sat up at dawn and went to her son. Johnny, who had rested for a full 24 hours, groaned and pursed his lips, but he eventually roused from sleep. Despite their general unhelpfulness, Lien's sisters had told her a few useful things about raising children. They said Lien needed to set a strict precedent, to handle her son with a firm hand. Children, after all, were drawn to what they wanted more than what they needed. Lien did as her sisters advised, instructing Johnny to brush his teeth in circular motions and wash the corners of his eyes, but she felt awkward telling all this to her son, who was not a child. "I must be like this," Lien explained, "to teach you the right way to live."

Johnny cleared his throat and dried his face on a hand towel. "Of course, Mother," he said. "And I must be a good son and learn quickly."

Lien made her son breakfast of eggs on rice. The rice came out soggy because she was used to making one serving and overestimated the water. Johnny, however, didn't seem to mind. He ate quickly, almost alarmingly fast, probably ravenous from being asleep all day. He seemed to swallow whole spoonfuls of food, though Lien had spent hours carefully crafting each molar and incisor. Lien told him to slow down, lest he choke, and she grinned at how quickly her motherly instincts came to her. As she cooked more breakfast, Lien gave him the newspaper to read, which he immediately became engrossed in the business section. If not for Peter's gym shorts and white tee-shirt with yellow armpit stains, Johnny almost looked like a proper man.

"Mother," he said, his brows scrunched, "there are many words here I don't know." He put a finger on the newspaper. "What does extortion mean?"

Lien thought for a moment. She had heard of this word before, but the meaning of it escaped her. "My son," she said, putting a plate of eggs on rice on top of the paper. "Don't worry too much. I don't always know either."

"If I want to be a good businessman, I must know about business."

"You will learn," she said. "I will teach you."

He thought about this, a finger to his lips. "But you just said you don't know all the words," he said. "Isn't there someone else who can teach me? Someone more knowledgeable?" From the way he tilted his head, Lien understood he didn't mean to hurt her.

"Eat your breakfast," she said. "We have a long day ahead of us."

They went to the convenience store and opened shop. Lien pulled the metal bead string to turn on the storefront sign, which said, "At Your Convenience." She eventually forgot about their conversation at breakfast once Rosa, her only employee, came in for her shift. Rosa, whose job it was to move boxes, keep stock, and speak Spanish to customers, often said they needed a male employee. She wasn't very old, but after having two children and doing the sort of work Lien couldn't do herself, Rosa's knees cricked, and she couldn't stand for too long anymore.

"Wow Lien," Rosa said while Johnny carried two crates of canned jelly drinks over to the fridge aisle. "He's very strong. And handsome." Lien's face became warm.

Lien had made a list of things for Johnny to do: restock, retrieve the boxes from the delivery truck, throw out all that had been expired in storage. Johnny finished off her list in a few hours. He even learned how to use the cash register. To give him something to do, Lien taught him to greet customers with his dimpled smile and make small talk. As expected, he became adept at this as well.

"Mother," Johnny said from across the counter. "We have a problem."

Lien didn't have to look at the security camera monitor to know a small group of teenagers were stuffing milk candy and panda cookies into their pockets. These boys came to the store routinely to steal, but they never took anything too expensive. If they had, Lien would've pushed the button underneath the counter to alert the police a long time ago. But in life, Lien had learned some things weren't worth her skin. "It will be fine," Lien said. "They will leave eventually."

"This isn't right," Johnny said. His hand on the counter became a fist. "I'm going to speak to them."

"My child," she said. "Please don't."

"I'm sorry, Mother," he said.

He marched up to the teenagers, and like the realtor in the ad, Johnny crossed his arms. Lien was glad she made Johnny tall. He stood a half-foot taller than the four boys, so he was able to look down at them. Johnny's voice went down to a low register, one that surprised Lien. If they didn't put everything back, he warned, he would hold them by their feet and shake out whatever was in their pockets. For a moment, the boys looked up at Johnny, their noses wrinkled. And Lien felt the dread of losing something that was both a part of herself but also completely separate. Then, the teenagers emptied their pockets and put the snacks and candy back where they found them.

*

Her sisters convinced Lien to properly introduce Johnny to the family. Since her son's creation a week ago, Lien had been keeping Johnny at the convenience store and away from prying eyes. Whenever she saw one of her sister's cars park out front, she would have Johnny do work in storage, leaving her sisters to linger too long at the counter as they checked over their shoulders. She had also been avoiding calls from them, but she listened to their voice messages. According to them, Johnny needed to socialize outside of Lien and Rosa. It was also important for him to be around other men, and who was Lien to think the men in their family not good enough? "The cruelest thing," Minh said, "is depriving a child of his own kin."

Profits improved with Johnny's help. His strength expedited a lot of the work, but it was the sort of labor that bored him. Lien bought him business books. After reading a few, he proposed ideas: why had they not implemented free samples yet? And what did Lien think about expanding and opening another At Your Convenience store? Lien, however, tried to explain that business wasn't something one could learn in a week. Still, he persisted. When Lien deposited money into her savings, Johnny quoted one of his books and said money unspent was worthless

and that Lien should look into investing. She pressed her knuckles to his temple and put what was left of the money in her wallet. They went to an outlet to buy Johnny fitted clothes for Minh's party.

At Minh's house, cars spilled out the driveway and all along the curb to the next block. Lien had to park across the street, three houses down. From the looks of things, everyone was there: cousins, in-laws, even family of obscure connection. Lien's legs began to shake, which her son took notice.

"Mother," he said. He put out his arm, and Lien, who was becoming accustomed to expecting things of others, took it.

Thankfully, their arrival didn't cause the disturbance she had imagined. The house was hot and crowded, smelling of sweat, perfume, Bud Light. Everyone was red in the face and chest from drinking since the afternoon. They yelled over each other and laughed so hard they held on to forearms or the stair railings to steady themselves. Johnny looked around. His lips pressed together in a "hmm." Lien had come to learn that this face meant he was deliberating, deciding whether or not something fit his small but growing number of principles.

"My dear sister," Minh said, and a small crowd followed her. Minh was also flushed, eyes watering. When she looked at Johnny, her face crumpled into scrutiny, and she reached up to touch his shoulders and then his temples. "My nephew," she said and smiled. "You look to be the same age as my son. Come. The two of you will make very fast friends."

Before Lien could have a say, her son went out to the backyard where Peter and other male relatives stood and smoked.

Lien was left with her sisters who were uncharacteristically happy in her presence. They kissed her on the cheek, leaving spit and the sour smell of wine. They looked at her with the sort of adoration and glittering eyes she hadn't seen in years. Lien wiped her cheeks with the back of her hands.

"You've done a great job," Loan said.

"Incredible," Bao said.

"He looks like the real thing," Thao said.

Minh joined their circle with two glasses of wine in either hand, and she handed one to Lien. Lien, who never liked the taste, cradled the wine glass in her palms. "Did you think you could keep him all to yourself?" Minh said.

"No," Lien admitted. "I was going to introduce him eventually."

"Oh, don't be so serious," Minh said. "You were the one being silly for not showing off this son of yours."

"Indeed," Loan said, leaning in. "Does he come to work with you every day?"

Lien nodded, and her sisters sighed and shook their heads. This began the usual discussion about their own children's shortcomings. Loan's three daughters were all liberal arts majors and had no prospects of finding jobs that paid well, and they swore off Loan's suggestion of marrying wealthy men because it went against their feminist beliefs. Both Bao and Thao had raised successful sons who called infrequently. As usual, Minh stayed quiet about her own children and only ever spoke up when she had an opinion about someone else's.

"Lien," Loan said. "How did you manage to do it? How did you create such a perfect son?"

They all watched her, expectant. Lien did not look away. She met each of their eyes, though she could feel the tears welling and the sharp pain in her throat. "I suppose I do what every mother does," she said. "I try to teach him all that I know." Lien took a sip of her wine.

An hour passed, and Johnny came back inside with an arm around Peter's shoulders. When they got closer, Lien noticed the stumble in Johnny's step and that Peter put his arm around Johnny's waist because Peter was helping him walk. Peter stood a half foot shorter than

Johnny, but Peter was wide in his shoulders and arms and wore a black shirt a size too small. He took after his mother with his large eyes, tall sharp nose, and his habit for deflecting blame. "He only had two drinks, Auntie," Peter said, grinning. "Then, he became like this."

Lien set down her lukewarm wine and went to her son. Peter gently pushed Johnny onto her, and eventually, both Johnny's arms were around her neck, their first embrace. Johnny belched, and Lien rubbed small circles on his back.

"Mother," he said in the car. He looked at her, his eyes bloodshot. "Peter is a very good cousin."

"You don't know what you say," Lien said, reaching over for his seatbelt and buckling him in.

"Peter is also intelligent," he said. "He has a great many plans for the future, and he told me about some of them."

"Intelligent people don't just sit around and share plans," Lien said.

"He wants to start his own business, Mother."

"Everyone wants to start a business," she said. "Now, lie back and close your eyes. We will be home soon enough."

He continued to sit up and look out his window in quiet protest. But he eventually reclined and closed his eyes, either out of exhaustion or nausea. When they got to the house, Johnny vomited on the front lawn and continued to do so in the bathroom. He sat on the cold tile, his chin on the toilet seat. Lien stroked his back as he dry heaved and hoped all talk about Peter would be forgotten by morning.

*

It had been decades since Lien was responsible for anyone. Of course, there were her sisters. They had come to America as teenagers, and when Lien met them at the John F. Kennedy Airport, she was stunned by how much smaller they were from how she remembered them. Her sisters were wan, brittle. Their lips were dry and flaking, and there were knots in their hair. Lien remembered thinking how she felt too young to take on this responsibility, as she had felt too young to go to a new country alone with the Catholic missionaries. When she first fed her sisters, they ate with a terrible quickness that made them sick and vomit the partially digested food. How thinly spread she felt in those early years. She worked multiple jobs, sewing polyester blouses, cleaning dishes at a Chinese restaurant, scrubbing bathrooms in corporate buildings. Lien attended community college but was never able to finish her degree, what with taking care of her sisters, who began to change in America.

They listened to Lien less and less, dismissed her opinions and advice. They thought Lien too timid of the world, which was filled ripe opportunities. Her sisters married off as quickly as possible, leaving Lien behind without a word, much less an apology. Instead, they sent her signed checks, as if money was enough to pay off their debts.

Perhaps Lien should have been stricter with her sisters, like the way their late mother had been in Vietnam. Perhaps she should have been harder on them from the beginning, scaring them with stories of her own beginnings in new terrain, the realization that everyone came into the world cold and alone and would eventually leave it the same way. But Lien had been too soft on them, and her sisters grew up seeing a much different world. Peter was the same way. Minh spoiled that boy rotten, and there was nothing anyone could do to air out the smell.

Throughout the night, Lien got out of bed to check on Johnny. She adjusted the blanket, so it covered his chest. She made sure he slept on one of his ears in case he needed to vomit again. Mostly, she observed him, analyzed all the parts of his face she'd attentively molded and

shaped. He looked nothing like Peter because she'd made sure of it. With that small reassurance, she got up and went back to bed.

*

Johnny overslept. Fortunately, the store was closed on Mondays, so Lien let him sleep until noon. When she found him, he was sprawled on the pullout sofa, still wearing his party clothes. It took a few nudges for him to wake, and when he did, a sour look appeared on his face. He groaned, rolled over, hugged his pillow so that it covered his ear, but Lien was persistent. She clapped her hands and sat him up. She brought a glass of water for him to drink, but he waved it away, so she left it on the side table. "If you don't drink," Lien said, as firmly as she could, "that headache of yours will be the least of your worries." Johnny made a "tch" sound but accepted the water. He cradled the glass on his lap.

Lien prepared his usual breakfast of four eggs on two servings of rice, but by the time he came into the kitchen, they were cold. He had changed out of his party clothes. Instead, he wore Peter's old basketball shorts and a shirt with a sports team on the front and holes at the collar. Johnny's hair was sticking up the back. His face was swollen, almost unrecognizable from the sharp features of the man in the realtor ad. He sipped from his glass of water, which he brought with him, grimacing after every swallow.

"Mother," he said. "I think it's time I get paid."

"Get paid?" Lien said, bringing his breakfast to him.

"A man is nothing without his money," he said. He didn't need to mention Peter for her to know who these words belonged to.

"What do you need money for?"

He was silent. He cut the eggs with the side of his fork.

"I'd like to save some for myself," he said finally, "so I can make my own decisions. Don't you want that?" He suddenly grabbed her hand with a firmness that almost hurt her—his hand still felt dry and rubbery. "Didn't you create me so I can be my own man?"

After breakfast, they stayed at the table to calculate his earnings. They agreed on his wage and overtime. He had worked for a full week, so his first pay was a little more than five hundred dollars. Lien went to the pantry where she kept a small reserve of money in a coffee canister for emergencies. She counted out Johnny's money and handed it to him. Johnny carefully accounted for each bill. "Thank you, Mother," he said. "You don't know how free I feel."

Peter came by the house later that day. He was the last person she wanted to see, but Lien could not very well turn him away after he put his foot in the door. He came bearing a bouquet of grocery store flowers, Minh's idea probably. "Good afternoon, Auntie," he said and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek. "Is Johnny home? We have a few things to discuss."

Lien took the bouquet and moved aside for him to enter. He walked quickly, almost jogging, as if Lien would chase after him. She only needed to walk at her own pace to find Peter in the living room.

"Hey, man!" Peter said, patting Johnny on the back. Johnny put down his business book and stood up from where he sat on his bed, and they performed a two-clap handshake Johnny must've learned the night before. Peter picked up the money Johnny had left on the nightstand and thumbed through it. "Pay day, huh?"

"Yes," Johnny said, smiling. "I've finally become a man with his own life path."

"Very cool," Peter said, handing the money back. "Lunch is on you then." He turned and jumped at the sight of Lien, who had been standing there the whole time. "Oh, also, we've made plans for today. Is this all right, Auntie?"

Johnny was already slightly turned towards the door, but he looked at Lien and waited for her permission. "Mother," he said. "We have no plans for the day."

"Fine," Lien relented. "No more drinks."

"Oh Auntie," Peter said as he and Johnny walked down the hall. "It's the middle of the day."

*

Rosa said this was normal. And Lien should be thankful that she wasn't raising two teenage daughters. They hid their progress reports, met with secret boys, snuck out of the apartment. Some days, Rosa wanted to run away herself. So, all things considered, Johnny spending his nights with his cousin wasn't necessarily a bad thing. He always came back a little before 11 pm with promises that he only had a few sips of Peter's beer. At least he shared things with Lien, like where they had been (a bar in Claremont) and what they talked about (their multitude of business ventures).

"Lien," Rosa said. "What are you worried about?"

"Nothing," Lien said because she knew the truth would sound ridiculous.

"It's not a big deal," Rosa said. "Just loosen the leash. Once he starts making his own mistakes, he will start learning from them. Then, you get to shove it in his face." Rosa laughed and went to restock the seaweed snacks.

Two weeks into Johnny and Peter's nightly meetings, they put together a business plan. And of course, they needed money to start. One night after work, Johnny went into the bathroom with the new clothes she had bought him. He came out in his button-down shirt tucked in black slacks. He had even combed his hair with water. Seeing him like this reminded Lien of the time she had found the realtor ad in the newspaper. The picture had given Lien a sense of security she had been gradually losing, like water in cupped hands. As she watched her son, she searched for that feeling again, but Johnny's sleeves were unbuttoned, and the business proposal was only a small packet of loose-lined paper.

They wanted to get into business with some of Peter's friends, who sold masks and moisturizers to aging women. They even sold several products to Minh, and she used them every night religiously. If they could get their own clients, they could have a steady income and even hire other people to do the legwork. They simply needed some money to buy the products and to attend a seminar about the company they would be working for.

"What do you think, Mother?" he said. "Isn't this a great opportunity?"

She smiled and hoped he couldn't see her mouth quivering. Lien knew of these salespeople. They would come into her store and tried to sell their lotions or hair products at half price, so that Lien could resell them. She swatted these people away like fruit flies because she was not a fool. But she knew her son would be persistent, endlessly stubborn to become the man he was meant to be. Perhaps Rosa was right about letting him learn from failure. "How much do you need?" Lien asked.

Lien wrote a check for \$4,000, which accounted for the masks and moisturizers as well as any extraneous costs. He grabbed her hand, more gently this time. Then, Johnny pressed his lips on her palm and thanked her for everything.

*

Five days later, Lien was almost relieved to hear Peter had lost the money. He took it and promised Johnny that he could easily double it, but Peter bet on a sports team he was sure would win but lost at the very last second. He shared this news over the phone, and from what Lien

could overhear, he seemed to shrug as he spoke, making it seem that this was just the sort of thing that just happened from time to time. But towards the end of the conversation, Peter did the unexpected and apologized: "Hey, I'm sorry, man," he said. "I really am." Afterwards, Johnny sat motionless on three crates of energy drinks for half an hour, and Lien, busy with customers, let him be.

On the way home, Lien didn't feel like lecturing. "It's all right, my child," she said. "There will be other opportunities."

Johnny stared out the window, his mouth fogging the glass. "But why," Johnny said. "Why couldn't I have this opportunity?"

"Some things aren't easy," Lien said. "Some things are just harder to have in life."

"And what about the people who ruin opportunities?" he asked. "Shouldn't they be punished?"

"Sometimes," Lien said but faltered. "Sometimes, punishment does not come to those who most deserve it."

There was that look on his face again. He pressed his lips together and looked out the window, as if he was trying to see something far off.

That night, they got ready for bed. Johnny didn't seem sleepy, so Lien left the lamp on, the way she did when he wanted to stay up to read his business books. But Johnny just sat on the pull-out sofa, his blanket up to his waist. Lien had trouble sleeping as well.

Something happened in the night that could've been a dream. Johnny crept into her room. His loafers lightly tapped the wood floor, half-waking her. He knelt by her bed and whispered that he had to go and make things right. Then, he kissed her on the forehead and left. The phone rang for what felt like a second later. Lien reached for it on her nightstand: it was Minh, already making excuses. "*He* was the one who came to us," Minh said. "So, we brought him back to you."

Peter's truck was parked out front. His car had a buff job and new wheel covers, evidence that not all Lien's money was gambled away. Minh had been driving, and Peter sat in the passenger seat beside her. There were a few small cuts on his cheekbone and lower lip, light green crescents on his face, the beginnings of bruises. Peter stared down at his hands, which were bandaged around his knuckles with gauze.

"Where is he?" Lien asked. "Where is my son?"

Minh looked back to the bed of the truck, and Lien felt fire in her stomach. Johnny was wrapped in floral bed sheets and laying in the back of the truck like a shot deer. Only his hand was loose from the sheets, and she stared at it for ten seconds, waiting for the fingers to curl. Minh came out of the car, cheeks glistening. She explained how Johnny had arrived at their house in the middle of the night, how Johnny was the first to attack. Peter only fought back out of self-defense. Lien had to understand.

"Oh, Lien, I'll make it up to you," Minh said. She sounded nasally, like a child. "I'll give you double what you paid. Then, you can build a new and better son."

Lien only closed her eyes. When she opened them, she said, "Bring him inside."

Peter carried him, huffing all the while. Peter was stronger than Johnny, Lien saw that now. He lay Johnny gently on the pull-out sofa. When Peter and Minh left, Lien sat next to Johnny and pulled down the bed sheet. She almost didn't recognize him. His eyes were closed. There were no bruises or cuts, but there were specks of dried blood on his face, where he was dented in. He felt as cold as the day she had made him out of Condensed Flesh™ and water, when she mixed him in a kiddie pool.

And as much as she wanted to blame Minh or Peter, she couldn't do it wholly. It was her fault as well. Lien lifted her son's head and cradled it in her arms. She found herself humming a lullaby. She was regretful for her impatient hands that made him this way, for her stupid hope. Old Lien

should have known better. She should have taken her time in making him. She should have given more attention to the eyes to see things how they were and the mouth to speak less foolishly. Lastly, she should have added her own tears to him, so that he could have fully known what she knew, that the world was a much less kind and fair place than she had always wished.



Photo of John

TRACKING THE ECONOMY OF ELK

by

John Thurgood

We've been tracking elk for the past month now. My brother, Benny, says that the reason we haven't seen any around is because the economy is gonna rip the world in two, and those of us who don't know any better are gonna get swallowed up in the hellfire of *naivete*. Benny thinks I'm too little to understand, but I'll show him. Dad too. I know more than they think, and I'll prove it, once the elk come back.

Our fort looks down on a wide bend in the creek just off the Weinzapfel property. We built it high so the hunters who pass through this part of the woods won't see it and spray it down with deer piss. They love that stuff.

We stole wood from the housing development on the other side of the highway for the fort. Benny says it's okay if we steal from them, because they're part of the problem anyhow. From the deck, I have the best view of the shallow side of the bend. The grass from the Weinzapfel property slopes down to the water between a break in the trees, and in the sun, it looks like a green tongue laid out for inspection. The grass is long and the blades fall over themselves and lap in the breeze pushing down the creek. Benny says it's the perfect view for elk

tracking. If any elk were gonna drink from this creek, they'd go thirsty for days just so they could *quench* themselves at our bend.

I sit up here most days and watch the water pass by below. My brother is off getting supplies. He says that the end is coming soon, and if we're going to fall into the bowels of hell, we're going to need some canned goods and plenty of bottled water. I believe him. I watch the creek, and I try to imagine the end. I see fire, and I see creatures with hell for eyes. And it's like I can taste the ash and mustard of a fried ham sandwich cooked over the fiery pits of doom.

"This is Betsy," Benny says before pulling himself onto the deck. Once up, he scans the fort with a heavy scowl, then looks at the book I'm reading. He's got one of the shoulders of his overalls undone, and he's not wearing an undershirt. His tan fades at his armpit. There's hair there now. "Why are my books up here?"

The girl climbs up to the deck and stands next to Benny. She smiles and looks pretty stupid. She's from the housing development across the highway. I can tell because her boots look fake, like they were made for a doll. Her t-shirt has a rip in the shoulder, but it looks new otherwise.

Benny grabs the book out of my hand. "You know I don't want these up here." He winds the book like he's gonna hit me.

I don't flinch, because I know he only wants to get a rise out of me. Disappointed, he tosses the book back into my hands, but I fumble it and it hits my nose, making my eyes flush a little.

Benny smiles. "Well, don't cry about it."

"I ain't. And those're Dad's books."

"More reason to take them back down to the house."

"So have *Betsy* do it." I shoot Betsy a *keen* smile. Then I pick up my hatchet and string it over my shoulder before heading down the ladder. "I need to be alone," I say without looking my brother in the eye because I know he'll say something mean otherwise.

Reverend Percy Reed says in *The Parsimony of Sin* that the meek will inherit the *monetary system* of the world and turn it into *fast food vouchers* and *porno*. Sometimes I think it's already happening. From the edge of the woods, I can see across the highway to the housing development on the other side. The land over there looks bald. I wonder if they know they've created a flood plain. They dug out the trees and leveled everything. They're planning to build a Gut Buster on the corner. There's a big sign there now that says *Coming Soon*.

Sometimes when I walk through the woods, I try to picture what I'll do when the elk return. I think about life before the housing development started construction. There were more animals then and less traffic on the highway. Dad seemed happier. And if I think about it hard enough, I can almost remember mom, even though Benny says I was too young to remember.

I take out my hatchet and pick a tree I think I can chop down. I find a skinny one growing at the bottom of a ridge. The bark looks thin and weak like it wasn't sure how to grow it yet. I take aim and get a few chops in before I hear footsteps crushing leaves down the glen. My dad comes over the ridge wearing a flannel hat, white t-shirt and jeans. He's carrying his chainsaw. When he sees me, his lips tighten, and I throw the hatchet in the leaves beside the tree.

My dad glances at the small nicks in the bark. “Did you do that?” The chainsaw hangs at his side. The blade looks like the teeth of a dinosaur. “Well, whatever you're doing, stop it. You shouldn't be back here anyway.”

“We're tracking elk.”

“Elk?” Dad glares down at me like when we're working on the pickup together and I dropped the flashlight. “Your brother back here too? Tell him I need to talk to him. He knows what he did.” Dad turns and starts toward the house, taking long steps up the hill and over the chicken wire fence to our property.

I look for my hatchet in the leaves. I took it from the garage. It was behind a stack of boxes underneath my dad's workbench. I'm not sure if my dad knows I have it. He wouldn't need it though. He had other tools. Better tools.

I glance down at the dull blade, rusted in spots. The handle is wood and painted red. Most of the paint is rubbed away and smudged with dirt and grease. I haven't used the hatchet for much, but I plan on it. Once the elk return, I might have to use it a lot.

Before we built the fort and before we started tracking elk, Benny caught me following him. For a few nights in a row, Benny had been climbing out of our bedroom window to sneak over to the housing development. I wanted to see what he was doing. He ducked in the shadows between houses, peeking into windows occasionally. When he got to the unfinished homes near the back of the development, he stepped through the framework, two-by-fours lined up like *cavalry*, staring up at the rafters, studying them, like I do the words in my dictionary, trying to figure out how to make their meaning mine.

The next night, when I was asleep, Benny jammed a pillow over my face. When he let up, he clasped his hand over my mouth and looked me dead in the eyes. “Don't think I won't murder you in your sleep,” he said. “And if I ever catch you following me around again, I'll make you wish you could murder yourself in your own damn sleep.” He waited for a minute to let his words settle in the darkness between our beds. Then he said he wanted to show me something.

A pile of lumber lay in the dirt next to the half-finished framework of a new home. Benny looked at the house and down at the stack of wood. Then he said we had to build our own home. When I asked him why, he looked at me sideways and asked what difference that made. He waved a hand and said that these houses had ruined everything. They were the real reason mom had gone. Mom had left with the elk, and these houses were the cause.

Benny picked up four two-by-fours and hooked them in his arm, and motioned for me to do the same. I could only carry two. The grain cut into my arm. I was afraid Benny would scold me for being weak, but then, he nodded and started off into the dark.

We crossed wet grass and crept round houses toward the highway. We were quick. We knew how to be quiet. The woods had taught us that. There was a word in the dictionary called *elan vital*. I had thought it meant to grow better—something to do with evolution and creation. The way I pictured it was that there were herds of animals and they each had the chance to grow better. The smarter animals, the animals that used all their parts better, they were the animals that got to grow the best.

Benny turned a corner and stopped. I nearly ran into him.

From the shadow of a home, a girl stepped forward. She was wearing shorts and a sweatshirt with a witch on it. Her knees looked soft and doughy. It was Betsy, but I didn't know her then.

“Are you stealing that?”

“No,” Benny said.

“I’m not going to tell anybody, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

Benny paused for a moment and looked the girl up and down. Then he stepped toward her. She tried to step around him, but he boxed her in with the two-by-fours until her back was pushed against the dark brick wall.

“Then, yeah,” Benny said. “We *are* stealing these. And if you tell anyone, we’ll kill ya.”

Benny leaned close. I couldn’t tell if he was gonna hurt her. I hadn’t really thought about what it meant when the Reverend talked about survival of the fittest, what it meant for the strong to survive. It meant the others didn’t. I wanted to say something, but I didn’t want to get yelled at later. I stood back, and tried to ignore what was happening. Through the yellow light of the street lamps, the stars seemed to pulse. They were still up there even though all the houses and their false light would soon take the sky away from them. I looked down at my feet. There was a toy pony pushed deep into the grass. The pink body of it lay sunken in the dirt, too low to get hit by a lawnmower. Its big blue eyes stared at me like I needed to do something about it, like I needed to exercise the *vexations* from this side of the highway.

When I looked up, Benny was already on his way. His baggy overalls rustled as he walked. The girl didn’t look scared. She scowled at me for a moment, waiting for me to trail after my brother. I hated her for thinking we would trust her, and if I’d have known Benny was going to start bringing her around, I would have done something different, tried to hurt her maybe. But in that moment, all I could do was stare back at her in a way that let her know she didn’t belong.

I try to focus on the deer chili. Some nights Dad makes it better than others. I’m hungry, but I wait for Benny and Dad to sit at the table with me. They’re in the front room. I can hear them talking. There is a loud crash. Something breaks. I hear Benny tell Dad to leave him alone. “You’re afraid of them. I’m not afraid like you.” A clap. Another, low and thick. Then the floor shakes. “You’re a coward!” Benny yells. Then the door slams, and silence fills the house.

Dad steps into the room. I stare into the chili and wait for him to take his seat at the table. He picks up Benny’s bowl and pours some in his, then slides the rest over to me.

“Eat up.”

The bowl nearly flips, but settles. The meat inside looks no different than the beans. There’s not much difference between the two. Sometimes, the big chunks taste a little like pickles. Dad settles over his bowl with his elbows on the table and chews. I can’t see his eyes. I don’t think he wants to show me how mad he is. He likes to be mad in private.

Dad must have found out about the wood we were stealing. The sheriff must have told him. They drink in the backyard sometimes. I see them back there, sitting in lawn chairs, staring out at the trees like it’s one big movie screen. Whenever I have to ask Dad about the water heater or something like that, I try to walk up slow. I want to hear what they’re saying, but most times they’re not saying anything. They’re only staring at the woods, waiting for the action to build. Part of me wants to tell them it’s all gonna be gone soon. The hellfire and damnation won’t leave much behind. But I don’t know how to say it. Dad only listens when I tell him what he wants to hear. Everything else I have to word toward his want.

The next morning, I walk out to the fort. Benny and that girl are sleeping up there. I find them curled together under an unzipped sleeping bag. I march over to my post where I watch for elk, trying to make as much noise as possible. They don’t wake. Benny stretches a leg, and his foot

slides out from under the sleeping bag. It's pale and boney, and the skin over his heel and ankle looks stretched, like his bones are out-growing the skin around them.

I glance over the side of the wooden deck. The ground below is tangled with roots and tufts of grass. There's never going to be any elk. The Reverend says that animals know the truth before the rest of us. He wrote a chapter about it. Hundreds of cranes dying unexpectedly over Arkansas. Thousands of jellyfish washing up from the Gulf of Mexico. He says they're called omens, because animals have a thing called *heightened awareness*. The Reverend says that no one understands the economy better than animals. They don't see numbers. Instead, they smell fear. When Benny first told me about the elk, he said we shouldn't be afraid of those people on the other side of the highway. The elk would smell it on us and never come back.

I watch Benny and that girl. He is such a liar. He doesn't know anything.

"Wake up!" I yell and stomp toward them. I lean over their faces. "Elk! Elk! Get up. Elk!"

Benny leans on his elbow and winces. "What?" He glances down at Betsy who is stretching her arms above her head and smiling. What a *bimbo*.

"Don't you wanna see?" I point to the grassy embankment. "Elk."

He focuses toward the bank on the other side of the creek. "I don't see anything."

"That's 'cause there never was any." I adjust the strap on my hatchet and shoot Benny a mean look. "They're all dead, you lying *shit*." Then I march over toward the ladder and climb down.

"Where'd you get that?"

Dad doesn't look. He must have heard me walk in through the side door. It takes my eyes a minute to adjust to the shade. The garage door is open, and the gravel drive looks like it's glowing.

I pull the strap to my hatchet tight over my shoulder. "I found it."

"Well, I hope you found it in here. I don't want you finding things from the neighbors. We already have one thief in the family. We don't need two."

He reaches for a pair of pliers and pokes at a hunk of metal and wire on his workbench. It looks like a robo-brain, something to protect us from the underneath, but it's probably just a garbage disposal. Dad fixes things for people, but he can only fix small things.

"Benny's been sleeping in our tree fort."

"Figures," Dad says. "Tell him he's gonna get foot-rot if he doesn't change his socks."

"He's been sleeping with some girl up there."

Dad pauses and glances over his shoulder. I catch his eye and feel it cut through me. "Those girls from across the highway have parents, you know, and I've met some of them. I'd appreciate it if I didn't have to meet any more."

I don't know how to respond, so I just stand for a moment and hope Dad understands what he is supposed to do. Tell Benny he can't bring Betsy over anymore. Make him stop.

Dad looks back at me over his shoulder. "You need something?"

"No."

Dad smiles. It lacks feeling like he doesn't understand what smiles are for. Then he turns back to his workbench and stabs at the motor with his pliers.

I wake, and it's dark. Cicadas wail outside. Over the din I hear voices. The screen over the window clicks. Something bangs loudly, and Benny appears. He disappears just as suddenly, and an empty duffle bag flies in and lands on the floor. Benny threads a leg over the sill and climbs into the room. I pretend to be asleep. He glances around. Then he turns to our dresser and rummages through the drawers.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

Benny stops and glances toward me. I sit up in bed.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep."

Betsy leans her head in through the window.

"What's she doing here?"

Benny looks over his shoulder. He waves for Betsy to move out of sight. Then he shakes his head and looks at me.

"We're leaving. Don't tell Dad." Benny turns to the dresser and finds what he's looking for. He stuffs it in his pocket. "Or tell Dad. What difference does it make? We'll be gone by morning." Benny grabs a handful of clothes and jams them into the duffel bag. "Make sure the old man doesn't give you any shit about this. It has nothing to do with you. We've gotta go, that's all."

I get out of bed and walk to the window. I peek my head out. Betsy is crouched below, leaning against the house. She's wearing a black beanie.

Benny steps to the window and nudges me out of the way. He hooks one leg over the sill. "We'll come back for you."

In the light from the moon, I get a good look at his face. His cheek is bruised around one of his eyes and there is a cut over the bridge of his nose. Benny smiles. It's warm.

"Dad's getting worse," I say.

"It doesn't hurt."

"I'm sorry." I try to return his smile. Then he leans out the window and hops to the ground. He and Betsy run down the back lawn and disappear into the woods.

I walk over to the dresser. The drawers are open. Most of my clothes are unfolded and hanging. Benny's side of the dresser is empty except for a small tin for ear plugs. Benny had been saving to buy a car. The money inside the tin is gone.

The next morning, I walk out to the fort like always. I know the elk are gone for good, but I want to ignore it. I want to ignore what Dad did to Benny, even though I wanted him to. I thought it would put the fear in him, make him forget about Betsy. I thought Dad could try to fix this one thing for me. I don't know how to do it on my own. All I have is this stupid hatchet. It's not even sharp. Benny and Betsy are probably following the creek down to the Ohio, trying to get away from this place. Maybe they'll follow that to the ocean. I try to picture the ocean, a coast of sand and waves, the sun shining all over, warm and friendly. Mulberry bushes and grass. And a thousand elk, chewing cud and standing in the wake.

I reach the fort, and I hope it's true. I hope Benny is tracking the elk all the way to the ocean. He'll come back for me once he finds them. That's why he left me behind. He needs me to keep watch over the bend.

I grab a rung to climb up the tree. We nailed two-by-fours into the trunk for a ladder. When I get to the top, Benny is laying on his back and staring up at the leaves and sky.

"I thought you'd be gone by now."

"Well, I'm not."

I walk over to my post and look down at the bend. No elk.

“What in the hell are you doing over there anyway?”

“I’m looking for elk.”

“Why?”

I glance down at the books that are still up here. The pages are starting to wrinkle from the dew each morning. I pick up one of the bigger ones and throw it at Benny. “I thought you were leaving.”

The book hits Benny in the shoulder, hard, and he sits up and chucks it back at me in one motion. I dodge it, easy.

“She didn’t wanna go,” Benny says. Then he sighs. “Everyone’s afraid. She’s afraid of her parents.”

“You’re not afraid?”

“Her parents are just stupid people. They’re afraid like Dad. They don’t understand why they do what they do.” He shakes his head and lies back. “You wouldn’t understand.”

“We need supplies.”

Benny shakes his head, staring up into the canopy. “Then go get them.”

I take a step toward him. “I don’t want to.”

“Listen, I don’t care what you do, but you should do it somewhere else.”

I try to step closer, but Benny leans up on an elbow and says, “Seriously, get the hell out of here.”

“I just want some help, that’s all.”

Benny jumps to his feet and steps across the deck. “You want help? That’s what you want? Help? Well you’re not gonna get it.” The wooden planks creak under his weight. “Why don’t you tell Dad you want help? Maybe he’ll give it to you like he did me.” He pushes his face close to mine. Blood swirls on the inside of one of his eyeballs. It looks gummy.

I take a step back, and Benny steps closer.

“You know what?” Benny says and smiles in a way I’ve never seen him smile. “You should walk down to the creek and crawl inside and swim to the bottom and never come up. It’s safer down there.”

I step back again. My heel dips over the edge, and I paddle the air to catch myself. I reach for a branch but the leaves rip free. I feel my back stiffen, and I tip. The ground looks far away, like I’ll never see it again.

Benny grabs my arm and pulls me back from the edge. “If you want help, you should find those elk you’ve been looking for. Maybe you’ll find mom too.”

I tear my arm from his grip and adjust the strap of my hatchet. The air smells like trash-fire and horses. “You’re an idiot. I hate you,” I say, and cross the deck to the ladder and climb down.

I fall on the way down the ladder. A two-by-four yanks free. My foot slips. I hit the ground, and a heavy weight lands on my chest. The canopy shakes and folds over itself in the breeze. Slits of light carve toward me. “Jack! Are you alright?” I don’t answer my brother. I can’t see him. The air funnels into my lungs. I stare into the light through the leaves. A strong taste of honeysuckle fills my mouth. I can’t tell if I’m breathing right. My fingers feel funny. I thread them over the dry dirt and through the silt and blowdown. I reach for my hatchet, but the sleeve is empty.

On the ground near me, blood is smeared over the knuckle of a root. I stand. There is more farther down the path, small dots, one after another. The dots of blood collect at a fork and turn left at the creek, following the water. The path is raised a few feet from the water and on the

other side is a steep hill up to the Bennigan's property. I hear my brother's voice call after me. He sounds worried.

The blood leads to a large thicket, covering the trail like a big wall of dried thistle and ivy weed. I peer through and catch a glimpse of what might be my hatchet. I see the red handle, dirt smudged, laying in the middle of the path. I kneel and squeeze into the brush. I work my shoulders past the thick stalks. Stiff brambles catch on my shirt. My hands and knees sink into the wet muck under the thicket.

Once through, I stand. My hatchet sits in the path before a knotted ridge. I move for it, but as I do, an elk comes over the hill and trots toward me. It circles itself and stops in front of my hatchet. I count six points on its antlers. The hair on its chest is puffy like cotton, except for a mare over its left leg. It's bleeding.

The elk looks down at the hatchet. Then it raises its head and kicks at the dirt.

"You're not supposed to be here," I tell it.

It stares at me, eyes black and empty, twitching its nose like it remembers my smell, the scent of fear I've carried all along.

"Get out of here!"

The elk rears and circles the hatchet. Then it stares at me again.

"You've gotta go. You're not safe here."

I take a step toward the elk. It swings its head low and snorts. I take another step, and the animal does it again and kicks at the ground.

"You're not supposed to come back. Don't you understand? It's not safe here. We're not safe."

I get close enough to reach for my hatchet, and as I bend down to pick it up, the elk rears back on its hind legs, tall like a giant. Its large snout and antlers block the sun. I see the wound on its chest. The fur is cut away, and I know it's from me, the mark from my hatchet, where the flesh peeled back and the blade tore through to the bone.



John's workspace



Frank X. Gaspar Introduction

Written by

Eric A. Loya

Frank X. Gaspar is a poet and novelist from Provincetown, Massachusetts. He's the author of *Late Rapturous*, *Night of a Thousand Blossoms*, *A Field Guide to the Heavens*, *Mass for the Grace of a Happy Death*, *The Holyoke*, *The Poems of Renata Ferreira*, *Stealing Fatima*, and *Leaving Pico*. But I think of him first as a teacher.

That's because for 8 years, I was his student: poetry workshop Wednesdays, novel workshop Fridays. When I entered his class, I was pretty sure I knew a thing or two about writing. When I left, I barely recognized myself. I tell my students that a good teacher will do that for you. Of course, I only have 16 weeks with most of them. Looking back on those years, I understand what a privilege it was to study with a published and decorated writer who gave as much to the classroom as to the writing. He was patient while we struggled with our craft, yet he pushed us beyond what we thought we were

capable of. He was insightful while never giving us the answer, and he provided us just enough leeway to explore but not get ourselves into too much trouble. There are many things I learned in those classes, but one quote from Frank stands out: "writers keep their feet moving." I took that literally and started traveling. What Frank meant was that writers have to keep exploring, trying new things, working their way out of jams, and that's what I've tried to do with my writing. I'm still writing because of this advice, and I do it well, sometimes, because of Frank.

Of course, I could, and probably should talk about his writing. Frankly, I think it speaks for itself. 5 poetry collections and 3 novels worth of writing about love, life, age, the Portuguese experience, and, occasionally, cats are the total of his career so far. And they are all wonderful. He writes clearly about everyday things, like the strange burden of the common cold and the philosophy of Marcus Aurelius. His descriptive flourishes offer sentiment and beauty without overreaching. His humor, often overlooked or missed, is dry, which is always best. Frank Gaspar is a good writer, certainly worth your time; he's a good teacher, and I think the two go hand and hand. He's also my friend, and there is no one else who shaped my writing more. I hope you enjoy his work as much as I do.

The One God Is Mysterious

from an illustration of Babylonian sculpture

The king and his queen are feasting.
They recline, sumptuously, on long divans
and are attended by naked servants. They
can have anything they want, this much is
clear, and I believe they have been having
sex with one another and with the servants.
Why wouldn't they? Who among the servants
would not be honored to help? And it's Babylon
after all, and doesn't Babylon exist in your
memory? Isn't Babylon the clear rumbling
of your heart at ease with its every craving--
not the way it is now, fenced off with spiked wire
and old pipes, with signs telling the pedestrians
to beware: the litter, the old cans rusting. No,
this is my own memory of excess and extravagance,
of abandonment to the weight of everything
that pulls me down to ruin, those same ticks
and voices that lift me up and fill me with breath.
And don't you want to drink the breath of your
beloved? And his beloved? And her beloved?
You see how it goes. The One God is mysterious
and He has made me crazy. Maybe I am the king
or the queen. Or one of those sculpted figures
that bend so sweetly toward them, so graceful,
so finely formed and desirable in every way.
I remember being desired like that, and desiring
like that also. And I remember my heart in its deep
voice, commanding. Now that my common neighborhood
is tucked in for the night, the cars parked in the driveways,
the blinds drawn and everyone's drapes closed and the garage
doors locked, I can breathe easier. Now, in Babylon,
you see what is possible. The queen and her king are
dining, forever, in a gray frieze, but even so, they make
a fire in us, they free the ache from my shoulders,
they make every dark wish lie down with every bright wish,
they bring a great comfort to the harried in this land.

It Was So Dark Inside the Wolf

All day with nothing on my mind, the soft old couch,
the heating pad, a book of Tennessee Williams's letters,
tea, camembert, beer, soup, dozing, speaking in tongues
off in my drowsing mind, invoking this or that god, thinking
of raising my fortunes, thinking of all of this swimming forward
without me someday, this bag of small wishes, the greatest
sorrows indelible and indistinct in the afternoon's haze:
I cannot remember who said that our salvation must come
from a turn within our own nature and that there are no turns
and there is no nature. *Oh, it was so dark inside the wolf* said
the little girl with the basket after the hunters had killed
that beast who had eaten her, after they had cut him open to
let her out, although you don't hear *that* version so often anymore.
Surely this is significant. Who hasn't lodged in the belly
of something, who hasn't been devoured? Do you remember?
Maybe it is something for you like an old tune that haunts you,
that makes you so suddenly sad when you see a place where
the carpet is coming up or where the screen door is sagging
on a desperate hinge. Unbearable, this material music dissipating
the neighborhood around you into nothing. How does one rise
from this torpor and say, *I don't know what to do anymore?*
Outside the trees have sneaked above the line of the neighbor's
wall. How did I not notice? They make a tiny forest along
our city driveway. They are as dark and deep as it gets here.
I am still trying to rise up from the loveliness of dying objects
into the loveliness of whatever it is they point to. I'm trying
to get at just how things are, to adjust to that, but then I start
shaking. Isn't that how it is with you? It *was* so dark inside,
but that's not the whole story. They are leaving something out.
I can feel it in the sleepless night when I run my hands over
the openings in doorways. I can feel it when my own heart
delivers all my secrets to my enemies. I can feel it when
the poem doesn't turn, but heads for the bottom with a hook
in its mouth or when the sky runs to the color of tin and
the sparrows disguise themselves as leaves in the hedge waiting
for their moment. Isn't that how it is with you?

Both poems from *Night of a Thousand Blossoms* by Frank X. Gaspar, Alice James Books.
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Photo of Eric (by David Campos)

Sea-green

The sweet smell of a red rubber ball and a row
of sea-green doors rolling down black asphalt to an
ocean full of color, I've painted over that distance
with wanting.

I've left too much behind and lost
more from forgetting: the one who fell
on the supermarket tile, her head a crushed
rosebud, a broken blossom, the father, whose lashings
made him a part of the hospital bed.
He pleaded to the mailman, "Help, they're holding
me against my will, I'm the Virgin Mary,
you know who you are."

Can anything I put aside
today remain: my mother with her eroding
bones and rebellious nerves, the brother hanging on
to love like a marionette, its strings cut, dangling?
Is it possible to stay in those memories
of blood and blossoms, of tears and swallowed pain?
Can I stand there on the burning asphalt with bare
feet, a sweet smell in the air, all those lost
people behind their sea-green doors
howling?



Eric's workspace

Old Life

I've tried to give up
my sentimental habits. I've stopped
looking to the stars for meaning or at the moon,
in its night womb for understanding,
but the old life is perilous.

My brother gave up dreams for his first
child, one life consuming the other, and still lingers
over the possibilities, "I could have played pro ball.
I'd have juiced to get there."

An amber coffin, all I heard about her death,
but I still grieve for my father's first wife, who folded
corn husks into tamales and fed me like
one of her sons.

Those memories refuse
to be put away: childhood streets,
a woman's love, prayers whispered
into clenched hands, all the images strapping
me to the past. They pull like tar,
trap meaning like bones, leave the ground
treacherous and maudlin.

And the stars still loom
with their confused symbols. The unborn
moon remains, always, waiting to be delivered
from the night.

Crushed

Smell is the password
to memory. Jasmine, the scent of bulbs
that surrender themselves to the crisp
evening air, it's always midnight
in those blossoms, cigarette smoke,
the rough skins of oranges fallen
from a tree somewhere in my childhood;
all belong to a house I no longer
call home. I'm pulled back to those
suburban streets and cracked
driveways where my father collapsed trying
to run from his cancer, from family worrying
his sickness alive. I'm pushed to a Live Oak
tree scarred with my parents' initials, the lingering
love that will outlive them both.
It's always smoke and fruit, trees radiant
along cinder block walls in memories, but they cost;
soft as petals, they crush with the weight
of constellations, a night heavy with
jasmine blossoms.

I Rise into Dark Waters

I wake half in awe, half in worry.
The pressure of another body,
I think it might be a woman I loved years ago.

It's a Great Dane, black coat reflecting
the orange light off cranes
in the harbor; she raises her head
and looks me over, wondering if
something needs attention.

When I settle back into the sheets, she curls into
herself. That's how the night goes until
I rise with a hacking cough, a full bladder,
or an urge to stare at the harbor,
water black as blood in the moonlight, lapping at rocks
with the steady violence of ages.

I've started praying again; before I sleep,
I run through Our Fathers and Hail Marys like Vicodin.
One night without using the restroom, without
phlegm and blood stacking up in my lungs,
a night without dreams of dead fathers
driving Chevy pickups, or sleep walking hands
searching for old flames.

Instead I'm staring at cargo ships. I'm studying cruise
liners. Hollow containers, empty vessels.
I stare at a body of water, something between
a river and an ocean, a Great Dane beside me, her coat dark
as the harbor, eyes soft as the tide, ready to pull
me under like a memory.

Ashley Jae Carranza Bio

Ashley Jae Carranza resides in Las Vegas where she reads, writes, and does push-ups. She teaches at both the high school and college level and works on the side developing curriculum for courses on practical English. In academia, Carranza has published chapters about *Stranger Things*, zombies, teaching creative writing, and in 2021, she edited a collection of essays: *Our Fears Made Manifest: Terror, Trauma and Loss in Film, 1998-2019*. Carranza's fiction has appeared in various journals including *Beautiful Losers*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Postcard Shorts*, *Maudlin House*, and others. Check out her website: ashleycarranza.com Ashley Carranza and Cecilia Azar met in 2006 in an American Literature class at Riverside Community College. Since then, they have been friends and writing partners. Ashley has been a big influence in Cecilia's publishing experience. They also co-authored a children's book titled *World of Whiskers* (2021).



Slice of the Good Life

Monday morning again. Jill fixed her eyes on the golden hills framed from her kitchen window. She smirked considering the relaxing life to come. All she had to do was withstand a few moments of agony, some reconstructive surgery... a most certain love affair with Oxycodone. The rest of her days would be her own. She romanticized the trophy of crippled digits if it meant disability checks and freedom.

Breathe in... out.

With the blender suctioned to the counter, she crammed a butter knife into the switch indicating the lid was secure, shoved her right hand in and pressed *mince*.

Editor Biographies

Maria Cecilia Azar is a South American transplant whose work is guided by the biodiversity of the Southwest. Her interests include contemporary American poetry affect, attachment, queer theory, performance, memory and diasporic studies. Inspired by the biodiversity of Southern California, she aims to “read locally, write globally.”

Eric A. Loya is an M.F.A. graduate from the University of California, Riverside whose work has appeared in *White Pelican Review*, *Black and White*, *Mosaic*, *Pearl Magazine*, *Verdad Magazine*, *34th Parallel Magazine*, *The Indianapolis Review*, *The Bookends Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. He lives and works in Long Beach, CA.

John Thurgood is a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Terry Ann Wright's poem “Juniper Tree” was longlisted for the 2022 Sappho Prize; it appears in her forthcoming chapbook *Mädchen* (dancing girl press). Recent poems appear in *a moon of one's own*, *The Hyacinth Review*, *Ghost Girls*, and *The Shore*; anthologies by *Cadence Collective*, *Sadie Girl Press*, and *Picture Show Press*; and previous chapbooks *mad honey* (2018) by *dancing girl press* and *Nature Studies* (2015) by *Sadie Girl Press*, whose title poem was her third Pushcart Prize nomination. A proud graduate of San Francisco State University and Goddard College, she lives, writes, and teaches in Southern California.