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rhodora

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rhodora

Volume 1, Issue 4 | November 2021

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THE

Fear is universal, yet so particular. Sometimes fleeting, sometimes resident. Sometimes lurking in the outskirts of your conscious mind, sometimes jolting and tearing through you. How many of us have looked fear squarely in the eye, studied its ghastly contours, sat down with it, ran from it, befriended it, exorcized it?

This is the darkest issue of Rhodora Magazine, but perhaps that's true of only the color palette. We can

EDITORS

SUSANNA MARIAN CORREYA KEERTHANA V

FROM

guarantee you won't be looking over your shoulder, fumbling for the light switch, or trembling under your blankets.

In this issue, Vidya Rajagopalan movingly captures festival blues; Maria Giesbrecht writes about nature with a fresh, distinctive voice; Marilù Ciabattini gives us Marinella Giuni's gritty tale of the German yesteryears; Mark Blickley treats us with gripping characters from the future-past; and, Maya Alexandria will imbibe in you a lasting respect for title sequences—for those who



create them, and those who analyze them.

Thank you to our contributors and followers for the love and support you've lavished on us throughout 2021. We hope this year has fulfilled your writerly dreams, both little and big. We look forward to seeing you in January 2022 with more great writing.

Happy reading!



poetry

counterpart

TIM HEERDINK

While I'm not for sure
the outcome if I didn't click
your face on that page
a decade ago before
our current lives began
if I'd have continued to draw
breath or seek another soul
to mate with & multiply
& find some sort of happiness
not quite as good as the books
yet nothing ever really is
or if I would have fallen
in a self-made rut only
I could get myself out
only to choose not to,
but I am glad you found me
deep in the woods in my rut,
pulling me skyward for a look
before deciding it'd be best
for the two of us to never be
a p a r t.

after eight years a dog

TIM HEERDINK

An aversion assimilated in my psyche
against all dogs after the loss of my lab
back in the year the world was to end.

It was right before days of celebration
when I had to give Sydney a final ride
to put an end to her unnecessary suffering.

Not having any cats growing up,
I gravitated toward the felines
who promised me they'd stay a while.

After the loss I felt with Mom's passing,
it felt like the right time to open myself
to loving another dog in need again.

We went to the humane society
because buying just ain't right
when there's someone to save.

The dog we had an appointment with
showed its cards before we had a chance
for any sort of civil acquaintance.

A volunteer brought to our attention
that there was a new arrival not yet
logged into their data system.

This one, a black lab, happened to be



eight years old and very similar
to my long fallen sweet puppers.

I'm not saying that it's reincarnation,
but she sure does resemble her
& Kandee is forever my big baby.

This silly thing gets scared of her own farts,
remains by my side, & loves to sleep (in our bed);
I, of course wouldn't have her any other way.

the curse upon rostam pehilva

DANESH BALSARA

Great men like great ages have come and gone,
But there has been no greater champion yet born;
His birth was as difficult as his life,
He roamed the land to free it of evil and strife.

Rostam was his sire-given name,
His feats of strength brought him worldly fame;
Seeing him upon his glorious steed Rakhsh, whole armies took flight,
He battled dragons, sorceresses, demons and wicked men to set wrongs right.

Every sovereign of Airan called upon him to serve his fatherland,
He fearlessly answered every call with his massive club in hand;
With the White Demon's skull as a helm and wrapped in tiger skin,
He and Death seemed like something akin.

Death placed his noose around Rostam many times but could not ensnare him,
Divine intervention each time in Rostam's favor began to scare him;
And so Death cursed him, a fortune that none could mend:
"Rostam, your life will be worse than your end!"

On his many distant travels, unknown to him, Rostam had sired a son,
Princess Tahmineh would bear Sohrab and not share this secret



with anyone;

Rostam had left behind a worthy jewel to be worn by his child,
Little did he suspect, the winds of fate had started to run wild!

In time Sohrab grew into a strong lad, same as his father,
He climbed the ranks of the Turranian army like no other;
Tahmineh entrusted Sorabh with only his father's name and
jewel,
Death smiled at this development which was almost cruel.

Soon war broke out between the archenemies, Airan and Turran,
Rostam and Sohrab both leading their respective van;
Eventually both challenged each other to a duel,
Ensuring victory for their people was their fuel.

Both combatants were armored from head to toe,
No one could predict in whose favor the fight would go;
As the swords clashed, the impact shook the battlefield,
Both were exhausted but none would yield.

Finally with his legendary club, Rostom smote his rival,
Breaking Sohrab's back and eliminating chances of survival;
Among the ruins of body and armor the fateful jewel lay,
A horrible realization came over Rostam, his face was ashen grey.

He had triumphed in this conflict but he had found and lost his
son,
As Sohrab succumbed to his wounds, cold went the afternoon sun;



The winds howled, the trees moaned but none matched Rostam's
lament,
Death swept by Rostam yet again, but this time his cries filled up
the firmament.

a big pothole

SPANDAN BANDYOPADHYAY

i was walking,
just walking.
going nowhere.
yes,
I had no destination

suddenly, I saw
a pothole
a very, very big one
filled with
dark
dirty
water

everyone
was avoiding
the pothole

so
i went and
stood at its center

i touched the water with my hand.
it was as if i was touching the sky.
i drank that water, gladly.
and don't tell anyone,
it was nothing but pure nectar

an invisible killer

Y U U I K E D A

An invisible killer
is wandering
with warning of time.

Fragments of the killer
rampage through my veins
to cover my brain with a shroud of the past.

The shadow of the killer
holds a knife of scorching guilt
to tear my last hope for the future.

Although I'm alive,
I feel that I'm at the center of death.

Although I'm alive,
I feel that I'm an ageless ghost.

Because of the invisible killer,
my brain is soaked in burning death.



she
YUUKEDA

She was abandoned by God
when she was born.

Because she was a timid wolf,
God gave up hugging her.

Because she was a symbol of
scorching despair,
God gave up smiling at her.

She was abandoned.
So,
she abandoned everything.



credence

ANTHONY SALANDY

Consumerist zeal
Socializes children to value capital,
Quantified amounts
Rather than sentimental significance,

But to be spoiled
Is a privilege that many are not afforded
When flickering lights
Are the only gewgaws to brighten winter nights

Where no being may descend on houses
Disturbed by pervasive cold.

For rugged individualism was concocted
To give credence and justification
For generations of brutal carnage,
Beyond blackened decay

Dangling on sycamores stripped bare
And replaced with agitated flesh
And rotting sacrifice
Where the human condition

Is rendered obsolete when segmentation
Overcomes consensus
And culminates once again
In massacres cyclical—

Waiting, ever patiently for new victims.



morose

ANTHONY SALANDY

Drapes sway to subtle draft
Where summer's air retreats
From autumnal humidity,

A yearly rendezvous
Succumbing to earthly repose.

But soothing clouds descend
On leaf-speckled soil
Adorned with ripened gourds

And orcherous survivors of harvest feast,
Now prey to ravenous creatures

Hoping to secure a hibernation opulent.
For snowfall beckons
Beyond delicate mist lingering

Where barren trees
And veiled luminescence

Give way to pale silence,
A blinding cascade of silken embers,
A substantial onslaught of gelid melancholy,

Seasonal fallings temporary
But sombre all the same.

a piece of flesh

IVAN DE MONBRISON

A piece of flesh.
An eye in the sky.
It sees everything.
I melt into the sun
I'm a puddle.
I'm a puddle of flesh
With skin,
And one eye
Which sees everything.

Кусок плоти.
Глаз в небе.
Он все видит.
Я таю на солнце
Я лужа.
Я лужа плоти
С кожей,
И один глаз
Который все видит.

the sea is far away

IVAN DE MONBRISON

The sea is far away.
Almost a dream.
Summer is over.
In the big city,
There is constant noise.
It prevents me from thinking.
I do not know
If I'm still alive
Because I can't think.

Море далеко.
Почти мечта.
Лето конец.
В большом городе,
Есть постоянный шум.
Это мешает мне думать.
Я не знаю
Если я ещё жив,
Потому что я не могу думать.

i am writing a poem

IVAN DE MONBRISON

I am writing a poem.
The one who will read it is different.
And yet we are one with him.
Each creature is one and many at the same time.
I'll go to the cemetery tomorrow,
Take the heads of the dead
To make of them
A very beautiful bouquet.

Пишу стихотворение.
Тот, кто будет его читать, - другой.
И все же мы с ним едины.
Каждое существо едино и много, же время.
Завтра пойду на кладбище
Брать головы умерших
Чтобы сделать из их
Очень красивый букет.



photosynthesis

MARIA GIESBRECHT

tastes like grass and greens that
do not belong in a salad / an auburn
orange cigar / left-handed fingers in
the honey pot and caramel
spit strings in august / I should write a
salsa about you, verde y caliente

this is my earth

MARIA GIESBRECHT

selenium sleeps and bromium
breathes / the
ground's green gown spins
and slowly shakes the elements
from her skirt / drips in
springstress, delights in dusk
I stick my tongue out
and catch the flakes of gold
she dares drop

i took the earth out to dinner

MARIA GIESBRECHT

the grass is tasting my toes
and the wind is reaching out and
drinking
my breath from me / (she doesn't share)
lord Sunshine
toasts me to a crisp as I spread on
spf as jam and offer myself
on the altar of salt and sandwiches

there exists a symbiosis of
worship in the wind
and girlfriends
in the grass and *you!* must look
for it every time you
take the earth out to
dinner

on the occasion of my un- expected resurrection

RUTH NIEMIEC

Take the iris of your eyes into my mouth.

Breaking
atmospheric tendencies
gladly.

Sinking grains burdened
by the body of the ocean.
Seized by your teeth
and your skin
and your thighs.

Heaving your lungs,
a breath.
Fresh tombs of tomorrow,
folding fingers back
a calloused mountain.
Hands that become one.

No heed
this feeling of resonance.
Futile and dangerous.
Snakes groan
in hands which
become calyxes for hearts.

I take you blindly,
horrifically,
choking
on the truthfulness of life.

I take you glassy eyed



with ingénue.
Breathing damp words
into my ears.

Rattling blue bones.
Stop.
When you are near
a black shroud of Turin appears.

Hungry now.
Stitched are the folds of my mind
as I leap forward resurrected,
wandering again
into the blue.

like mother, like daughter

KAVITA SARIN

Lying awake in bed
At the ripe old age of sixteen
I realized
For the very first time
That only a brick wall
Separated me
From the tumultuous madness
That ensued in the room next door.

It really was the very first time
I realized and became aware
That my otherwise loving father
Was somewhat of a brute.
A bogeyman who appeared
Only in front of my mother
Only at night
Only within the confines of their room!

Years of being told
“I have very sensitive skin”
As a response to queries about
The purple-blue bruises,
Had led me to believe her.
I had often said I was glad
I hadn't taken after her.
And just as often, she would say,
“Well, I hope so,” and then
Under her breath, mutter something.
I now realize she said,
“Touch Wood! I should hope not!”

My anger, strangely, wasn't directed at him.
It was Mum I was angry with!
I trusted her: she broke my trust.
She lied and hid the truth!
My sixteen-year-old self believed
I had been wronged! By her!

That changed. And how!
I understand now
Her shame, her fear, her helplessness!
She didn't want to betray him
In front of his children
His friends or family.
Even then, she took it upon herself.

I understand now
Her penchant for wearing purple
Shades of blue and at times, red.
I understand now
Why she wore sarees wrapped around her shoulders
Why she wore long-sleeved blouses,
Why she walked around with her eyes to the ground
Why she pretended to have fallen, tripped, walked into a wall.
I understand completely now.
You see, since I was married
I've taken to wearing red, blue and purple
Saree wrapped tightly around my long-sleeved blouses
Also, with my eyes lowered to the ground.
My husband often jokes
"She's terribly accident-prone!"



And my mother...

“Touch Wood! She died a year ago!”

the artist before her exhibition

TIM GOLDSTONE

In intense convulsions of nerves
she looks through a quivering
pulsing canvas
to light years away in the distance
until a microdot containing
all the colours she knows
hurtles all that way
back to her at breakneck speed
through millennia
of millennia of infinity
towards the bullseye
of her bullseye
in the frame of herself
that spots its flying approach
just in time to prevent it
filling her entire vision forever
and with a split second to go
her artist's eyes dive her down
into an unfathomable
gulping ocean
where she sinks
sighing with relief
at the abatement of the noise
of the storm of her thoughts above
and she comes to rest softly
in silence at the bottom
of a great welcoming calm
consisting entirely of her favourite colours:
massively deep reds,



miles thick creams,
profound azure,
the doors open
she shoots back up to the gallery's surface
quickly decompresses
swallows down her gasps
and offers her hand demurely
to each of the perfectly dressed guests
who fall upon her
emptying the bubbles in her blood
into their glasses of champagne.

rehash

CHRISTINA HENNEMANN

i.

I cry after each bodily convulsion,
Crocodile tears of remembrance
And grey clouds staining
Pink skies—
I water my chastity in sea water,
Cleanse my crystals with sunbeams.

ii.

I cast a love spell, burn two candles of a
Soft pink, coated in honey and rose petals.
3 weeks pass in harmony, but then—
The rosy scent evaporates.
White magic has too little power.
I turn to a dark wizard in the black of night,
He calls himself Wolfe Gray.
At new moon, the concoction is done.
The spell takes 8 to 10 weeks to manifest.

iii.

A raven pecks at my neck,
Venus turns and twinkles in the night sky.
Time flies by and nudges my nose
In a white nightgown,
Tik tok, tik tok,
Until I find its climax
And catch it in a time capsule.
The hours shine rosy through that lens.
My neck is sore and bleeding.



iv.

I gasp and open my eyes.

Smile, cherry lips—

It was only a dream.

the driver

EDIE MRIGNA

There sits the driver on his seat,
Gently gripping the oversized steering,
Not recovered sufficiently from yesterday's sleep debt and fatigue.
For the sake of what secures his sustenance,
Prayers are on his lips for a smooth journey to the destination.

The responsibility of his passengers rests solely upon him.
He feels hungry, his body screams in pain.
His routine is never disrupted by sleet, fog, heat, or cold.
He drives unflinchingly
While every soul behind the cabin sleeps without the slightest
worry in the world.

The driver is often looked down on, not respected.
His bravery and sacrifices often miss the eye.
Only few express gratitude as they dismount.
He is pushed to the receiving end of anything untoward on the
road.
He waits there innocent and unreactive
For the spontaneous vigilantes sparing him not a chance to
explain himself.

He drives through treacherous hilly streets, on wobbly wooden
bridges,
Or long stretches of eerie roads with no vehicle in sight.
His familiarity with the road gradually sets the tone of monotony.
When he faces unforeseen obstacles, staggers under inexorable
pressure,
Unruly commuters, with their unsavoury behavior, add salt to the
wound.



When the drivers get short breaks, they sit, huddled on the
roadside at a motel,
Relaxing to the sound of the kettle coming to a boil,
Sipping invigorating hot tea, exchanging laughter,
Sharing their tales of woe to considerate ears.

And bid mutual Godspeed for the unpredictable journey ahead.

doppelgänger

KRISTIN GARTH

(After *Twin Peaks*)

Offscreen it seeks her in bed withering
between alive/dead, no Audrey, Season 1,
French fries, a malt, good Coop lowering
a gun. It sets the stage for Season
3—white rooms, her mental fragility
precarious as hyoid bones. Hospitalized
comatose, no secret agents/angels
only a saddle-shoed ghost whose whites of eyes
it brutalized the most disguised as him,
to whom she prayed. Every seraph's gone
away in the mass-produced acrylic prints
in this medical establishment along
with her effervescence when she awakes.
Everything he saved his doppelgänger breaks.

mind the guffaw, the gap

RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN

Three tables away, a great uprising,
not of men so much as full-bellied howling,
two pitchers of the bad beer down short-stubbed hatch,
lighted from below as though jovial bar hall plankton
and I am reminded of those signs on the subway,
mind the guffaw, the gap;
the poor hating the rich for being rich
and the rich loathing the poor for existing at all,
everyone lost to a forced laughter that is hardly their own
and never sustainable—
the way to climb through anything is after midnight,
with a cat burglar's entrepreneurial spirit,
to lay it all out: skeleton keys, waitress tipped
like outhouse, this persistent suffocating unhappiness
that can strangle a parrot out of its last
wordy color.

positions & dispositions

RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN

I've heard enough about the bees
and the birds to last
a river's long-fruitless running,

looked under the microscope of endless crawlings,
watched generations of larvae beat a dead horse
from the inside,

what I am after now is bent smiles
in the junkyard

summer heatwave fire hydrants on the
thoughtless mad-gush

books that fall from shelves
like aging bootleggers
out of love.

my fine roman nose snuffling down the appian way

RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN

Nothing is the same,
even Sameness is packing a suitcase,
beginning slow, before the many add-ons
that cause the long dormant volcano
of yourself to bulge with so many magma days—
I break out in hives every few hours
like some buzz-less brooding honey trap of my own design;
even money costs money (ever hear of inflation?), now I am
scratching again,
my fine Roman nose snuffling down the Appian Way,
this patterned glass of afternoon Carthage-water poisoned,
the Hannibal elephant no longer in the room
and what you do says more than threshers through
farmer's fields; don't forget to pack your waterpik,
that unflattering flight risk passport;
ballooning suitcase, soon the damn thing won't close...
sitting on it like some swivel-junkie office chair
that has not known the failing contours of your posterior
in well over a decade of artificial light and aging sports
memorabilia.

a pendular condition of the breast

LORELEI BACHT

at first I thought it must – ugly
was not a name I had in mind for this.
at first I thought it must be a matter
of weeks before elasticity would

return. at first I thought I would shower,
rapture again and soon: the gleaming
marble unconsumed come back.
but no. but lacerated in purples,

yellows. now needing more oblique,
pastel lighting. at first I thought it must –
a glitch. surely not permanent sandbag.
not permanent bizarre. but true:

this pear never looked the same after
you. but true: mommy's mourning
how she would shape before. how she
nipped, hipped and waisted.

perhaps it would have plummeted
anyway – no escaping the low necessity.
perhaps wasting it on you was what I
did best. in the bathtub you laugh,

you laugh: how they dangle.

atrophic linear scars

LORELEI BACHT

like a creeping, like a car approaching
but slow, lights low – or perhaps it is
the mind refusing.

a little bump every time I take chairs.
a little bulge floating, no girl on top -
that would reveal.

like a creeping, like a dispossession:
taken by whatever made it in the first
place and said now it is ripe,

I will pluck it and eat. under
the radiant light of doctorates, I saw
someone else grown at the centre.

wait a minute – is that what I was for,
rummaging in the fridge at four
in the morning salivating

for grapefruit, ice lollies and chalk?
the deed done, my repayment was:
nothing. a handful of consequences

that I am taught I must now learn to love.

being alone

FAVOUR IGWEMOH

I don't know it, it don't feel it.
How others feel when they have someone to hold.
To cherish those moments as though they were gold.
It's a wonderful feeling, so I'm told.
But I fear that I will never feel it even when I'm old.
When the tears drop, I look for a shoulder.
When the good news comes, I look for a partner.
When the night falls, I'm colder.
When the word 'love' is spoken, to it I'm a foreigner.
At night, my bed is empty. At noon, my palms are sweaty.
I'm always in need of that emotion
But to believe I'd ever have it is a silly notion.
Society points at me saying, "Look, she has no one to hold her."
And my fear is that I will be alone, even till I'm older.

that dark room

FAVOUR IGWEMOH

There is that one dark room
Whose cobwebs I can't clean with a broom.
I look around and the place is cold.
To take a step in, I'm not bold.
It's the one place that I fear,
Every time I think about it, I shed a tear.
One for the thought of being alone,
Two for the fact that I am alone.
I watch as all my emotions come running
With a force so stunning.
But in the end I can't commit to loving.
There is that one dark room that I fear to enter
Because all my fears will be brought to the center.
That dark room is the room of love.

gravel ballads and red rock tides

CLEM FLOWERS

We put out the Sundays to catch a winter's breeze
& now comes the hammer to rattle every road
singing of the fire in the bellies of devotees
to high iron pastures of the rusted mountain—

High dollar tone weeps out in the briar & barbed wire for the
tumbleweed that's hanging on to the last stand of humanity to
touch this land since the screens went over the night

Throat of the huckleberry valley will soon holler all of us
wayward kids back on home for bed—but now we just try to
drink the prairie rain

i don't have children, but i have my poems

HAVARD CASSANDRA

O God! I'm
thirty years old and
I feel odd... I still don't
know about love; I'll never.
Doctors all say the same: "Birth sickness."
What a shame to be a woman born with a weakness!
I can't have children, but I can give birth to a poem.
Like this one. Can you see it, this fit body?
I admit, it's not perfect... Any
of my poems is perfect
So I'll protect them.
They're my children,
that's why I
love them.



the stories of fire

JOHN TUSTIN

History's narration
Is left to the victors.
No one believes the accused
Even when exonerated
If they don't want to believe the accused.
The acorn doesn't fall far from the tree
But the squirrel can take it
And bury it far away.
Faith is predicated upon wish-fulfillment
And smoke tells the wind
The stories of fire.

your lips were so particular

JOHN TUSTIN

Your lips were so particular—
How the upper lip protruded
And the lower lip still puffed out
Like someone with their arms folded,
Resolute: so suited to you.

However, what I think about most is your eyes
With their darkness of obsidian, of basalt.
Once hot, now cooled,
Still dark but unobscured

And then your lips that tasted
As good as they felt
And as good as they looked
In the moonlight of the window
That came in upon the mattress on the floor.

I still think about you
And when I do
I see only moments in time
Or feel specific feelings in my memory
And what I see most
Is your eyes that seemed forged
By volcanoes and the age of earth,
That heat of the moment
And cooling of so much time elapsed

Way back when even I
Was almost beautiful



Though not to be compared
To a lip pouting, a lip protruding
And two eyes
At once hot and now cooled
As basalt, obsidian.

dark embers of diya

VIDYA RAJAGOPALAN

I wear your t-shirts in the hopes of
whiffing the scent of you smelling
like hair cream and office
instead all I could smell was the
overwhelming scent of overpowering
naphthalene balls
I refrain from looking at your photo
inviting denial to
push melancholy through
my eyes and my mouth
I can't look at your frozen eyes
anymore
it's equivalent to
staring at and embracing death
So I succumb to the
toxic scraping of my skin
because it's incumbent upon an
ephemeral escapism to relieve me
of my misery before I can be saved
I don't want to be saved
today was the umpteenth day
the sun almost scorched my eyes
only to realize it's four a.m. and
the rays of the diyas are all I can see
I moaned
because I wanted to sleep
because there's no hope in sparks
because there's no spark
I don't hate flames and embers

I hate that the world that is lit and rejoices
in your absence
Your flame used to extinguish
all the other diyas
Until you became the vibuthi to a
predatory fire
Since you're gone the world now seems
like a burning funeral pyre
every flicker is a whisper of envy and jealousy
brimming at the outskirts of my heart
every burst is an invisible tear shed at my loss
every color sputtering at the sky is me
gulping my wails and shrieks
this year is unlike any other
this year is my festival of death
of your death
amidst the festival of lights
it's mind boggling to see how people
move on as if nothing has happened
and apathetically celebrate
consciously or unconsciously rubbing
it in the faces of those who are grieving
I'm wrong
it's none of my business, I have no right to judge
it's their rights and happiness
a death, your death blinds me
so much that I fail to see the light in others
every year I used to light the diya
wishing for your welfare and longevity



this year I had nothing to wish for
this year I had no hopes to live on
this year I gave up on hope and reason
what does one do when a loved one dies?
whom does one support and lean on when their support system
crumbles?
how does one live when their breath is smuggled to the specters?
to all those who have lost their loved ones
I might not have the answers to my own questions
but please breathe and let me hear you breathe
let me know you're alive and that you'll survive
we will learn to live again, love again, and laugh again
we will one day stand next to a diya
and be reminded of warmth and not death
Pops, you're my vibuthi, my diya and my hope
I hope in your shadow
I would learn to love your warmth, your flames and your embers
my fire is all extinguished
so I borrow yours and rage like the
wildfire you wanted me to be
after all a breath is all it takes to
flare up or die down



tunnel of colors

MEG SMITH

Underpass, Lowell Connector Trail Project

Let them flow from this dream
—the fires, the fury, the split
of bones, and weeping—
lighting this dark space,
they will be seen, and heard.

the holy of the shrike

MEG SMITH

For Brice McVicar

Every footstep in green
parts the path
to a silent place.

A tree raises arms
in its own crucifix;
leaves cover the veil.

What holds in these long fingers
is the cold arch of something
once tracking a field of wildflowers,
and the cavities of fallen trunks,
but no longer.

No feathers, no reason, no crown—
only the unadorned,
awaiting the return.

the only darkness

MEG SMITH

At night, my sister and I
would shout
the names of witches,
of fairies, and ghosts,
and maybe, rock stars.
But then came the time
morning would only
welcome one of us.
And on that morning, I sat up,
and the floor was cold.
There were tears, and telephones,
and shouts of recriminations.
But I was hungry, and eager
for cereal, toast,
and a grand, new light.



crumble

ANTONETTE RIANAC

Warped, burnt, squeezed, slammed. Kept
In dark, only to see a
Glimpse of hope crumble



red

ANTONETTE RIANAC

As I go down,
I shall ask you one thing
Tell the red world
That violence ain't the language

A mother carrying her child's arm—
And only the arm,
Decayed and eerie with coagulated blood adorning it—
Across crimson oceans and red lands
In the hopes, that her child shall once again reunite with the arm

The arm and she
Drowned peacefully
In the crimson oceans and the red earth.



fiction

a bah humbug christmas

B CRAIG GRAFTON

There once was a man named Mr. Grichwald and each year during the Christmas season, he would be a bell-ringer for a charitable organization collecting money to buy Christmas presents for the underprivileged children in the community. (For who in their right mind would not want to help poor, needy, underprivileged children—especially during Christmastime?) Each year, he felt it his duty to help the children and was honored and proud to do so. But each year, since times were tough, he seemed to collect less money, and it took his toll on him. This year, he had become disenchanted, disheartened and disgusted with the whole Christmas thing itself.

Now, this wintry night, he stood outside a chain drugstore in a mini-mall as a young mother and her kindergarten-age son approached. He rang his bell and smiled at them. The mother was taken in by his grandfatherly smile and smiled back. She was about to open her pocketbook and make a small donation, but a donation nonetheless, for after all, it was the thought that counted, and it was the Christmas thing to do.

It was never known whether it was the hours in the cold or the lack of contributions he received that night—for he had received none—that prompted him to do what he did next, but Mr. Grichwald suddenly cracked, broke, and blurted out, “Christmas. Bah humbug!”

“Pardon me?” gasped the startled young mother. “Did you say, “Christmas bah humbug?”



“Yeah, lady. Christmas. Bah. Humbug,” he repeated. “What’s it to you?”

“Well I never,” she said, appalled.

Mr. Grichwald replied, “Well, it’s about time you did.” He didn’t know what he meant by that, but he said it all the same, because he thought it sounded clever.

“Is that man the Grinch?” asked her son.

“Yes, I am Tiny Timmy, or whatever your name is. I’m the Evil Grinch. Bah humbug for now. Bah humbug in spades. Bah humbug forever. Bah humbug,” he brayed.

The mother dragged her son into the drugstore without another word and Mr. Grichwald felt better for having gotten that off his chest.

When the next person approached, he did likewise, and again felt good for having indirectly cursed Christmas with another bah humbug. So he did it again and again, and after he had done this a few times more, the store manager came out and had a brief and somewhat heated conversation with him, informing him that his customers were complaining about him. Bottomline, he was ordered to take his act somewhere else, or the police would be called.

That was fine with Mr. Grichwald, but for the fact that he had



three more hours left on his shift before someone came to relieve him.

He moved just two doors down so that whoever came to replace him at the drugstore would see him there. Two doors down was a liquor store, and that's where he set up shop.

He set up his donation kettle and began ringing his ding-a-ling bell when a middle-aged man approached.

“Spare me the speech fella,” he grumbled to Mr. Grichwald. “I ain't giving you no money.”

Mr. Grichwald replied, “I don't blame you, kind sir, for neither would I. Christmas. Bah humbug.”

The man was taken back momentarily, then smiled and said, “You know I'm kind of glad to hear that for a change,” and dug into his billfold and took out some folding money. “Those are my feelings exactly. Christmas, bah humbug. Ya know, if it wasn't for booze, I'd never get through Christmas. It gives me the fortitude to put up with my wife's sisters and those bratty kids of hers. Every year it's the same old goddamn thing. She invites them over to our house. At our expense, they eat all our food. They never bring any of their own, and their kids—well, her kids—just keep yelling, screaming, and fighting with each other the whole goddamn time, and hog the TV watching that goddamn Charlie Brown Christmas special that they've seen a hundred times. Hell, I can't even watch football on my own tv in my own house. Yeah Christmas. Bah



Humbbug! Amen, brother. I'm with you on that.”

The man stuffed a couple of bills into his kettle, and on his way out, he dropped in his loose change too.

It dawned on Mr. Grichwald that he had found the perfect place to collect Christmas donations. He bah-humbugged every individual going into the store and made a point to engage that person in a conversation about why they both did not care for Christmas. The person's sex, age, marital status, religion, or ethnicity made no difference, for they all did not like Christmas for one reason or another, and wanted it to be over with as soon as possible. They talked to him because he lent a sympathetic ear to their plight. When they had gotten it all off their chest, they invariably felt better and made a donation.

He had his best day ever, and so did the store owner, for he came out, slipped him a pint of brandy and said, “Keep up the good work.”

Mr. Grichwald thought he meant good work for charity, but the store owner meant something else.

The three hours passed quickly and enjoyably. Mr. Grichwald never felt cold, thanks to the brandy, and reluctantly gave up his post when his relief arrived. Before he left, he made sure that his replacement would stay right there and do just as he had done.

As he left, he smiled and said with delight, “Bah humbug to all. And goodnight.”

beyond the berlin wall

MARINELLA GIUNI

(Translated by MARILÙ CIABATTONI)

Heidi is 16 and she's the best in her school—academically and physically speaking.

She knows she is a rising athletic talent and this makes her proud, but at the same time, she would like to live in a corner of time; she wishes that her body wasn't that powerful and that nobody noticed her strength.

Because being a good athlete in the 1980s and living in East Berlin has serious implications.

“When I'm done with school, I need to go to training and I really don't feel like it today. I would like to go back home and sit in a corner to think. I went to the library and I grabbed a book—among those I'm allowed to take, of course. I picked Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days*. It's the only way I can travel, leave this place. I saw others are set in space, down below the sea. If I have time, I will take them. I really need to detach myself from this school, from this life.”

An imperious voice from a speaker wakes her up, but she can't stay focused much longer on herself. She needs to go. They already called her twice.

She wears her uniform, waits in line in the long hallway that leads to the field, takes the equipment. With those masculine shoulders she has, she hasn't gone unnoticed since her first years of school, and the hammer-throw specialty had been assigned to her right away, without giving her the chance to choose.



Among the moods of her adolescence are different sensations related to the way her body and her identity are built; she thinks about men's and women's sports, the clothes to wear. She surely cannot have ambitions for gymnastics with her height and weight.

She can only participate in men's sports, yes, but she doesn't want to be a man.

These are the years of the Wall, built in 1961. Heidi was born in 1966 and she has never crossed the border. Her grandparents, who live in West Berlin, applied for the Familienzusammenführung to visit their family, but they haven't yet received a response.

Her grandfather's brother, too, lives in Western Berlin and visits her twice a year. He received the permission. Yes, because that was possible; all that was needed was to pay the entrance fee—the Zwangsumtausch—a sort of mandatory change which imported money from the East, which was so much needed.

“Stop thinking! I have to train and I have to drop by the pharmacy first. Every day—for years—the same thing, a blue pill to swallow and ready-set-go, to the field to rehearse the throw, farther and farther away.

“14 meters, 16 meters, 20 meters.

“Not even I can explain these results to myself, this quick

progress. I'm winning a lot of championships, I have a lot of medals, and my teammates and I are the most feared in the races. But what surprises me the most is my own body. I look like a boy, a handsome chad with fattened female genitalia and a deep voice.

"I want to run away, I want to escape my own skin and pain. But I can't. Every day, I swallow my condition in a single pill and go train, with a feeling of death in my heart."

Stuttgart, 1986

"I won the European championships; I threw the weight beyond 21 meters. But I don't care anymore, I'm confused, but it's not me who threw the tool. I'm not the person who climbed the podium, who was interviewed on the microphone. This voice isn't my own.

"Today, after the race, I wanted to speak to Roland. He lifts weights and has grown beyond measure; he told me he will stop because his chest reached size seven. He cannot live with it. After some time, he underwent surgery to be smaller, to be himself again.

"Instead, I continued for a few years, stuck between the desire for overreaching and to quit. Because in my time and city, being the best removes you from mediocrity; it makes sure you'll get that bread.

"And now? Now I'm a man. My voice proves that, my painfully and scarily engrossed genitalia prove that. My inclinations prove

that.

“I go to the women’s bathroom but I’m ashamed because they send me away. I never wear skirts and I understand why, when I compete, they scream obscenities at me.

“I’m a woman but I have too much hair—it shows. Too much hair, too many muscles, too many pills.

“I met two girls. It felt natural to be with them because I don’t want to hang out with men. I’m embarrassed with myself, and everybody.

“And then, I met Ute.

“Ute is a great swimmer, physically imposing just like me. I often see her sad and depressed.

“But I feel her close to me. I kept some of that female sensibility, hidden behind this muscled, hairy armor which my country created around me and my teammates: built to win, because we have to be the best.

“Especially, we have to be stronger than our brothers from the West... Proud to be on the wrong side of the wall.

“It’s 1997 and I made up my mind. No more breasts, no more everything. I’ll do whatever I need to do. Do I have to be a man?



I'll do it for Ute and with Ute.

"I often cry but I'm not going back.

"They'll stop mocking me, they'll stop noticing my hair, they'll stop kicking me out of the women's bathroom.

"Today, I'm a true man. My name is Andreas and Ute is my wife."

All that's left of Heidi is her female clothes, never worn, in the wardrobe of the house in East Berlin.

on the window

MARINELLA GIUNI

(Translated by MARILÙ CIABATTONI)

Transparent, delicate, the drop slowly slid on the veins of a green leaf. She was delighted to feel the lightness, joyous like a child on the slide.

At the end of its race, however, she would find nothing.

She thought about earlier before, when, further up, she wasn't but a tiny particle made from a big black watery mass: she had seen below herself trees and houses, she had trembled at the sight of lightnings and then—smaller and smaller—with great uproar, she fell fast, screaming together with other small drops.

Now, on that tree, she had found other travel companions. They had told each other their fears, swinging on the leaves and, although fearful for the forthcoming end of their race, they could not help but enjoy that moment, such a bright green that it canceled the ripping black from the lightning fire.

The tree trunk coughed and welcomed, the earth arose and the little drop leaned, with one more effort, to the leaf.

She would fall soon, but she wasn't scared.

She would live again in the richer earth, in the greener lawn. She greeted the sky and fell while one hundred, one thousand drops were playing.

This is how the foreseen flood occurred and a small grey stone, after undergoing a long trip between sand and small known eyes,



came to the grass-filled lawn with daisies, which blinked to her.

Melancholy overcame her! For years she had played with fishes on the bottom, she had reflected the light, played with the bigger stones.

With a childlike hand she had found him, weighted him, pondered and, with a precise gesture, she had made him jump, rotating on the water surface.

The happy and satisfied screams of the little girl had accompanied him, until, in circular shapes, it sank to the depths.

Fishes mouthed welcoming words and, from that moment onwards, the sand at the bottom didn't feel so grey anymore.

Further up, a small white head shivered, as if scared by that storm—now distant—and turned her gaze. She saw couples of golden angels which colored the sky with a brush, drawing the colors from the sun and someone—reckless—came down to the soil to steal green from the mountains and the blue from the waters.

He then looked for the red from the earth to lit up the sunset which would have given to children and lovers, that awaited from a bench or a balcony.

The little white head admired the angels' work and then, so that her presence was not completely useless, picked a basket of little



clouds and put each one on a ray of light, as if to insert many small rings.

In the winter evening fire, black trees, from the rain-soaked branches, turned to the sky, summoning for beauty.

The drop dried, merging in a new life with the ground.

The rock played hide-and-seek on the bottom.

And just like that, after the storm, the sun set giving red flashes, bright red like paint poured on a valley that, by day, extends colorless, borderless.

Because everyone can ask more from a sunset.

red

A M JOHNSON

To summon your Second Self:

Sit in the center of a cold bare floor. The room should have one window, and a ceiling fan. Watch the blades of the fan beat their way into oblivion. Then, close your eyes. Recite the following: “There once was a girl, with a little curl, right in the middle of her forehead. When she was good, she was very good, but when she was bad.”

I saw Red for the first time on the other side of a pane of strange glass. I was leaning over the counter, one finger holding one eye shut. I drew a straight black line against the pinkish skin of my eyelid. My hands were steady. And then I had the thought that I should wedge the eyeliner pen into the cavity of my eye.

I suppose I didn't think of this myself—that implies control. Rather, I had a vision. In this vision the pen was lodged beneath the slick white bulb, the wet ball with pinkish lace, into the red flesh beyond. I was convinced, briefly, that I had made some divine discovery. Like a Q-tip, I would slip myself into some hidden, sensitive place, and scratch the unscratchable itch. I would pull, like a shovel breaking fresh ground, and instantly I would deny myself every painting, every rainbow, every sunset left on earth. I held the pointed black thing so close to the gloss of my open eye that tears welled and fell. I heard a desperate vibration somewhere behind my ears, inside my skull. And then I was crying outright, the pen dropped, the vision gone.

My hands were smeared black. The tears mixed with mascara into



a fine grey film that coated my eye. And it was through this haze that I saw her. Red was pretty, and laughing. Red was sorry, but not really.

If you asked me to tell you what Red looks like, I couldn't tell you. I don't know. I see her, but that word, 'see.' It is such a weak word. The eye itself sees nothing. There is no organ in the body to sense her. Nevertheless, she is there and appears to me as a human-shaped thing in the room. Some days she is leather-clad, with vampire black curls and blood red lips. Some days she is the outline of a woman, barely there, made of static from a broken TV. Some days she is a dry zombie, irradiated and sick, with grey lank hair. At best, she is thirty, drinking lemon iced tea. No matter what, she stands behind me and talks. I know her by sight the way you know your mother in the other room. Nothing to see, nothing to hear, and yet, you know.

Red sits on the bathroom counter while I cut my own hair. She chews bubble gum, or smokes, or talks. On good nights, the conversation is cutting and pegging, cocaine and blood. Sometimes I listen, sometimes I don't. It's a matter of disposition. Usually Red speaks in a low, constant voice, which is articulate and pleasant to hear. Red is very cool, and has a way of making everything sound fun. I like hearing fun ideas. I like to be entertained while the hair from my head falls in itchy clumps from the clippers to my shoulders, and then to the sink. It's better than a podcast, of course; anything is better than a conversation that will never be mine. But Red can get very animated about the gore of the world.



If I let her, Red can grow. Powered by sheer unfiltered reality, Red can stretch herself into a vast amoeba, coating the walls of the bathroom. Her eyes grow huge and wet, a color only shrimp can see. Venom drips from her fangs, burning the flesh of my arms. She will eat me whole then, if I let her. And I always do. I can't explain. Somehow, I am always curious about what her insides look like, and what's on the other side.

But if I catch her in time, if I glare at just the right moment, she'll roll her eyes and start again. She'll shrink and say something like: aww, c'mon, chica. Let me have the hands. Just this once, okay? The hair grows back fast.

Generally speaking, Red is courteous. She does not come when she is not called. That's the rule of the ritual, really -- you get what you invite. At school or work, she rides around in my backpack, taking a nap beneath the books. She is well-behaved in public—she understands that I work in the realm of long term. That being said, Red has made herself known in public once or twice. Or at least, she has tried. At the library, the restaurant, the hospital—it's a twitching in the hand, most times. She dances in my fingers, flailing, trying to get out through my palms. Either that or it's a noise, a gesture, a choice with none of the fun. Red will make me bite the side of my hand, so the teeth leave a dent. She'll close up my throat and open my mouth, so the spit dribbles out. Or perhaps she will send me the urge to fall on the floor, or to shout a nothing word. It doesn't matter. I don't blame her. She just wants her life. But I can't let her. At home, we can roll on the

floor, and pinch our lips shut, but out here, they will eat us alive.

Red longs to be public, to do what she wants. I hate to tell her no. I feel like a mother, an iron hand around her waist that prevents all games and fun. I'm not opposed to fun. I like fun. I'm not an old woman yet. But the games Red would play with our body are unacceptable, because they would end my own. Somehow they contradict each other at every turn. I want to play go with a partner; she wants to play orgy chess. I play tennis with my health; she wants to play slots. Red dreams of ponies and their tranquil darts. I refrain from such things. She likes golf clubs and cricket bats. I guess I like butterfly nets. Can you blame me? I want to live long, and well. I suppose Red does too. We want our life so bad, in such different ways.

And it's not fair to her, that I still hold the keys. But I do. So I drive her around in my backpack, I take her to practice in my blue minivan. I am the soccer mom of my own wildest dreams, a tyrant of scheduled fun. And every day, I hope to cave to Red's tantrums of will.

But tonight is different. Tonight I am trying to get closer to Red. I am trying to erase the villain in my mind. I don't want to wrap her in medical chains and say it's for her own good. I want to live as friends, as roommates at least. This body feels so crowded when she's mad. So I wait for my parents to fall asleep. At three in the morning, I schedule time for her to play. Let go of synapse. I, I, I try so hard to relax, to give her full range. The body, I think—not



mine, ours. Whatever she wants for tonight. It takes a moment. Like falling asleep, or remembering the word you forgot. One moment you're grey haze, searching, pushing through unseeable murk. The next, Red's in your shoulders, buzzing like blood in your hands.

It's fun for a while. In the cold light of the open fridge, she puts a raw egg in our mouth and bites through the shell. I take the cracked corpse off my tongue, laughing at her sense of humor. I can feel her smirk—she loves to impress. Watch this, she says. And I do. I watch as she crawls down the hallway from the kitchen to my room. Our hands like aching claws. Thighs burning and bent. Our legs are thick with hair, matted and clean, our skin dry from fragrant soap. It's such a relief. For a moment there, I was afraid that I had invented Red somehow. But crawling past the bathroom, dragging nails on the walls, mouth black and open and dry... being the beast of our home unalone.

In the bedroom she shows me things I've never seen before. She bends our neck deep. We slip from our chair and onto the floor—it doesn't hurt. Looking up now, from a dog's eye view, I can see the ledge of my desk as I have never seen it before, in lamplight, from below. Shadowy and angular like a beautiful jaw. She wants it and for once, I do too. So we move the neck and bite my desk together, sinking the teeth into the cheap, soft wood. The gums ache with the pressure. We feel deliciously our own skull. And I can hear her laughing with me, Red delighted, living fully at last.

This feels good, I think. This is not so bad. I let her curve the



spine, snapping it this way and that. The hands at odd angles, the eyes rolling in their box. It takes me a long time to realize she's showing me something—a dance. We're on our feet. I'm dancing with her. It makes sense, briefly. The evil of it all, the cruel side of Red, it's like... but the metaphor is already gone. She leaps up, stretches out. And I remember at the last moment that there are scissors on my desk.

Lost in translation, I panic. I hide the keys; I run without trust. The body locks, the gun drops, the scissors land on the floor. All I can hear is the breath. The ceiling fan beats into oblivion. And we sit in terse silence, waiting for the other to die.

I was just gonna mime it. I can feel her sit on the bed, her elbows on her knees. I was gonna put it between our ribs and our arm.

Red is always over my shoulder, standing in my blindspot.

On bad nights, Red is a tornado siren inside me, moaning for miles around. Red is a wasp crawling up the inside of my throat, resting on the back of my tongue. Red is the inside of a mini fridge left unopened for too long. Red is The End. She is static, she is pain, she is chewed glass and bleeding gums. But mostly, I think she's just sad. She cries all night, you know. Begging for my hands and my eyes. Not even for sleep can I give them up. They are all I have left.

On good nights, Red asks for nothing. On good nights, Red listens



to me. She listens quietly, and well, and I feel the caring in her eyes. She does not think I'm strange when I bite my arms in terror, when I rake my nails down my face hard enough to draw blood. Red knows the reality of the world. She knows the mind is a sack of fat carried in a backpack made of bone. She understands that this shock in our body is a gift and a curse—electricity for now. It is a gift and a curse and yet neither, because those words imply God. There is no one around to give us anything. We agree on that, at least, that God is dead, and we are haunted by his ghost.

Blah, blah. Sad girl shit. You only need to know this: I can't get rid of Red. That is not an option for me. Red eats reality, she chews it for me, and her insides translate its song. But she's quiet now. Red's been silent since our first date. And for the first time I find myself thinking of her on purpose, wanting to summon her again.

I tell my mother about Red, quietly, at the kitchen table. We share a pot of jasmine tea on a day that is too hot for such things. But it's raining and we are alone, and this is how we come to terms with our Selves. She tells me that she feels a presence in her mind, a presence that is not her. It tells her evil things and she resists. She believes that this voice is the Devil, and I do not tell her it is not. Instead, I tell her about my own voice. I tell her that I am segmented, like an earthworm. And she laughs and tells me what I already know, that when I was a child, I saved worms from the sidewalk after the rain. I want to tell her, I still save worms. I want to ask her, what does that say about me? I want to ask her if



it's okay, Mama, to want to plunge the kitchen knife into your belly, between your ribs and twist. I want to know, is Red okay? But the moment has passed, and just like that, I am alone again.

It's midnight and a week later when I hear Red's voice again, over my shoulder, as always:

Do you regret doing the ritual?

I'm laying flat on my bed when she says this. Taking up half the space. I've always slept like this, tidy, ready to share.

Why do you say that? Why would you say that?

No response.

What Red does not understand is, if I could, I would give this body to her. If it were up to me, I'd spend every Saturday night on the wrong side of the glass, drawing with pencils, playing with dust on the floor. I'd lay on carpet and daydream while Red went out and fucked and drank and died. I would be happier that way. So would she. And it's not that it's impossible. It's that I can't, and anyways, it would only be her body for a while. Till sunrise, at most.

And it's before sunrise, after a long and sleepless night, when I think of Red the most. You think of people the most when they're gone. And she's long gone—she sleeps inside my arms and will not wake before the next sun sets. She'll be back. But in this private



time, I can stare into the cobalt pre-dawn sky and think, freed and prisoned by solitude. Mostly it's a drag. You get so bored of yourself. But some nights, crazy thoughts come from the blue: I will ask Red to marry me. I will kill Red. I will eat Red raw and become her somehow, and we will become new. The thought comes to me, that if I could, I would name this new body Blue. Blue would be beautiful and terrible and all would love her. Blue would foam saltwater at the mouth and bound down the highways at night on her hands and feet. But Blue cannot exist. I cannot become one in any way, with or without Red. We are both too far gone.

So I suppose the answer is that I must have already been Red, or that Red was me all along. But this much cannot be true, either. We are both alive and therefore separate, sharing this warm, fickle room. We have our sides of the glass, of course. We have our realms. I can only pray that one day we will look each other in the eyes, and nod, and slam our heads together, shattering for the rest of our lives.

I did not want to go on the moon walk. It was Violet's idea. Supposedly this was a tradition for her family, a warm fuzzy memory she just couldn't keep to herself. Every year in October, her family packed up the station wagon with red milk crates full of matches and flashlights and white gas. They would come here, God knows how many kids playing football on the gravel and grass, and this would be their routine. For two days and two nights, they camped like good old-fashioned somethings, and on the second night of their trip, they hiked down to what Violet called 'the low-water bridge.' And I guess they looked at the moon.

But we had already gone hiking today. We'd taken a trail after breakfast, stomping through brown leaves and blue-grey stones, down the hill through the arched hall made by fallen trees. We'd broken through the mossy boulders and the bramble, and found a field of sliding rock, long smooth slabs leading down to the river bank. The dark green water, glinting without sun. The highlights of submerged brown rock, like long-lost viking bronze. It was beautiful. What I mean to say is, it was enough. I had sat on the slabs by a bend and sketched the muted myriad of sleeping trees. Now my ankles were rubbed raw by my brand-new boots, and my neck was tacky with sweat.

Yes, the way down had been a jaunt, we'd laughed our way to the river rocks, tumbling and falling toward a comfortable stop. But the way back had been a silent, gruelling climb. Now we sat around the fire, watching wood turn to flaking, smoking ash, trying to decide what to do about the full moon existing tonight.



“But you can’t see the stars from here,” Violet said. “That’s the problem.” She sat away from the fire ring, at the rusted table, slathering mustard on a piece of white bread. “The bridge is a break in the trees, so down there, you can see the whole sky. Well. I guess there’s some light pollution now, with the Wal-Mart in town. When we were kids it was basically a telescope. Now it’s not... well, it’s not ruined or anything. Just a little yellow around the edge.”

“You’re selling the vision, Vi.” Tori sat across the fire from me, her denim legs spread wide, her boot heels ground into the dirt. “Really, I can see it now.”

Tori’s elbows rested on either armrest, propping up her phone. The sun was going down. In the sunset dark the screen made her face cold and pale blue. She rubbed her eye, and a few black flakes of mascara fell off, resting like ash in the purple hollow beneath her colorless eye.

“We should stay here and drink,” she went on, and yawned. “I have mezcal in my trunk.”

Violet’s lips curled away from her teeth to bite into the beige sandwich. A blob of yellow fell off the edge of a sad lettuce leaf onto the paper plate. She chewed and swallowed carefully, her shoulders hunched, her eyes a casual thousand-yard stare.

“We can drink anywhere. And we will drink anywhere.” She stopped, blinked, came back to the realm of the living. “We have



something different here. New experiences.”

“Like the moon?” Tori said.

“Yeah, Tori. Like the moon.”

“Huh.” Tori’s eyes darted up to meet mine. “Never seen the moon before.”

“Please, guys.” Emma’s voice cut through the smoke, a little desperate.

“We’re not fighting, Mom. Chill.”

Emma locked her hands together and breathed out slow. Tori settled back into her phone, Violet into her sandwich. The fire was the only noise then, crackling into the forest void. I thought to close my eyes, to hear the birds and the wind, if either came back. Then Tori’s phone flashed red, and she grinned. Her teeth were neon wet. She turned her phone toward the fire, toward me, burning a hole in my eye.

“We should do this instead,” she said. “Tonight.”

No one made a move to stand up or squint to read the tiny black letters on the screen.

“I just wanted you guys to see this,” Violet said, prodding the yellow glob on her plate. “It’s so beautiful, you have no idea. I

don't wanna be a bitch or anything, but it's literally my whole childhood, guys, I... it matters to me."

I could feel Tori staring at me, summoning my gaze. The red rectangle hovered in the corner of my eye. When her arm got tired, she dropped the block of phone back into her lap with a huff. The red disappeared.

"I think we're just tired, Vi," Emma said, massaging her powdery knuckles. "Maybe we'll feel better after dinner."

The sun was gone by the time we started to cook. Violet and Emma chopped in tense silence as the dark came hard and fast. When our breath turned to fog and they still weren't done, I held a flashlight over their paper plates. The flimsy knives twisted against the hard skin of the carrots. Their blades dug deep into the flesh of the plates, drawing reddish brown paste, like dried blood, from the potatoes. The onions wept white blood. The strings of celery bent, but did not break. All of this was stacked in a huge pile between them, on an altar of tinfoil. The vegetables were dotted in margarine. Violet forgot the salt. We threw the packs on the coals and gave up on the burgers, an unspoken and collective choice.

We waited. I almost fell asleep. Then I heard a murmur, and someone else stood up. Emma was the first to smell burnt carrot, I suppose. I hadn't noticed. The smoke was all I could sense. In her rush to wrestle the package out of the flames, Emma burnt her finger. The sound of her high, tight voice delivering a rare curse



sent a shiver through us, all at once. We got her a piece of ice from the cooler, a cooler with no water, only soda and beer. And we sat and picked at our food, which was too bitter, too soft, too bland.

The fire blazed briefly with the fuel of their paper plates. Now only coals remained. So the four of us sat with blank faces, eyes half-shut, surrounded by dark. Four red faces, different shades of red, the tones ranging from Tori's pale blood orange to Violet's burnt umber. Four red faces, unwilling to try again. I tucked burnt carrots into the pockets of my cheeks, trying to chew and not taste. I stared down at my soggy plate, the last one alive, and tried not to look up at the trees. But the ink-jet lines of branches called, like errant hands. I expected, at any moment, to see a man with a face made of leaves, staring down.

I was beginning to remember to imagine something in the woods when Tori's face turned blue again. She looked like a man with her chin tucked to her chest, staring at her phone. She was spread wide and thin, her knees almost touching the edge of the fire pit. Her knees were bare, the denim torn by a machine. She yawned, loudly, unstifled, and Violet noticed. A single muscle in Violet's jaw ticked. She stared at Tori's bland expression, searching for God knows what. I watched the muscle pulse like a heart.

I watched the two of them until Violet pushed the air from her lungs, out her pursed lips, and stood up.

"Well," she said, her chin up high. "I'm going, so."



Violet laced up her hiking boots and prepped her walking stick. Tori hissed behind Emma's tent and Emma whispered back. I know, I understand, but. Meanwhile I sat on the threshold of my tent. I wrenched off my sneakers and socks. My toes froze on the gravel at once. In the dim light it was hard to see the deep gouges, the raw red flesh around the chapped heel, but I felt the sticky sting. Shoes. Imagine taking a wrong turn here, passing up the faded sign that read SILVERMINES CAMPGROUND MARK TWAIN NATIONAL FOREST in favor of the next darkened road. A gravel road, noisy like a jar full of rocks. The radio playing blues. Robert Johnson, perhaps—and the trees curving above my head, above my truck, like a hair claw clip ready to close. The path is one-way. I wonder what's at the end. A truck, a bigger truck than mine. Crashing up over the hill, its lights enormous and white—no. It's not what will happen on this road, it's what will lie at the end. A man? No, not that either. In the dark, just beyond the reach of light, a pile of shoes, ten feet tall.

Give your shoes to the pile. Your bare feet burn cold against the gravel. You get on your knees and reach into the pile, and—

I shut my eyes and opened them again. The campsite reappeared. My fingers were cold to the touch, but bright orange in the firelight. The way the skin rubbed together was tangible enough to remind me where and when I was—not so much why. I slapped a bandage on the stinging slice on my foot. I stopped long enough to regret a few things, like going to college, and owning a phone. Then I started packing a drawstring bag with my art supplies.



Above all else I wanted to crawl into my sleeping bag and tell Vi to fuck off for once, but I wouldn't. I shouldn't leave Emma alone—she shouldn't have to suffer their bickering, the unsaid between Tori and Vi. So, sitting there awkwardly, my weight on my tailbone, my elbows on my knees, I took one long, tight breath.

A hand appeared in the dark, right in front of my face. Tori's face was grave and surprisingly gaunt. Far away from the fire, her skin was the color of a hospice ember.

"I know you don't want to do this either." Tori's nose was red with chill, growing redder as we left the campsite. "It's ten o'clock, did you know that? Fucking ten at night, thirty something degrees, and we're going on a nature walk. I love Vi, okay. You know I love Vi. But she's colonized this whole fucking trip. It's not surprising, I mean, it's so Violet to shit on everyone else's plans because she has a vision. Whatever. We just gotta suffer through it, get it over with it. Hopefully it won't be too windy down by the water. I'm already fucking cold as it is. Hey. You okay? If you're getting real sick of it or cold or anything, just give me a little nudge. We'll go find a bathroom and then conveniently forget to hike back. Snuggle up, get some extra sleep. Okay?"

Emma and Violet looked unreal, standing in the road, waiting for us. I'd never seen them in a place so dark. Their denim legs looked grey in the lack of light. The features of their faces were already starting to blend and churn, becoming grimaces and strange grins. The fire was an orange dot behind us, the tents unrecognizable. My thighs hadn't felt truly warm since we arrived.



I resisted the urge to wiggle my hands down the front of my pants and rest them there, against the cold dough of my skin. The brief heat gifted by the fire was fading from my chest already. As I noticed this, the first shiver took hold, draining like nausea through my limbs. I thought to double back, to grab my other jacket or my hat, but as I opened my mouth, Violet took off down the hill.

The path was little more than a narrow and unpainted two-lane road. The ground beneath us was smooth, easy, but steeply downhill, and disturbingly grey. On either side of the road there expanded trees bearing inky fruit and blackened leaves, stretching upward to the bluish-grey sky, slicing through. I looked up at the branches as we walked. I was the last in line. Tori was a few feet ahead, with Emma and Violet chatting at the front. I didn't mind being last. This was our friendship's line. And anyways, it gave me space to think. And I needed to think. Because every rustle in the brush was at once a mouse, an owl, a chupacabra, a vampire. Every noise could be a maddened man with a weapon meant for us. And yet we did not stop, did not even pause. Every twitch of the ear was an unfeared death, unacknowledged, almost ignored. Except for the bothersome interference of our ancestors, prickling the back of our necks, we could have been armored, trained, confident in our strength. But I could still feel where fear should be, where faces could form in the brush.

And then we reached a plateau, and the path went left and right. Violet went right without pause. I tried not to stare down the left path, wondering at what lay beyond, in the dark, and keep up. We



walked along this path, this same path, identical except for its flatness, until my shoes suddenly touched sand. I looked up, and found the others drifting away from me to the left.

Two hills rose on either side of us. One was the hill we'd come down from, the other, the hill I'd drawn this afternoon. The river cleaved these two pieces of land, and the bridge connected them again with a plank of cheap concrete. The texture of the bridge was gnarled, a guaranteed road rash. There were no handrails. Along the ledge there were notches about six inches high, many feet apart, which would protect no one from nothing. Below, strange iron bars sprouted from the supports, twisting upward toward the sky. The foliage in Hell, I thought.

I tried not to think of tripping over one of those notches, a shoe catching in the hole, my chest plunging down onto the bar. I flinched away from the sound of an impaled heart. God, stop it. You're supposed to be happy right now, aren't you? You looked forward to this reunion for months, you planned and dreamed and arranged, and now you're doing this again. Don't let it go. Focus. Look up at the clouds streaked with moonlight, look down at the dark green water rushing below the bridge, cutting over well-loved stones. Look over Violet's shoulder, at the wispy grey fish darting under flashlight. Be brave. Touch her shoulder, and smile when she smiles because of you.

The moon is covered by clouds, but that's okay. This is what you needed, all you needed, all this time. It's enough to stake our claim in this crevice between two mounds and wait for the moon.

It's enough to prowl like coyote cubs, in the dirt.

Tori must have felt it too, because the same moment I went to close my eyes, Tori took Violet by the hand. They ran together, laughing, surprised, their boots clapping on the rock. Emma and I strode slowly toward them, our hands in our pockets, comfortably cold. She smelled of soap and smoke.

"They forget they love each other," Emma said. "My brother and my dad are like that. So busy being themselves that they forget the point. It happens when you live together. I know camping isn't living together, but it kind of is. It's like, livingtogether outside for a weekend. I don't know. I like to see them holding hands. I just hope they can get over themselves and let us have a nice time."

And they did, or at least, they tried. Violet braided a strand of Tori's hair. Tori told Violet that she was pretty, in a halting sort of way. We skipped rocks and hunted for frogs. We poked in the hollows of trees, hoping to find a snake. We were friends again. And then the clouds started to move, and the ground grew bright. We ran back to the bridge like our lives depended on it. We laid beside each other like sardines in a can, holding hands, breathing cold air. We waited... and then the moon broke through the haze, a weightless, formless, unending light that has no temperature and no texture, just illumination, just...

What hasn't been said? What has yet to be said about the moon?

I breathed. We looked at the moon.



The mezcal appeared in the sky, just below the bright. The bottle was the same pale color as the moon, clear and tinged with unknown. Wrapped in Emma's chapped hands, it looked less like a bottle of glorified tequila and more like a sacrament. Theophagy is the final frontier, I thought, and took the offering. For an instant, I expected water and honey sweet. Then the burn came crashing through my nose. Angry taste, like gargled lye. Coughing, I handed the bottle back.

Catch your lungs, learn to breathe. I propped myself up on my elbow. Wiping my mouth, I watched the bottle move back down the line, passed from hand to hand.

"I have," Violet said. "An announcement to make."

"What?" Emma said.

"What?" Tori said.

"I," Violet said, her eyes glassy, her lips turned up. "I... am drunk."

"Yes," Tori said, nodding sagely. "Very good."

"I am drunk," Violet said. "I am... I haven't been drunk in like, a year."

Tori took a swig from the halved bottle, the syrupy clear draining



down past pale lips. Violet rolled on her side until she was leaning against Tori's tit, her cheek smushed against the flesh. She reached for the bottle with a wide open hand—the bottle which Tori pretended to hold aloft for only a second, only long enough for Vi to make a noise. Then she gave it up.

“There you go,” Tori said, petting Violet's hair. “Good baby.”

Tori looked at me from across our makeshift circle. She glanced at my folded legs first, then up to my eyes. Her eyes moved too slow. Her mascara was really flaking now.

“You drunk?” she asked.

“She's not drunk,” Violet said, rolling off Tori's tit. “She's a fuckin' heavyweight.”

“No shit,” Tori said. “You remember Emma's bachelorette party.” Emma laughed a little too loud for a little too long.

“We should tell scary stories,” Tori said, still petting Vi.

“No.” Vi drew out the word long, meowing out the vowel.

“No?” Tori's hand did not pause. “What do you want to do then, honey?”

“I want fairy tales.” And Violet dissolved into giggles.



“Ah. Bedtime stories.”

“I don’t wanna go to bed!”

“You don’t have to go to bed to hear a fairytale.”

Vi snuggled back into Tori’s lap. She picked at the frayed holes in Tori’s jeans. Her face went from smiling to contemplative so fast—and then, crashing down into near tears.

“I want a boyfriend,” she sniffled.

Tori paused, then patted her shoulder. “I know.”

“I want a prince,” she whined, and it sounded like she would burst into tears. But just that fast she turned over to look up into Tori’s pinched, controlled face.

“Hi,” Tori said, keeping something to herself.

Violet’s eyes lit up, and she smiled big.

“Here, baby,” Tori said, reaching into the back pocket of her jeans. “I’ve got something for you.” She took out her phone, the black rectangle appearing in her hand. I felt a sense of dread, but no one else groaned—so I kept it to myself, as her face was brought to light. The blue got Violet and Emma’s attention. Tori waved us over, and we obeyed. We gathered round, having briefly forgotten honor in the wake of curiosity. Which killed the cat.



The screen went from blue, meaning white, to black. We waited, holding each other's shoulders, our thighs pressed at each other's backs. Emma kissed the top of Tori's head, gently, so quietly no one would have known, had I not seen it, and felt pain.

The screen went red and our faces were bathed in blood. My stomach tightened, like it had finally noticed arsenic, waiting on the front porch. I looked at Tori, then Emma, then Violet, and found their eyes all glowing like coals. Don't think about it too much. It's just a color, be cool. Read what they're reading, look down.

The background of the website was red. The text was tiny and black. The font twisted like black vines curling around a pole to sprout a rotten bloom. Every time the phone shifted, the text became a blur. If I squinted, the words melted into red. I snaked my way closer, burrowing beside Tori's arm. I didn't want to ruin her moment with Vi. But a thought happened to me, regardless of my feelings, regardless of what I want.

I thought: this is what words looked like before the tower of Babel was built. This must be the same ancient script under which all stories were once told. I should feel safe looking at this. I don't. So maybe it's not the original language. Maybe it's what words looked like right after God noticed the tower we built, when we realized the fun was done.

Tori ran her thumb across the screen, to make sure the page was loaded. The black text rose up, obedient enough. Like black rain



falling in red reverse. I reached for the mezcal, and it was nowhere to be found.

HOW TO BECOME HYPERREAL. A RITUAL TO TRANSCEND. ACCORDING TO BAUDRILLARD THERE ARE THREE LAYERS OF REALITY IN RELATION TO SIMULACRA: 1) THE SIMULACRA IS AN OBVIOUS SIMULATION OF THE REAL OBJECT. 2) THE SIMULACRA IS A CONVINCING COPY OF THE REAL OBJECT. 3) THE SIMULACRA NO LONGER REPRESENTS THE ORIGINAL REAL OBJECT; IT HAS BECOME PURE SYMBOL. BAUDRILLARD ACKNOWLEDGES THIS TRUTH BUT FAILS TO SEE THE DIVINE. IT IS IMPERATIVE TO BECOME HYPERREAL IN THIS DAY AND AGE. THE GOVERNMENT ENSLAVES THE POOR. CORPORATIONS KILL ANIMALS AND LET THEM ROT. THE GOVERNMENT PUTS POISON IN OUR WATER LIKE LEAD AND FLUORIDE. VACCINES INJECT THE ELDERLY WITH DEATH. THE ILLUMINATI CONDITIONS US WITH SUBLIMINAL MESSAGING. CEREAL COMPANIES PUT POWDERED GLASS IN OUR FOOD TO MAKE US SICK. NUCLEAR WEAPONS LIE BENEATH FARMHOUSES IN OHIO. THE REAL WORLD IS OF THE THIRD ORDER AND WE TOO MUST EVOLVE!

TO ACHIEVE ENLIGHTENMENT YOU MUST REMOVE THE ILLUSION OF REALITY AND BECOME SIMULACRA. BECOME SYMBOL OF YOURSELF FOR POSTMODERNITY HAS FAILED US. TO BECOME HYPERREAL YOU WILL NEED: TO RELINQUISH ALL SENSE OF THE REAL AND UNREAL THAT IS THE REALITY YOU HAVE BEEN TOLD TO SEE. GO TO A



LOCATION THAT IS REAL BEYOND REALITY. FIND A PLACE THAT IS CONCRETE BUT NOT. TOUCH THIS PLACE AND THINK OF ITS SYMBOL. THE GROUND IS NOT THE EARTH. THE SKY IS NOT THE SKY. TREES ARE PLANTS NOT SECRETS OR GROWTH. ROADS ARE THE GROUND NOT A STORY TO BE TOLD. ACKNOWLEDGE THE FAILINGS OF YOUR PICTOGRAPHS. SEE HUMANITY'S FAILURE. THEN TAKE OUT YOUR CELL PHONE AND STARE INTO THE FLASHLIGHT. YOUR MIND WILL TELL YOU TO LOOK AWAY BUT IT IS ONLY BECAUSE THE SYMBOL OF A LIGHT IS PAIN. STARE UNTIL A HOLE FORMS IN YOUR EYE. CLOSE YOUR EYE. STARE INTO THE HOLE IN YOUR EYE. THIS IS YOUR DOOR. IF YOU LOOK LONG ENOUGH YOU WILL NOT EXIST. HURT YOURSELF. IT WILL ALL BE OKAY. WE WILL SEE HIM TOGETHER AND I WILL KNOW YOUR NAME THEN.

BECOME HYPERREAL TODAY! BECOME HYPERREAL AND YOU WILL SEE GOD! I HAVE SEEN GOD AND YOU CAN TOO!!

“So if we look in a cell phone light, we’ll see a ghost?”

“Yeah, apparently.”

“That’s so scary!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll keep you safe.”

“Isn't it kind of weird to use a phone? I thought you were supposed to use like, beeswax candles or a ouija board, something natural like that.”

“Who cares, man. It does the same job. It gives you that little blind spot in your eye. You know. The mystical magical door?”

“But isn't that bad for your eyes?”

“Who cares if it's bad for your eyes? It's one time. You've done it on accident a million times and you aren't blind yet.”

I close my eyes and slip away from the warm pile. Where the fuck is the mezcal? I pat with my palms, searching in the dark, finding nothing but cold concrete. The bottle, where is the fucking—there it is. Lying on the wrong side of me, in the shadow of Emma's ass. I grabbed the mezcal by the neck, hoping the solid, cold glass would feel like something real. It didn't.

“Where did you even find this website?”

“I dunno. Reddit.”

“Howtobecomehypperealdotcom. Is this the only page it has?”

“Yeah, isn't that fucking weird?”

I twisted off the cap, scraping my finger along the aluminum edge. The pain bloomed and died fast. The moonlight caught in the glass as I turned the bottle upside down. Clear glugged downward into my throat. Syrup shimmered in the silver light. My mouth broke away from the bottle, gasping, and I thought: shit. Will mezcal make this worse? Will mezcal make me think more? Too

late—the burn made itself known. And I waited to go slowly blind.

“Guys, I have to pee.”

“There’s a tree right there, darling.”

“But what if someone sees me!”

“No one’s gonna look. I’ll kick their ass if they do.”

“Okay, but.”

My legs felt weirder with every breath. Waiting to get drunk is like waiting to feel your cancer. I stared through the bottle to my legs underneath, the denim warbly and faraway. Somehow it reminded me of jellyfish, the way they move but don’t. I took another chug, hoping to finish the dregs. This time Emma noticed the upside down bottle, sprouting in the air like a strange tree. Her hands covered the label and the moon, trying to guide the empty thing from my hands. But we were both clumsy in the wrong direction. The glass knocked against my teeth and my hands flew to my mouth, to make the awful sound stop.

“Wow,” she said, holding the almost empty bottle. “You really went to town, huh?”

I planted my hands on the concrete and pushed vaguely up.

“Hey, where are you going?” Emma said. “Hey!”



Emma's hand waved in my periphery. I had the idea to let her stop me, but I knew the gesture was insincere. I got to my knees, then to my feet, trying to feel time again. Somewhere outside my tilting skull, Tori and Violet were in each other's arms. They looked so pretty there, in their perfect Pieta pose. Eyes twinkling like stars, their hair in each other's hands. There's nothing wrong with my hair. It's not silky or smooth like theirs. But it's just as dirty and smoky and no one is touching me. The way Tori is looking at Vi makes me sick. The way Vi touches Tori is worse. But I have to let Tori have this, because she wants it too bad.

Remember Tori with her elbows on her knees, crying into her hands. Remember how her voice didn't change at all, didn't sob, didn't break, when she told you the truth. I like her. You were in her bedroom. A chill had sprinted up your spine and stuck itself at the base of your throat. You couldn't swallow it down, couldn't cough it up, so it stayed there, and it's been there since the last time you checked. It wasn't the confession itself that bothered you. It was so clear, instantly, that she did not Like You Like That. But she told you and not Emma because you were dispensable—because you could not afford to break trust. And you pretended so hard, didn't you? You pretended the secret made you close. You pretended it was a gesture of love, to be shackled by a word you can't say. But you knew. That lump in your throat whispered to you the truth behind the truth, that you were unwanted and unwanted. That you could disappear into the foothills and never return, and no one would mind, especially not Tori, not with your secret in her mind. Tori, who only loved you because she made a mistake, because she told you what no one should know.



Tori doesn't love you. Vi only loves herself. And Emma barely exists. Just like you—but you could do something about it. You could be more than a ghost tonight. Go on then, be brave. Tell Tori to give up, and Violet to stop. Crush this thing that is left, with your fat meaty fist. This thing, this facsimile of...what? The person you used to be? Because it was never about your friends. You just can't stand it, being first in the worst line.

The moon passes behind the clouds, and the statue is illumed. The skin goes pale and crisp like cut marble, the hair pausing to catch the light. The faces turn and they smile, this horrible, sickly smile, like honey if honey could rot. Tori takes out her phone. I know the screen is blue. Blue meaning white. My eyes perceive it as blue, my eyes know the truth. The moment has passed, I have lost my chance to blame anyone but myself, but goddamn it, I can't help myself. When I see their faces all I see is hyperreal. They are staring at that screen with their cheeks pressed together, and they're laughing about it, like it's funny, like it's ironic, like it's okay. It's not okay, and it's not a ghost story. It's the end of the fucking world.

Take three steps. Fall to your knees. Reach into the pile of your former friends. Reach out your hands, your freezing, wet hands, and—

As Tori's phone fell toward the water, it occurred to me that my mouth was full of blood. Copper and salt bloomed like oil on the flat of my tongue. The water came up to swallow the screen, and for just a moment, HOWTOBECOMEHYPPERREAL.COM glowed



like blood. The rectangle rested on the bottom of the river, which was only a foot deep here. Just one foot deep. Through one foot of water, twelve inches, the light blinked and went out. You can drown in half a cup of water, I thought. I heard myself laughing, in the silence that followed. And then the chorus at my back, the ape-like keening of my friends. I let it happen. When someone shoved me, I fell. Knees on cold stone, bruised but not broken yet. Behold, the blue-grey horror of my own hands.

love letters in the post- apocalypse

B A O'CONNELL

Yisara'el,

How I have missed you! I don't know what else to write—to say—the days have less luster, my life less reason to be without you orbiting my universe.

Time moves differently now.

The air sticks and stinks like honey too long left in the sun. You are my doppelganger in the repeats of my dreams. How I long for a relic from you! A bone from which to build my altar.

What else is there to say? I miss you!

I miss you as the wick misses the flame—as desire misses the dwelling of moss-oiled eyes. The serene surface of my mirrored face has morphed into the bold mimic of you—the sky has turned to currents and shimmers of wormholes eating time. It has turned to the rolling waves of the ocean I used to fear but now beg to take me.

I don't want to go on without you.

I want to nest in your exposed ribs.

Say you'll make a home for me? Have you already?

I want to kill the brightness you have planted in me—your eyes, I want, to watch from behind the pale glass. How many mornings have I longed for you? Have you felt my absence as I have felt yours?

The birds only sing your name in a tongue understood by my love—you have become the background melody to all my daily striving, yearning, and movement.

I want to rebuild you in front of me—I want to bring you home. My heart wants to plant in the Earth of my grave and to call you Eternity.

Please say you'll remember me.

Please say you miss me too.
Grant me a place in the marrow of your bones.

Yisara'el,

I suppose you have more than enough reasons to send me on my way; did you know the nuclear sky reminds me of the winter of your teeth?

These days my bones look a lot like yours and I'm clattering down the dirt road near your rectory—somewhere I am hoping to bring you forth by the rising dandelions—I've collected many things in the shape of you.

I miss watching you and your gentle way of resting.

It has been so long—I write the same things over and over and I have developed graphomania looking for your hands in the movement of mine. Everything echoes of you.

I'd like to think I made some kind of impression. I like to think that in the crooked line I catch myself humming I have entrapped parts of you.

Oh what a cunning boy you are!—I think I'll eat your heart first and perhaps that will provide the nourishment I need to heal perpetual wounds—

I read us in the pages of every strange love story—sometimes the sun is between my eyelashes and I think of how you touched me—like steam from hot cup of tea.

I find you staring at me from the water that cradles me in the evening.

And I know you will always be waiting like a road that grows ivy, but the path remains—my back carries the same steps to Christ

as you and it aches across the distance—my fear and desperation sent out like burning lamp in an empty dark field; in the heaviness of storm pregnant skies.

I eat of your words—I want to break you open like a pomegranate beneath Mother Moon and find only the seeds of truth.

Like a lemon branch grows on any citrus tree, I have attached to you—the thing made of the same as me.

The orange is naked and peeled of the outer puckered skin and I cannot eat it in it's beauty—I have the same dream about you.

Yisara'el,

I am still thinking about you this morning—that is nothing new, in truth, all things have reminded me of you for quite some time now.

I wish I could pray beside you—even for a just a few minutes.

Your presence was a magical kind of way—a road through the middle of the desert, and in my isolation, I found you as water in the surprise greenery; all my days pass as tombstones and crosses along the path.

I did not mean to become so morbid. But such is what my thoughts have become—I see your face upon the crucifix. You are the holy weight upon my chest—you are the need of God's blessings.

How are you holding up?

Have the fires consumed you too?

I wonder about your loneliness—especially when the sun first greets me.

Do you ache? Have your bones turned against you too?



I think about God a lot these days and how He must look a lot like you—what does God dream about? Does He know the colors He appears as in my visions?

I miss you. I told you that.

Maybe I'm just a shadow lingering a little too long—
do you know what you are meant for?

Life has been a constant blur from the moment it called you elsewhere. I can see your white fingers gripping my throat. I wish you would've killed me! Sorry—that was probably wrong of me to say.

Yisara'el,

I cannot continue.

However, I must—there is both nothing more and complete galaxies between us and to be said. I am still debating sending this to you.

The sky closes, but the rain remains.

Can I come home—will you put a good word the Father? Tell Him, you, His son, have released me from destiny and obligation. I don't know what I'm trying to ask you or tell you or what I'm hoping to achieve—some sense of closeness I suppose.

I know who you are.

I know what you are asking me to do.

But why does the world deserve to be saved?

dense, dark woods

RIYA AGGARWAL

A thump and the car halted

Air around changed, becoming more chilly

In front, were the dense, dark woods

When the headlights died

The silence was thick

Hairs behind her neck prickled

Suddenly the lights flickered on

A face was plastered on her windshield

That made her heartbeats skip

And her throat scream.

The image features a dark purple background with the word "drama" centered in a white serif font. The word is surrounded by four stylized, light-colored leafy branches that curve into the corners of the frame. The top-left branch is in a slightly darker shade of purple, while the other three are in a lighter, teal-like purple. The overall composition is elegant and minimalist.

drama

the nanny (cntd.)

FAVOUR IGWEMOH

SCENE 3

(Fredrick is in his study going through some documents when someone knocks on his door.)

Fredrick: Come in. (A lady in her early 20s walks in, Fredrick raises his head to look at her). Titi?

Titi: Sir, I have finished with all the cleaning and cleared the place. The room you requested is ready.

Fredrick: Good, thank you.

Titi: Sir if I may ask, are you expecting someone?

Fredrick: Yes. Can you please tell my kids and everyone else to gather in the living room and wait for me?

Titi: Yes sir.

Fredrick: And let me know when they are all set.

Titi: Yes sir.

(She leaves the room and goes upstairs to the children's rooms. She stops at the first door and knocks).

Jennifer (rudely): What?

Titi: Your father wants to see everyone in the living room now. (There is no response from her for a few seconds. She knocks again.)

Jennifer: I heard you!

Titi: Okay. (She walks quietly to the next room and knocks. Loud music is blaring from the other side of the door.) Isaac? Isaac! (She opens the door and a boy in his teens turns around and points to the KNOCK BEFORE YOU ENTRR sign). I did, but the music is loud so you didn't hear me... You father wants to see everyone downstairs now!

Isaac: I can't hear you!

Titi: (Clears her throat.) Your dad wants to see everyone downstairs! (Isaac furrows his brow. Titi sighs, takes a deep breath, and shouts again.) I said... (Isaac turns the music down.)

Isaac: What did you say?

Titi: I said that your father wants to see everyone downstairs now. (He stands up, comes to the door and faces her.)

Isaac: I actually heard you. It was just fun hearing you say it over and over again. (He smiles and comes out of the room. Titi shakes her head, sighs and moves to the next room. She knocks on the door.)

Whitney: Yes, who is it?

Titi: Whitney, Titi, your daddy wants everyone to meet him in the living room now.

Whitney: Okay. (She opens the door and looks at Titi. Titi looks back at her and she looks back at Titi, Titi sighs and stretches her leg forward. Whitney steps on it, squeals and runs away while Titi winces, rubs her feet, and moves to the next room. She knocks on the door where a woman in her late 30s is painting her nails).

Tomike: What is it?

Titi: Ma, Mr Fredrick wants to see everyone in the living room now. (Tomike sighs.) Ma?

Tomike: Titi, I've heard you.

Titi: Okay, ma. (She moves on to the next room and knocks on the door.)

Dayo: I'm coming! (A man in his mid 20s answers and opens the door seconds later. He smirks as he sees Titi, leans on the edge of the door and rests one hand on the edge of the door). Hello beautiful.

Titi: (Hisses at him.) Mr Fredrick wants everyone to meet him downstairs. (She speaks quickly and walks away briskly. Dayo smiles as he watches her leave. His mother walks up to him, stops behind him, and hits him on the back of his head.)

Dayo: Ah, mummy.!

Tomike: What? Is that why I gave birth to you? Rubbish. Come on go downstairs, jor.

(He rubs his head and walks in front of his mother as they go downstairs. Titi enters the kitchen. Three pairs of eyes look at her as they end their conversation. One is a male in his late 20s, another male in his early 30s, and a woman in her early 40s.)

Titi: Mama, Kunle, Chuks, Oga dey call us.

Kunle: Which one be Kunle?

Chukwudi: No be your name be that.

Kunle: Which kind, na Mr Kunle.

Ene: Kop Inua mfo. (Close your mouth). Mr Nonsense. Mbok, (Please) Titi why are you... Sorry, why is oga calling us?

Titi: I don't know o, he just said we should gather in the living room.

Chukwudi: Oya na. Make we go.

(They all leave the kitchen and head to the living room. Kunle hits Tomike intentionally, then apologizes that it was a mistake. Titi heads to Fredrick's study to inform him. She knocks on his door when she arrives)

Fredrick: Yes.

Titi: (Enters the room.) Sir, everyone is waiting in the living room.

Fredrick: Alright, thank you. (Titi closes the door and heads back to the living room. Fredrick closes his computer and walks to the door where he sighs deeply.) Here we go. (He mutters and leaves

his study and walks to the living room. As they see him, they all fall silent and compose themselves.)

Fredrick: Good evening, again. Um, quick announcement, so we will be expecting a new guest in the house tomorrow, a nanny. (Everyone looks at each other and mumbles a bit.) Yes, a nanny. She will be taking care of the kids and also overseeing other affairs of the mansion, ensuring that everything runs smoothly and as it should.

Jennifer: We don't need a nanny. (Everybody nods in agreement.)

Fredrick: Jennifer, I beg to differ. I have been too busy with work, so there is need for some strong footing in the house, especially when I'm not around.

Tomike: Fredrick, I am an adult and I am also at home all day. I think that is strong footing enough.

Fredrick: Well, I require stronger footing. (Everyone including Dayo tries to suppress their laughter, but Tomike sees them trying to hide their smiles. She turns around and gives Dayo a hard glare until he sits still.) She will be arriving around 6:30 tomorrow, and after the interview, you will be introduced. I just wanted to let you guys know mostly so she doesn't get held up at the gate tomorrow. Alright?

Staff: Alright, sir.

Tomike and Dayo: Alright.

Kids: Okay.

(Fredrick nods his head, says goodnight to everyone, and goes upstairs. Everyone heads to their rooms while still whispering on the subject.)

To be continued in the next issue.

times change (cntd.)

GEORGE FREEK

THE CHARACTERS

STEVEN OLDHAM, A Literature Professor, late 50s, well-worn, but 'distinguished'

SUZIE OLDHAM, His wife, 60, looks like the remains of a very self-indulgent life

FENTON NEWMAN, A Professor of Genetics, 30, handsome, shy

HILARY NEWMAN, Fenton's wife, 28, a High School Teacher, ambitious, bold

THE PLACE

STEVEN and SUZIE'S home

A small Midwestern college

THE TIME

Recently

ACT TWO

(The same room, empty: STEVEN and HILARY enter. He's carrying some roses)

HILARY: You have a beautiful garden.

STEVEN: I have to give Suzie most of the credit for it.

HILARY: Really? Well, she has an extremely delicate touch. I mean those roses are absolutely marvelous.

STEVEN: She'd love to hear you tell her so.

HILARY: Oh. I will. (Pause) When I see her again.

STEVEN: I'm very sorry about this.

HILARY: No. Don't be. I know that Fenton is going to feel extremely guilty, and it's probably nasty of me, but I'm going to

use that against him for all it's worth. So I probably owe you thanks.

STEVEN: I'm glad you can find a positive side.

HILARY: And since we're being honest, I'll let you in on something else. In case you haven't noticed, whereas my husband is close to a scientific genius, he's not very aggressive. I have very high ambitions for him at this school, and I know in due time he has the capacity to climb to the top, but I have to be constantly pushing him.

STEVEN: You're making me feel a lot better about this.

HILARY: I just feel bad for your sake.

STEVEN: Oh, I'm used to it.

HILARY: Well, I did have a feeling this wasn't the first time.

STEVEN: It's almost like an initiation rite for new male professors!

HILARY: (At first, mildly insulted by that) Oh. Then, I guess you won't mind if I ask what your attitude is.

STEVEN: I feel like it's mostly my fault.

HILARY: How do you mean?

STEVEN: It's a little awkward to talk about. But I guess you deserve to hear it.

HILARY: You mean you are... I mean are you?

STEVEN: Uh-huh, pretty much so.

HILARY: I didn't mean to pry.

STEVEN: Under the circumstances, I think you have the right.

HILARY: Have you tried Viagra?

STEVEN: I prefer things this way.

HILARY: I really think I can relate to that!

STEVEN: It's a lot less hassle.

HILARY: Hm.

STEVEN: Most of the time! (He gives a rueful chuckle, in which HILARY belatedly joins).

HILARY: But your wife—you know, she seems quite, um, normal.

STEVEN: You might find this hard to believe, but Suzie isn't always so demanding.

HILARY: I'm glad to hear that. If she were I guess it would present a bit of a problem.

STEVEN: At times I get the feeling her motivation is to belittle me.

HILARY: That sounds terrible!

STEVEN: Oh, I'm the problem! I'm a failure as a husband.

HILARY: Oh, I'm sure, as you say, most of the time—

STEVEN: (Then, as a door is heard slamming, there is a pause) And I'm sorry to say, and as a father, too.

HILARY: So that was your son again? I thought it might be Fenton, trying to slink away without me.

STEVEN: I'm sure it was Mick. God knows where he's been or where he's off to now.

HILARY: But he is an adult.

STEVEN: In years only! And that absurd name! Can you imagine how embarrassing it is to know your son is named after a rock-and-roll baboon! And one who lived long enough to be a grandfather.

HILARY: I guess that would be embarrassing.

STEVEN: But Suzie generally gets her way.

HILARY: She has a rather forceful personality.

STEVEN: It was a genuine disaster trying to discipline our son. You see, embracing another of the cliches of the '60s, Suzie felt

that too much criticism would damage Mick's self-esteem. Unfortunately, I went along with her, and as a result, we raised an incredibly lazy, spoiled, self-centered egotist, and who, far from appreciating the easy life we provided him, is merely resentful if we expect anything at all out of him! (The door slams once again).

HILARY: I'm beginning to reconsider having children.

STEVEN: Maybe you can learn something from our irreparable blunders.

(FENTON now re-enters; He looks somewhat ill; He goes immediately to the bar)

FENTON: Do you mind if I help myself? I could really use a drink! (He pours a large glass of whiskey and takes a long drink).

HILARY: For Heaven's sake! Watch it!

FENTON: (Smiles pathetically) I guess I was just a little thirsty. (He takes another gulp).

STEVEN: Uh...Where's Suzie?

FENTON: I, um, think she's sleeping.

HILARY: Then she must have had quite an experience!

FENTON: Look, honey, I think it's time we went home!

HILARY: Well, I feel like I should at least say good night to our hostess, if not thank her!

STEVEN: Look, if you're really in a rush, I could convey the message.

HILARY: I wouldn't want to appear rude.

FENTON: (He tosses off another jolt of whiskey). I just don't feel too well—

HILARY: For God's sake, go easy with the sauce!

(Suddenly, from off, SUZIE is heard, calling out, before she actually enters)

SUZIE: Hey! Lover Boy! Where'd you disappear to? For crying out loud, where did EVERYBODY disappear to?

(Before she enters, FENTON turns green, and bolts. We hear him outside being sick)

HILARY: Goodness! Is it that unpleasant making love to your wife!

STEVEN: It's no picnic.

HILARY: Nevertheless, I think he's over-reacting!

(SUZIE re-enters in a state of disarray. She looks much the worse for wear)

SUZIE: (She smiles and looks at them warily) So here you all are. (She looks around) Where is—

HILARY: He just went outside for a minute.

STEVEN: It seems you had quite an effect on him.

SUZIE: (She turns sheepish, when they hear FENTON once again vomiting) I guess he was a little disappointed.

HILARY: It's not that. I keep warning him about liquor and his delicate stomach.

SUZIE: That reminds me. I need a drink!

STEVEN: (Warily) Now, Suzie, do you think?

SUZIE: There's nothing delicate about my stomach!

STEVEN: Permit me to make you one. (He does so) I might as well fill my own.

SUZIE: (To HILARY) I am so sorry about this! Believe me, I'm really embarrassed!

HILARY: There's no need.

SUZIE: Oh, there is! I must be crazy! I don't know what comes over me! It's like I just say to myself, go ahead, baby, let it all hang out, and see what happens! And when it DOES happen, I don't care! Now that is SICK!

STEVEN: If I could offer an excuse, honey... maybe it's just the fear of aging?

SUZIE: Don't go there!

STEVEN: But I was only going to say that you really are getting better. It's been almost a couple of weeks since you—

SUZIE: Look, I know everybody is really pissed off with me. In fact, you probably all really HATE me!

HILARY: Oh my, no!

STEVEN: You have apologized.

SUZIE: (To HILARY) And I really mean it, too.

STEVEN: I think now we should put it all behind us.

HILARY: I'm for that.

SUZIE: I know it's a little late, but I feel like such an IDIOT! (It seems for a moment, an awkward moment, as if she'll cry; then...)

STEVEN: (He suddenly produces the roses for SUZIE) Ta-Da!

SUZIE: What in the...?

STEVEN: (Folksy) Shucks, sweetheart, we all got together and just sorta felt like you'd earned these here flowers.

SUZIE: (Between tears and laughter, she takes the flowers) Oh, you NUTCASE!

STEVEN: It's just a little token of my appreciation.

SUZIE: Appreciation for WHAT?

STEVEN: (Thinks) Give me a minute, I'm sure I can think of something.

SUZIE: (To HILARY, laughing) God, what can I do with him!

(Then FENTON re-enters; but he is now wearing a donkey's head)

FENTON: (A Pause, as they stare at him) This is exactly how I feel!

HILARY: What in the world!

FENTON: I found it in the garage! It's a poor fit, but I feel like it becomes me!

STEVEN: Oh my! It's the remains of our ill-fated production of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"!

HILARY: It's certainly appropriate!

STEVEN: Now, now! I think you're too harsh on the poor boy. Right, Suzie?

SUZIE: Oh, all right, everything is forgiven.

FENTON: All I know is I feel very ashamed, and I want to apologize.

SUZIE: (Assumes he means to her) Apology accepted.

HILARY: I think you're letting him off too easily, but I'm getting rather sick of looking at him in that thing!

FENTON: All I can say is whatever I did, I'll never do it again.

HILARY: All right, you can take it off.

FENTON: (He tries to take off the donkey head) Oh my gosh! It's stuck!

HILARY: Quit clowning! Take that ridiculous thing off!

FENTON: I mean it! I can't!

STEVEN: I don't think he's kidding!

HILARY: Of course he is! This is his idea of a joke, the idiot!

SUZIE: I'd think it would be pretty hot in that thing!

FENTON: I'm suffocating!

STEVEN: Look, Don't you think—(He shrugs).

HILARY: (To FENTON) Stop that! A joke is a joke, but really—

SUZIE: Well, if it's a joke I've sure had enough of it!

FENTON: I mean it! Help me!

STEVEN: (Now trying to pull the head off of FENTON) It really is

stuck!

HILARY: Oh God! Leave it to the ol' life of the Party!

STEVEN: (Still pulling on the head) Um, maybe if we all try—

SUZIE: (To HILARY) We'd better help or we'll never hear the end of it! (She grabs the head).

FENTON: I'm... choking—

HILARY: Do I feel foolish! (She also grabs ahold).

STEVEN: (To FENTON) Hang on, we're trying!

FENTON: (Making choking noises) Agh—

HILARY: (As they struggle with the donkey head) This better be for real or you're going to get it!

SUZIE: (Out of breath) I'd give it to him, anyway!

STEVEN: I think it's coming! Everybody, pull! (They all do. The head finally comes off and Hilary goes sprawling onto the sofa).

HILARY: Don't you ever do that again!

FENTON: (Between gasps and chokes) It seems I made an ass of myself.

STEVEN: (Great relief) Oh well, it's all's well that end's well!

SUZIE: I think we've had enough Shakespeare for one night!

HILARY: (To FENTON) So what do you have to say for yourself!

STEVEN: (He is also out of breath) It's all right. I needed the exercise!

SUZIE: You can say that again, Tarzan!

FENTON: (Still labored breathing) But you know I think I have really learned something important tonight.

HILARY: I certainly hope so.

FENTON: I mean it—

HILARY: Well, klutz, would you mind sharing this wisdom with the rest of us!

FENTON: (Chokes a few times) I don't mean to sound mushy, but I think it was something about love and, and sharing.

SUZIE: That's what the '60s were all about!

FENTON: And I feel I owe you a lot of gratitude, as well as an apology.

STEVEN: Not at all!

FENTON: I made a fool of myself tonight.

HILARY: Hear here!

STEVEN: No more need be said.

FENTON: I disagree. I think it needs to be said—

HILARY: (Doing a SUZIE) OKAY! KNOCK IT OFF! (FENTON shuts up immediately).

SUZIE: Don't you love to see them grovel! That's my method, too!

STEVEN: (He smiles weakly) Groveling is rather hard on my rheumatism, but my back still isn't broken!

SUZIE: Not by a long shot, baby!

STEVEN: Of course it is creaking a little. (He impersonates a stooped walk).

FENTON: I'm beginning to feel that myself!

HILARY: (With a sharp look at FENTON) You think so!

STEVEN: (Quickly rights himself, toasts to FENTON) Of course a good lubricant helps a lot! (He takes a long drink, and they laugh).

FENTON: (To STEVEN) I just want you to know how much I respect you.

STEVEN: Oh my.

SUZIE: (To HILARY, conspiratorially) MEN! Why do they always have to turn everything into a conspiracy?

HILARY: They never grow up, do they?

SUZIE: Not without our help! (They both laugh, then the men join

in, belatedly).

FENTON: (To HILARY) Well, listen, honey, I think maybe now—

HILARY: Yes. We have a lot of things to discuss!

STEVEN: Don't be too hard on him.

FENTON: I feel pretty miserable already.

HILARY: But not half as miserable as you should feel!

STEVEN: (To SUZIE) Remember when we were just a couple of fun-loving kids?

HILARY: I'm sure we have overstayed our welcome.

SUZIE: (Half-heartedly) It's not that late.

HILARY: But I think I'll get his Bottom home! (She pats FENTON on the butt).

FENTON: It looks like I'm in for it, so I might as well get it over with. (To STEVEN and SUZIE) Thanks very much for a...a... (Unable to find words)—

HILARY: A VERY nice evening!

FENTON: That's what I meant!

STEVEN: (Now that the evening seems to be over, coming to life, he puts on an apron) I guess now I can start my cleaning.

SUZIE: Don't I wish!

HILARY: Now I feel guilty. If you'd like some help—

SUZIE: He can handle it!

HILARY: I was only going to say I know where you can find a good Houseboy! (They all look at FENTON)

STEVEN: He looks a little green. You'd better take him home.

FENTON: I'm not very proud of myself.

HILARY: Very! (Doing an impersonation of Suzie) It's a little late for THAT, baby!

(As they are about to leave, we again hear a back door slam.

There is a pause)

HILARY: And I'm very sorry about your son.

STEVEN: (Winces, tries to rush over that) Well, listen, thanks again for—

SUZIE: (To STEVEN, who now looks sick) Whoa! What's this about our son? (Pause)

STEVEN: (About HILARY) If you recall, we had some time to ourselves a while ago—

HILARY: I hope I didn't say anything wrong.

SUZIE: No. But I got a feeling somebody else did!

STEVEN: I simply mentioned that our son was having a tiny bit of trouble getting sorted out, sweetheart.

SUZIE: And whose fault is that?

HILARY: I'm sorry. I honestly didn't mean to—

SUZIE: I'm sure you didn't!

FENTON: Listen, honey, I really think we should—

SUZIE: Just a minute! I'd like to know what he said to you.

HILARY: It was nothing, really.

SUZIE: (To STEVEN) WHAT DID YOU SAY!

STEVEN: I simply admitted I was a terrible father.

SUZIE: Boy, is that an understatement!

STEVEN: I said it was essentially my fault our son is selfish, under-educated, unemployed and anti-social.

SUZIE: He's an ARTIST!

STEVEN: I know, and I accept the blame.

SUZIE: WHAT BLAME?

STEVEN: Maybe that's not quite the right word.

SUZIE: (To HILARY and FENTON) Do you see what he's doing! (They look at each other).

STEVEN: I'm simply accepting responsibility.

SUZIE: He's implying there is something wrong with our son!

HILARY: Oh, I don't think—

SUZIE: Sure he is. But let me tell you what's really wrong! He is! Him and his overly critical philosophy! You see no one can ever do enough to satisfy his expectations. My plan was to create a loving atmosphere for Mick, to make him HAPPY! Now I ask you, was that such a rotten idea? I mean if he doesn't want to read a bunch of boring old books, is that a crime! I felt we should let him discover who he is himself. Was that so awfully wrong of me? And even if he's had no relationship with his own father, it has worked. When Mick first picked up those drumsticks, it was a magic moment! The talent was immediately obvious! It's not his fault if he hasn't found anybody with the ability to play with him! To hear his father, you'd think he was just a lazy slob!

HILARY: I'm sure that's not what he meant to say.

SUZIE: Oh my God! He did call him a lazy slob!

HILARY: I don't remember those exact words.

SUZIE: You wouldn't believe how hard that boy works on those drums!

STEVEN: Damn it! I only mentioned I was a little disappointed when he quit school.

SUZIE: But would you ever give him a word of encouragement?

STEVEN: I just don't like the drums.

SUZIE: You see? You SEE! He doesn't even like his own son!

FENTON: Well maybe—(Then a look from HILARY).

STEVEN: (Now somewhat aggressive) Now wait a minute! Just because someone is a little disappointed in another person doesn't mean he doesn't like that person. Maybe that person hasn't

accomplished everything you were hoping he might accomplish, or he's gone in a direction you find hard to relate to, but that simply means you're a little disappointed. That is understandable. After all, we're often disappointed in each other for some reason. Damn it! Nobody is perfect!

FENTON: Oh boy! Amen to that!

SUZIE: (To FENTON) KEEP OUT OF THIS!

FENTON: (Instantly cowed) Sorry.

SUZIE: You don't see it. You don't see what I've gone through! He doesn't have any idea what it means to be an artist!

FENTON: (Tentatively) He does write some pretty good poetry.

SUZIE: That CRAP!

HILARY: (Under her breath, as she elbows FENTON) Nitwit.

STEVEN: I've never claimed it was great poetry.

SUZIE: That's true...

STEVEN: I have always admitted my own limitations.

SUZIE: (Out of steam) Yes. You have. What I said, it was nasty of me.

STEVEN: Well... sometimes the truth hurts.

SUZIE: No, Steven, I'm sorry I said that. Some of your poetry was really good!

STEVEN: Maybe a line or two—

FENTON: I really liked the one about his father—

SUZIE: (Cutting FENTON off immediately) I mean those poems you wrote for me. I'll admit some of those were almost beautiful.

STEVEN: I ran out of steam.

SUZIE: (Deflated) I guess I just stopped being your inspiration.

STEVEN: No, honey, I just didn't have what it takes.

SUZIE: (Near tears) Oh shit.

STEVEN: No one was more disappointed in me than I was.

SUZIE: I was, too. (With a sigh, to HILARY and FENTON, who want to leave, but can't find a way) He's right. He's right about everything.

STEVEN: Let's not get carried away, sweetheart.

SUZIE: What the hell, it's true. Our son is messed up. I just hate to face it, because the truth is, it's my fault.

STEVEN: Now, Suzie...

SUZIE: It is! I (She shakes her head sadly)—But I don't know what to do about it.

STEVEN: You're overreacting.

SUZIE: Nope. I'm responsible. (She pours herself a drink, sits down in a gloomy mood, talking more or less to herself now) I thought I knew what was right. God, did I blow it! But if you'd only seen him when he was a baby, he was so cute! I mean people would stop us on the street and tell us how darling he was—

STEVEN: People say that about everybody's baby.

SUZIE: I only wanted our baby to be happy. I wanted life to be perfect for him. And then, when he began to play those drums, it was like a dream come true. I was so PROUD. (She takes a drink) And he really is a good kid. He's a real good kid. He just hasn't... found himself—Not yet. But he will. (She takes a sip of her whiskey and her head sinks, lost in her own thoughts).

HILARY: (Quietly, to STEVEN) I think now maybe...

STEVEN: I think you can make it.

FENTON: (Utterly at a loss) Look, we...I...You...

HILARY: I think he's saying thank you. (She pushes FENTON out the door)

STEVEN: (The silence is suddenly 'deafening,' as they say.)

STEVEN opens his mouth to say something, thinks better of it, shakes his head, then goes to refill his glass, thinks better of that, and sighs heavily) Our guests have departed.

SUZIE: (Still absorbed in her own thoughts) You think they enjoyed themselves?

STEVEN: (Pause) They weren't complaining.

SUZIE: I'm a lousy wife.

STEVEN: (Doesn't want to get into it) No. No.

SUZIE: DON'T MAKE EXCUSES FOR ME, STEVEN! I CAN MAKE MY OWN EXCUSES!

I AM A LOUSY WIFE!

STEVEN: I don't want to argue with you, sweetheart.

SUZIE: I am a lousy wife and what's more, a lousy person! I'm loud, I'm abrasive, I'm selfish, and I'm something else. You know what else I am, baby?

STEVEN: If you're anything like me, at the moment, you're very tired.

SUZIE: I'm INSECURE! Did you know that?

STEVEN: Yes.

SUZIE: Yeah. But do you know why I'm that way?

STEVEN: I'd rather not get into your childhood right now.

SUZIE: Not that, you bastard! It's because I keep trying to get a rise out of you!

STEVEN: I figured it was probably my fault.

SUZIE: It's because you always act like you don't give a damn! And that PISSES ME OFF!

STEVEN: I see where it might.

SUZIE: See! I told you I could make my own excuses.

STEVEN: But you do have a very good point.

SUZIE: Oh bullshit!

STEVEN: I can be very aggravating.

SUZIE: I can't blame you.

STEVEN: Of course you can!

SUZIE: It's wrong!

STEVEN: I don't really care. (Realizes what he said) I mean it's not important.

SUZIE: We should just get a divorce.

STEVEN: You're probably right.

SUZIE: What? You don't mean that!

STEVEN: Sweetheart, I was simply agreeing with you once again.

SUZIE: No. I can take it. Of course I can. And God knows you have grounds for it. So are you going to file for divorce?

STEVEN: I don't think so. Are you?

SUZIE: Hell no!

STEVEN: Well then, what are you going to do?

(Before SUZIE can answer, we hear the drums, coming in loud and clear)

SUZIE: Oh God. What time is it?

STEVEN: (He looks at his watch) It's just after two.

SUZIE: (Amazed) Is that all!

STEVEN: And I think it is still Saturday night!

SUZIE: (Laughing) You nutcase!

STEVEN: I resemble that remark!

SUZIE: I think I'll have one more drink.

STEVEN: (The drumming continues, slight chuckle) I'll join you. (They both, suddenly, begin to chuckle, somewhat ruefully, perhaps, as the drums continue to pound on, and the lights then slowly fade to

A BLACKOUT...)

d.o.a. eve: dawn of agriculture

MARK BLICKLEY

CHARACTERS

BASIL, The dominant male tribal leader. Extremely buff. Enjoys flexing his muscles at every opportunity to reinforce superiority and narcissism.

NORMAN, The only tribal member with a protruding belly. Unlike the others, his hair is very greasy and his skin lightly coated with an oily sheen.

IRIS, An attractive female, she has a tendency to be a peacemaker.

HERB, A buff male completely subordinate to the larger Basil, a total “Yes” man.

MYRTLE, An attractive female and very much a flirt.

Costume Note: The above futuristic Paleo Tribe are quite attractive looking humans if one could ignore the elongated monkey ears and tufts of protruding armpit, back, leg and chest hair. Even the females’ sexy cleavage falls victim to a slightly exaggerated pseudo-Paleolithic human kind of body fur. They are all just a shave and body wax away from being considered 21st century highly desirable.

TIME: The year 2929

SCENE: A sacred cave lit by torches run on electricity. It has a primitive chic design with stylized furniture featuring zebra, leopard skin patterns. Prominently displayed are snakeskins tastefully arranged as a wall hanging. Directly behind a center stage plexiglass lectern/pulpit is a large empty wall space. A banner embroidered with the large letters, PPPP.

The TRIBE shouts in loud unison:

HERB (shouts, raises both arms): PEE-PEE-PEE-PEE!

TRIBE (shouts): We are Proud Paleo Perfect People!

MYRTLE: A fruitful and somber D.O.A Eve to you Iris, Norman and Herb!

IRIS & NORMAN: Thank you, Myrtle.

HERB: And a joyful and reflective Dawn of Agriculture Eve to you, as well. Can you believe it's been a year already since our last D.O.A. Commiseration?

MYRTLE: It's my favorite holiday, Herb. It feels much longer than twelve months to me.

IRIS: I love the D.O.A. Eve vigil. It's so comforting to have us all spend the night together in this holy place, speaking of truth, facing the dawn together.

MYRTLE (demurely): I love when our dusk to dawn oral tradition isn't limited to just words.

NORMAN: The overnight vigil is okay, but I'd rather be able to sleep late in the morning instead of being ordered out for sunrise prancing in the sacred grove.

HERB: Are you crazy, Norm!

IRIS: It's D.O.A. Eve, Norman!

MYRTLE: What the hell kind of bug crawled up your ass, Norman!

NORMAN (reflexively grabs his butt): What!?

All three rise up to grunt and squeal at Norman while giving him the Disagreement Salute.

NORMAN: I was only kidding! It's just a joke! I adore D.O.A. Eve. (A sudden sound of blasting wind makes the electric torches flicker and interrupts their speech. In struts BASIL, the tribal

leader, wearing a cheap monkey mask, a fancy fringed vest that reveals his chiseled chest, and a colorful speedo that houses an abnormally big scrotum. He carries a very large post of BABE RUTH above his head as he flexes his amazing triceps and biceps.) BASIL (points to audience): Welcome to all the new tribal recruits!

TRIBAL MEMBERS: Praise be to Lard, and all other natural byproducts.

BASIL: (his twitching muscular arms outstretched, as if crucified) A blessing on all your heads, from your family of physically and morally undefiled Paleolithic ancestors.

TRIBAL MEMBERS: Homeostasis in the highest!

(HERB and MYRTLE ritualistically unroll BASIL'S old jeans from the yoga mat and place them on him, as NORMAN and IRIS repeat the sacred chant: "Tis more glorious to fade out and burn calories away." Herb and Myrtle slap away each other's hand in a battle over the honor of zipping up and buttoning Stefan's jeans.)

BASIL: (looks down at his jeans, unbuttons, unzips them) Sagging and shapeless mainstream mankind doesn't want me to venerate and expose the powerful purity of my old jeans. Using work swallowing machines and flabby factory farming they want to strip us of our true Paleo heritage! The attempted molestation of we Proud Paleo Perfect People began on this very night at the very first Dawn of Agriculture's sneak attack on humanity!

TRIBAL MEMBERS (chant): Outrageous abomination! Homeostasis in the Highest! Praise be to Lard and all other natural byproducts!

(Basil violently pulls off his jeans. In doing so, two large peaches are dislodged from his speedo and fall to the ground. TRIBAL

MEMBERS gasp in surprise and disillusionment. NORMAN smirks and shakes his head.

BASIL (humiliated, stutters): They... they... those are naturally found and picked fruit. Not harvested from evil orchards. (BASIL raises up and flexes his arms to distract his followers as he quickly kicks the peaches off to the side of the stage. He hides behind the lectern in order to recover his dominance and dignity.) Myrtle, why is this evening different from all other evenings?

(Each response to Basil's questions is met with apelike grunts/squeals of delight and the Agreement Sign from the tribal members.)

MYRTLE: Because it is the joyful commiseration of D.O.A., the Dawn Of Agriculture, Basil.

BASIL: And what is commiserated on this day, Herb?

HERB (proudly): The 15,714th annual remembrance of a terror avoided by our beloved Paleo ancestors, Basil.

BASIL: And what constitutes this terror, Iris?

IRIS: It's when humanity rejected their natural Paleolithic pureness for the evil of the Dawn of Agriculture, Basil.

BASIL: Norman, why is the Dawn of Agriculture evil?

NORMAN: It marks Man's fall from our true nature as hunters and gathers and into the perversion of farming and...

MYRTLE: (interrupts) Mechanized, processed foods!

Basil glares at Myrtle, growls and lunges at her; Iris pulls Myrtle away. Basil does an angry ape dance of drumming on his forehead with both hands while jumping in place. The other tribal members give Myrtle the Sign of Disagreement.

BASIL: How dare you interrupt the Sacred Screening! One more outburst and your old jeans shall be confiscated and publicly

shredded! Do you understand me, Myrtle?

(Tribal members give grunts/squeals of approval along with the Sign of Agreement. Myrtle lowers her head, turns and submissively crouches to show Basil her backside).

Iris, and what are the two greatest sins created at this Dawn of Agriculture?

IRIS: The sins of grain growing and animal husbandry,

BASIL: Are we animals, Herb? Do we marry fellow beasts?

HERB: We are not animals and we do not marry to destroy sensuality! We are PeePeePeePee, Basil. Proud Paleo Perfect People! Untainted, loving human beings, not beasts!

BASIL: And the evils of cultivated grain? Tell me of this wickedness, Norman. This curse against human nature.

NORMAN (reciting from memory): Cultivated grain gave birth to the unnatural, wicked food of bread, Basil. The Dawn Of Agriculture began a... a... a degenerative... and addictive invasion against humanity by seducing mankind with mechanized and processed foods. It contaminated and weakened our glorious primal genes.

(Basil withdraws a very large book that he holds above his head.)

BASIL: A reading from the sacred book of Holy Homeostasis!

TRIBAL MEMBERS: Praise be to Lard and other natural byproducts.

(Basil lowers the book and opens it, flexing his muscles as he finds the proper page.)

BASIL (reads): As the honored Charles Ludlum sayeth, "Evolution is a conscious process."

TRIBAL MEMBERS: Thanks be to Lard and other natural byproducts!

BASIL (reads): And the MAN broke the BREAD, held it out to them, and sayeth, “Take, EAT this bread. This is my body which is given to you.” And what sayeth you?

TRIBAL MEMBERS: Hell, no! We are not animals or cannibals!

BASIL (smiles, nods in approval): We are not animals or cannibals my children. (Reads) ‘Tis better dead than bread?

TRIBAL MEMBERS: ‘Tis better dead than bread!

(The tribe chants “Better Dead Than Bread!” while monkey dancing to the hypnotic chant.)

BASIL (reads): Yet there is one amongst you that shall betray us with a kibble and a nibble.

TRIBAL MEMBERS: Not on our watch, dear Basil! Not on our watch!

BASIL (reads): We shall wait and watch for evil. Ever vigilant. Wait and watch for evil.

TRIBAL MEMBERS: Wait and Watch! Wait and Watch. Wait Watch! Wait Watch! Wait Watch!

BASIL: Thou are indeed the beloved wait watchers!

TRIBAL MEMBERS (screaming): Wait watchers! Wait Watchers! Wait Watchers!

(The Tribe shouts this out with such fervor they revert to a kind of knuckles scraping monkey dance frenzy.)

BASIL: And now, my dear little monkeys, let us commence this year’s Dawn of Agriculture Eve pageant with the lessons learned from...

NORMAN: George Herman Ruth!

IRIS: The Babe!

MYRTLE: The Bambino!

HERB: The Terrible Titan!

NORMAN: The Rajah of Rap!

IRIS: The Wali of Wallop!

MYRTLE: The Colossus of Clout!

HERB: Maharajah of Mash!

IRIS: The Big Bam!

NORMAN: The Behemoth of Bust!

IRIS: The Wazir of Wham!

MYRTLE: The Sultan of Swat!

(BASIL lifts Ruth's portrait above his head.)

BASIL: George Herman "Babe" Ruth was born a proud paleo perfect person. His unblemished DNA through purity of diet and work ethic allowed him to inherit the five physical qualities that turned him into a thousand-year legend: speed, endurance, strength, accuracy, and coordination.

HERB: That's the damned truth!

MYRTLE: And so handsome. When he joined the New York Yankees he had no double chin or paunch! The Babe had the body of a god.

IRIS: His teammate, Jumpin' Joe Dugan, said, "To understand Ruth you had to understand this: he wasn't human."

HERB: When Babe Ruth pointed to the centerfield fence during the 1932 World Series and then hit a home run in that exact spot, another teammate, Lou Gehrig proclaimed, "Did you see what that big monkey did? He said he'd hit a homer and he did."

TRIBAL MEMBERS: Yes he did!

BASIL (returns to lectern): Yet Babe Ruth is the historic example when life as we know it got truly dangerous. This ancient hero destroyed his Paleo primal perfection and humanity through agricultural gluttony!

(TRIBAL MEMBERS break into Basil's speech and echo sentiments his words evoke, not unlike a Gospel sermon in a black Baptist church.)

IRIS: That he did! Yes indeed! Proclaim the truth! The shameful truth!

BASIL: A great man of heroic proportions and accomplishments, he turned away from the heroic ideal to an artificial culture of consumption that ruined him. Ruined us!

HERB: His unnatural selection, excess of addictive, processed food and drink poisoned our culture with deadly eating habits!

IRIS: Poisoned us like polluted air, indeed!

BASIL: The Babe would proudly cram a dozen hotdogs at a time down his throat before game time and wash it down with a gallon of soda or beer!

MYRTLE: Cram it like a sodomite!

BASIL: This destructive eating turned the beautiful Babe into the obese poster boy for unnatural selection excess, excesses that outstrip his valiant and legendary manly accomplishments.

NORMAN: Stripped the man naked! You tell it, brother!

BASIL: Feeding on trash food, candy, hotdogs that left a proud Paleo perfect primal w a bloated bellied, skinny legged oaf who destroyed succeeding generations with his glorified, sugar coated cry of, "if it feels good, do it!"

IRIS: It feels good to respect Paleo practices, not eat and drink like some damned fool!

BASIL: He betrayed his glorious Paleo ancestors and became an infamous dupe for our demonic agricultural persecutors!

HERB: Persecutin' my firm ass from here to eternity!

(Basil leaves the pulpit and joins the other tribal members to give

ape-like grunts, groans against Ruth's photo. Basil leads The Sign of Blasphemy at Ruth's portrait.)

BASIL: And what would you like to tell the Babe?

TRIBAL MEMBERS: I would tell him to lose the factory farming and EAT ME!

BASIL: Eat who?

TRIBAL MEMBERS: Eat Me!

HERB: All the wonderful Paleolithic foods the gods gave us!

IRIS: Like grass fed pasture meats!

NORMAN: Nuts!

MYRTLE: Eggs!

HERB: Seeds!

IRIS: Fungi!

NORMAN: Fruit!

MYRTLE: Vegetables!

BASIL: Yes! The only recipe for healthy reproduction and pleasurable lovemaking!

(Tribal members gather around BASIL and sensuously stroke him and each other, except NORMAN, who only parrots the motions. BASIL removes a dusty old can of Diet-Coke from the lectern and shoves it into the faces surrounding/adoring him. Each tribal member immediately pulls back, like a vampire being assaulted with a cross, and offers up The Sign of Disapproval.

Basil grimaces, holds the foul soda can away from him with two fingers, and places it on top of the lectern. They sing a song, "Eat Me," about all the great Paleo foods one can eat. Choreography: when they dance to "Eat Me," whenever the refrain of Nuts is sung, the males grab their crotches, when Eggs are sung out, the females grab their crotches.)

BASIL: Babe Ruth was a magnificent ancestor who betrayed his species. (He withdraws a large #3 Babe Ruth pinstriped Yankee jersey from within the podium, and waves it like a banner.) I give you the Unholy Trinity of Terror we must pass through on this D.O.A. Eve celebration of darkness attempts to swallow the light. As the Bambino once proclaimed, "Watch my dust." We have watched your dust, Babe, and shall sprinkle it into an everlasting Paleo Dawn!

IRIS: We are all just Babes, dear Basil. Born pure into a corrupt world.

BASIL: My children! My children! Come forth and purify yourselves with our annual D.O.A. Eve birthing ritual. A pageant of truth. Help squeeze the pus out of the pimple known as humanity's darkest day, the Dawn of Agriculture! The most cruel and destructive blunder in the history of mankind! As the Number 3 on Babe Ruth's New York Yankee jersey so disturbingly illuminates, show us the putrid, domesticated horrors of D.O.A.'s unholy trinity of terror.

MYRTLE: I refuse to be slapped into a shadow of sexual shame by the Dawn of Agriculture! They raped our topsoil's life-giving and venerated throbbing inches of dirt by pulling up erect trees by their thick stumps that sprout expanding and exploring roots whom firmly holds our moist fertility secure and safe while filling us with excited expectations of a daily mystery that's not supposed to include being plowed and carved into, seeded from just one lousy crop until our sacred dirt becomes dry and dusty for I am juicy dessert not an arid desert smelling of dried dung-laced breeze of domesticated animals that attacks your nose as you step past dried creek beds with cratered walls of spent topsoil on

either side of you the D.O.A. chaos of crusty earth, as if some mad god of Babe Ruthian proportions troweled along their rims in ecstatic abandon, surrounding you in a protective snake shaped womb of sandy soil as you listen to the high wailing voices of a Paleo song of despair from the tendrils of a wind that slithers among dunes carved from alleys of depleted soil turned clay as melody and lyric unleashing a gale of unrequited erotic energy as ancient drums carry her through different symphonies of movement as each sway of her hips laments her forced monogamy to a non-alpha male property owner who causes her skin to split like a serpent's egg to reveal the tinkle of a goat's bell ringing inside of her demanding she create more farm hands to till his perverse, flabby soil, that turns all women into breeding beasts of burden! (She screams out a blood curdling shriek of terror) WELCOME, OH DAWN OF AGRICULTURE!

TRIBE: We are Pee-Pee-Pee-Pee! Proud Paleo Perfect People!

(The TRIBE does a twirling dervish.)

CURTAIN

The page features a dark purple background with decorative leaf patterns in the corners. The leaves are rendered in two shades: a lighter, muted purple and a darker, more saturated purple. The patterns are arranged in a circular or semi-circular fashion around the central text.

reviews

grace and frankie's title sequence takes the cake: why it's a masterpiece

MAYA ALEXANDRIA



One of the Easiest Shows to Pick Up

While names like Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin already sell a show, throwing Marta Kauffman (who also created *Friends*) into this delicious cocktail of dry charm and salty one-liners makes this show truly worthy of its many nominations, including the Golden Globe nomination for Best Actress: Television Series Musical or Comedy. Much like the finest of wine and our leading ladies, *Grace and Frankie* only gets better with age with the seventh and final season in production. While we have seen plenty of transitions and changes as Grace and Frankie navigate their twilight year, one thing has remained constant: the pure mastery and genius of the title sequence. Having a title sequence that not only deeply analyzes the main characters as well as meditates on the themes of freedom, age and ageism, and divorce grants its audience with more than enough context that even new fans can pick up from virtually any episode in any season and comfortably land in the

narrative.

Potential spoilers beyond this point. Please read at your own risk.



Logline and Background

Before we even meet the cast, we witness something like a puppet show performed on a tiered wedding cake with two pairs of wedding toppers in the very first episode of the series; and for over 6 years, the puppet show has told the same story about the main conflict of the show: with nowhere else to go after their husbands, Robert Hanson and Sol Bergstein, reveal their decades-long affair with each other, Grace Hanson (Fonda) and Frankie Bergstein (Tomlin) must live together in their beach house where their adventures together invite friendship, drama, and introspection.

Wedding Toppers: Characterizing Character

Even without acting out scenes, these toppers have a lot to say, thanks to their level of detail. As they perform the story, we watch how they slowly evolve out of the traditional wedding topper figurines into individual persons by the end of the big reveal: Grace transforms from her white wedding dress into her signature business casual look while Frankie develops her free-spirited hippie wardrobe. Despite the stark differences between Grace and Frankie, Robert and Sol look relatively similar from the beginning to the end of the title sequence showing us how as the two men grew closer in love together, their wives were already transitioning out of marriage in their own way whether they realized it or not.



The title sequence makes a point of showing that both families have children.



Props are also used to describe character: Grace is sharp and direct like the pointer stick for her business presentation while Frankie is more open and colorful like her paint palette and canvas.

Be Free and Eat Cake

Just like any theatrical performance, the stage provides just as much information as to its actors. Besides the topper and some of their props, the cake is void of any vibrant decorations or colors, very reminiscent of a blank slate. While usually a sad sight, the blank-slate cake ultimately illustrates the endless possibilities that the women have in their lives now that they are free from their deceitful marriages. Had the divorce not happened, Grace and Frankie would have never partnered up to launch their vibrator created specifically for older women; and when they're not profiting off their failed marriages, they embark on their romantic encounters with a variety of suitors: from new love with the local yam man to rekindling an old flame with a former

contractor. To unwind from their antics and their busy schedule, they unapologetically drink and smoke their worries away. When some may think a failed marriage is the end of the road, Grace and Frankie prove them wrong by living more authentically than they ever have before. They may not be young, but these ladies are definitely wild and free.

The Icing on the Cake

While the cake represents a fresh start for our heroines, the icing on the cake provides further analysis of the themes discussed throughout the show. Notice how the color isn't white but tinged a light shade of yellow, much like how a wedding dress yellows with age. The show explores other themes outside of friendship and perseverance such as age and ageism the elder face in everyday life. For example, when Grace returns to save the company she built from the ground up, her employees fuss and handle her like glass when they discover that she's 80 years old. Frankie takes it a step further and confronts 'the man' over crosswalks not providing enough time for the older population to cross. In fact, the vibrator these ladies created came to be because the market didn't consider the 'needs' of older women. There are great reminders and inspiration for the audience, even younger generations, that age is just a number and not something that hinders progress and growth.

Implosion and Divorce

Just as you thought the title sequence (and this viewer's argument about cake) was wrapping up, bam! The cake implodes on itself. Even after Grace and Frankie rise above their husbands' betrayal,



things still come crumbling down on them. The brilliant choice to have an implosion instead of an explosion comments on the ripple effect of divorce in families. Even when families divorce, the bond remains, just in a new form. This is especially so with families with children; and even though the Hansons and Bergsteins have grown adult children, their choices still have consequences that affect everyone. Imagine growing up with a man that you love as an uncle when suddenly he becomes your new stepdad. Therefore, when situations among the parents become unstable, the residual effects primarily stay within and disrupt the bonds of the family. All in all, it's still the families' mess to clean up.

Conclusion

In less than a minute, Grace and Frankie's title sequence provides an incredibly detailed account of not only the protagonist and their personalities but also the central themes of the narrative. Having such a firm grasp of not only the story but also the



Notice how the cake doesn't explode but implodes.

central themes of the narrative. Having such a firm grasp of not only the story but also the characters make it a great introduction for any viewer to pick an episode at random and feel completely immersed within the narrative: and that is nothing short of a masterpiece.

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about the
contributors

A. M. JOHNSON

A. M. Johnson is the pen name of Annabella Johnson, a writer from Saint Louis, Missouri. Johnson holds an undergraduate degree in creative writing from Webster University. She has been previously published in *The Green Fuse*, *The Webster Mercury*, and *The Oakland Arts Review*. Johnson is a member of the LGBT+ community, identifying as bisexual and nonbinary. Her pronouns are (she/her), (he/him), or (they/them.) She enjoys tea, books, and relative quiet, even at the best of times.

ANTHONY SALANDY

Anthony is a mixed-race poet and writer who has spent most of his life in Kuwait jostling between the UK and America. His work has been published 190 times internationally. Anthony has 2 published chapbooks titled *The Great Northern Journey* (2020, Lazy Adventurer Publishing) and *Vultures* (2021, Roaring Junior Press). His chapbook *Half Bred* is the Winner of the 2021 'The Poetry Question' Chapbook contest. Anthony's debut YA Novel *The Sands of Change* will be released in November 2021 with Alien Buddha Press. He is the Co-EIC of *Fahmidan Journal*. Twitter/Instagram: @anthony64120 <https://arsalandywriter.com/>

ANTONETTE RIANA C

Antonette is the ultimate foodie, constantly experimenting with new cuisines and culinary variations. She is a 20-year-old student in her senior year of her bachelor's degree at Stella Maris College, Chennai. She spends much of her time binge-watching Netflix and living in her food and K-pop utopia. She also has a

strong interest in research and is constantly looking for new tactics to maximize her potential.

B CRAIG GRAFTON

Craig is a retired attorney. His latest book is *Willard Wigleaf: West Texas Attorney*. It is a legal fiction western thriller concerned with the diversity and social issues of the American West in the 1880s. It is available on Amazon.

B. A. O'CONNELL

When a pivotal moment in B.A.'s youth caused them to turn to poetry with serious intent, they were changed. Today, they often pen four to eight poems a day. B.A.'s poetry, fiction, and blog focus on writing and art centering around trauma, recovery, and mental health. B.A. also touches on themes of abusive, obsessive, and unhealthy relationships and the pain of moving on from them. Twitter: @OnceLateataco | Tumblr: hellishrebukesystem

CHRISTINA HENNEMANN

Christina is a writer and photographer based in the West of Ireland but originally from Germany. At the age of six, she began writing her first English songs and poems with the help of a German-English dictionary. Since then, her English skills have much improved, she hopes. Her most recent publications include *orangepeel*, *Maythorn Mag* and *The Sunshine Review*.

CLEM FLOWERS

Clem Flowers (they/them) is a poet, eldritch horror, and soft-

spoken southern transplant living in a mountain's shadow in Utah. In an eternal quest to be the host in constant disbelief in an infomercial. Nb, bi, and queer as the day is long, they live in a cozy apartment with their wonderful wife and sweet calico kitty. Twitter: @clem_flowers

DANESH BALSARA

An imports manager by day and poet by night, Danesh believes that the world could be made a better place one kind word at a time.

EDIE MRIGNA

Mrigna is an advocate by profession, and a freelance columnist and poet by passion. She hopes to become a certified merger and acquisition analyst, given her keen interest in the same. She writes for a host of magazines in addition to being a sporadic legal blogger. She loves art: acrylics, oil pastels, pencil sketching, and detailed watercolors. She is interested in research on subjects concerning society, and has several research papers to her credit. On a lazy afternoon, you'll usually find her engrossed in her violin lessons or planning vacations she cannot afford.

FAVOUR IGWEMOH

Favour is a Nigerian writer. She is passionate about art forms like movies, writing, painting, pottery, fashion and cooking. She temporarily quit writing as she was shy but resumed when she realized she couldn't live without it. She uploaded her first book, *How to Love Like That*, to Wattpad, and it was later published as a

webnovel. She considers writing her God-given gift, and wishes to use it to spread joy and hope.

GEORGE FREEK

George has been playwright-in-residence at the Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, Southern Methodist University, Southern Illinois University and Eastern Illinois University. His plays have been published by *Playscripts*, *Blue Moon Plays*, and *Off The Wall Plays*.

HAVARD CASSANDRA

Havard Cassandra is French. She works as an accountant, has a passion for reading English poetry. She sometimes writes poetry in her spare time. She mainly reads classical literature. Her favorite poets are Percy Bysshe Shelley, Alfred Lord Tennyson, Robert Browning, and John Keats. She loves when poems tell stories. One of her poems called “Thanks to the Fallen, I am Free” has been published in *Alternate Route*.

IVAN DE MONBRISON

Ivan is a French poet, writer, and artist born in 1969 in Paris. His poems or short stories have appeared in several literary magazines in France, Italy, Belgium, The UK, Canada, India, Australia, Switzerland, and in the US. Five poetry chapbooks of his works have been published: *L'ombre déchirée*, *Journal*, *La corde à nu*, *Ossuaire* and *Sur-Faces*.

JOHN TUSTIN

John's poetry has appeared in many disparate literary journals since 2009. fritzware.com/johntustinpoetry contains links to his published poetry online.

KAVITA SARIN

An educator, a writer, a part-time poet, an editor: Kavita Sarin goes about wearing many hats. She is enthusiastic about everything she does and enjoys learning new things. An avid reader, she's passionate about promoting the English Language.

KRISTIN GARTH

Kristin is a Pushcart, Rhysling-nominated sonneteer, and a Best of the Net 2020 finalist. Her sonnets have stalked journals like *Glass*, *Yes, Five:2:One*, *Luna Luna* and more. She is the author of 21 books of poetry including *Crow Carriage* (Sweet Tooth Story Books) and *The Stakes* (Really Serious Literature), and the editor of seven anthologies. She is the founder of *Pink Plastic House*, a tiny journal and co-founder of Performance Anxiety, an online poetry reading series. Follow her on Twitter: (@lolaandjolie) and her website kristingarth.com.

LORELEI BACHT

Lorelei is a poet in a body located in Southeast Asia. Her poetic work concerned with embodiment, motherhood and aging has appeared/is forthcoming in *Gustslut Press*, *Odd Magazine*, *Wrongdoing Magazine*, *Hecate*, *Moonflake Press*, *One Art*, *Corporeal*, *Anti-Heroine Chic* and elsewhere. Instagram:

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MARIA GIESBRECHT

Maria is an emerging poet residing in Guelph, Ontario. She is obtaining her BBA from Yorkville University and works as an accountant during the day. She will be published in *Sunday Mornings at the River*, a quarterly poetry anthology, in Fall 2021.

MARILÙ CIABATTONI

Marilù is a writer, editor and translator based in Amsterdam. She studied English Literature and Creative Writing in Rome, Italy, and is now working as a Communications intern and a freelancer. Her creative work has been included in *Cordelia Magazine*, *Unpublished Magazine*, and *Bloom Magazine*. She publishes fiction, poetry and nonfiction on a regular basis.

MARINELLA GIUNI

Marinella was born in Paternò, Sicily, in 1961. She currently lives in Voghera in the Northern region of Italy. A graduate in Clinical and Community Psychology, she worked in this field for many years until she became an employee of the Pavia Court. Praised by various literary contests, she published *Racconti seri se veri* (Placebook Publishing) and the poetry collection *Nella stanza del te* (Le Mezzelane). She regularly writes reviews for *MilanoNera*, a platform dedicated to thriller and mystery books, and articles about Psychology and Philosophy for *Kukaos Magazine*.

MARK BLICKLEY

Mark Blickley grew up within walking distance of the Bronx. He is a proud member of the Dramatists Guild and PEN American Center. His latest book is the text-based art collaboration with fine arts photographer Amy Bassin, *Dream Streams*.

MAYA ALEXANDRIA

Maya is a biracial African American writer, poet, painter, and filmmaker in California. She graduated from the University of California, Davis in 2020 with a degree in English with a concentration in Creative Writing. She is the Chief Marketing Officer and Producer of Mad Mouth Poetry Inc., a poetry coalition based in California that focuses on uplifting the voices of underrepresented poets. Her artistic and literary work have appeared in or are forthcoming in several publications including *RiskPress*, *Poet Speak Magazine*, and *Harpy Hybrid Review*. Maya is currently studying film at NYU while working on poetry and prose projects. She looks for ways to dismantle the patriarchy in her spare time by painting outdoors, listening to jazz with her cat, and slaying dragons via video games.

PEDRO LÓPEZ FERNÁNDEZ

Pedro is a law graduate and bank employee. He was a finalist of the International Prize of Poetry City of Barbastro (Hermanos. Argensola 2014), Gonzalo Rojas Pizarro (Chile, 2018), and the IV Contest Internacional de Poesía Enrique Pleguezuelo (Córdoba, 2020). His poems have appeared in magazines and literary spaces such as *Aeroletras* (Gaceta FLL), *Monolito*, *El Humo*, and others.

He has been published in various anthologies, and his poems have been translated into English and Slovenian. He is the author of two novels: *El Magistrado Cuernavaca* (2014) and *Las cenizas de Manhattan* (2018), both with Ed. Amarante.

RIYA AGGARWAL

Riya is an author and an enthusiastic learner from India. She believes there is no wrong age to learn. She's always open to trying new ideas and hobbies. She likes to pen long stories, quotes and poems. Her hobbies include art and photography. You can find her thoughts on her Instagram handle: @thenextipenned.

RUTH NIEMIEC

Ruth Niemiec (she/her) received her BA with a major in Professional Writing from Victoria University. She is a writer of non-fiction, fiction and poetry in English and Polish. Her latest work is forthcoming or recently published in *Dumbo Feather*, *Mamamia*, *ABC Everyday*, *Neon Literary Magazine*, *Coffee People*, *Parliament*, and *Rhodora*. Ruth is a love and relationships columnist for *Perfumed Pages Magazine* and a creative non-fiction reader for *Catatonic Daughters*. She hopes for a kinder world.

RYAN QUINN FLANAGAN

Ryan is a Canadian-born author residing in Elliot Lake, Ontario, Canada with his wife and many bears that rifle through his garbage. His work can be found both in print and online in such places as: *Evergreen Review*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Rhodora Magazine*, *Monterey Poetry Review*, *Red Fez*, and *The Oklahoma Review*.

SPANDAN BANDYOPADHYAY

Spandan lives in the bustling city of Kolkata, West Bengal, India. He firmly believes that he loves Literature and Philosophy more than anything. In the future, he wants to establish himself as a full-time author. Twitter: @Spandan_B_49 | Instagram @spandanb.49.

TIM GOLDSTONE

Tim is published in the UK, Ireland, Germany, India, the US, the Philippines, Australia, and elsewhere in numerous print and online journals and anthologies, including *The Ekphrastic Review*, *The Offing*, *CultureCult*, *Tir na nÓg*, *Riverbed Review*, *Provenance Journal*, *Crannóg*, *11 Mag Berlin*, *Dodging the Rain*, *Déraciné*, and *The Wild Word*. Prose sequence read on stage at The Hay Festival. Scripts broadcast on TV and radio. He has roamed widely and currently lives in Wales. Twitter: @muddygold

TIM HEERDINK

Tim Heerdink is the author of *Somniloquy & Trauma in the Knottseau Well*, *The Human Remains*, *Red Flag and Other Poems*, *Razed Monuments*, *Checking Tickets on Ooumaumua*, *Sailing the Edge of Time*, *I Hear a Siren's Call*, *Ghost Map*, *A Cacophony of Birds in the House of Dread*, *Tabletop Anxieties & Sweet Decay* (with Tony Brewer) and short stories "The Tithing of Man" and "HEA-VEN2". His poems appear in various journals and anthologies. He is the President of Midwest Writers Guild of Evansville, Indiana.



VIDYA RAJAGOPALAN

Vidya is a 21-year-old Literature student whose abode is poetry. She finds light in her darkest thoughts and hopes to write more. Her poem in this issue is an elegy, and is dedicated to her father on Diwali.

YUU IKEDA

Yuu Ikeda is a Japanese poet. She loves to read and write mystery novels and drink sugary coffee. She writes poetry on her blog: poetryandcoffeedays.wordpress.com. Her work has appeared in *Nymphs* and *Tealight Press* among others. Twitter/Instagram: @yuunnnn77

The image features a dark purple background with the word "masthead" centered in a white serif font. The text is surrounded by decorative elements consisting of light purple and teal leafy branches in the corners. The word "masthead" is the central focus, rendered in a classic, elegant serif typeface. The leaf motifs are stylized and appear to be part of a larger, repeating pattern, adding a natural and sophisticated touch to the design.

masthead

SUSANNA MARIAN CORREYA

Susanna is a lanky long-haired twenty-something from Chennai with handwriting that resembles a cardiogram. She recently completed her Master's in Literature from Stella Maris College. She worked as an editor for a publishing company and was a regular contributor to the college magazine. She founded *Rhodora* on a quiet starry night when she realized the potential of indie zines. Cats, Joan of Arc and Mark Twain are some of the things that get her excited.

KEERTHANA V

Keerthana is a social-media-shy creature who giggles in short bursts. Articulate and laser-focused, she assesses submissions and situations with sensitivity. She doesn't believe her WhatsApp texts could go straight to publication. She is fluent in Telugu, English and Tamil and can translate and interpret with ease. She obtained her Master's in Literature from Stella Maris College. A Carnatic singer with an airy voice, she will calm your nerves on a bad day or make a good day sound better.

MARIAM ANNA ALEX

Mariam "Akku" is a soon-to-be Visual Arts graduate from Kottayam. She was the set designer of the play *On Both Sides* and has contributed doodles to The Ecology Project. She loves art, music, TV shows, flowers and dogs. Even her rough sketches look printable and marketable. Plump chicken dumplings and the color aqua make her happy.



THE RHODORA

ON BEING ASKED, WHENCE IS THE FLOWER?

In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,
I found the fresh rhodora in the woods,
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,
To please the desert and the sluggish brook.

The purple petals, fallen in the pool,
Made the black water with their beauty gay;
Here might the red bird come his plumes to cool,
And court the flower that cheapens his array.

Rhodora! if the sages ask thee why
This charm is wasted on the earth and sky,
Tell them, dear, that if eyes were made for seeing,
Then Beauty is its own excuse for being:
Why thou wert there, O rival of the rose!
I never thought to ask, I never knew;
But in my simple ignorance, suppose
The self-same Power that brought me here brought you.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON



