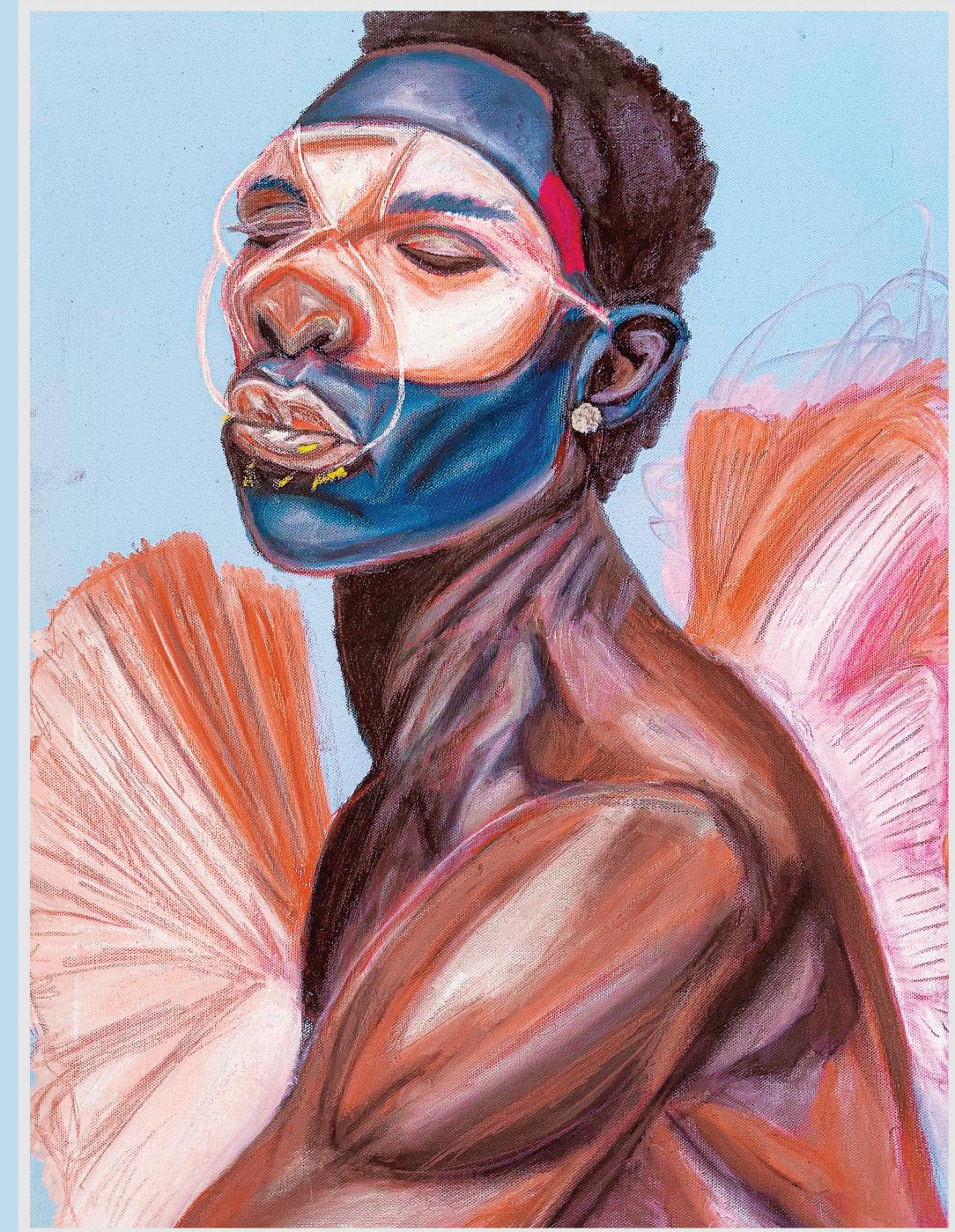


# FOGLIFTER

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# FOGLIFTER

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

POETRY	
<i>Eduardo Martínez-Leyva</i> / MORDIDA	8
/ ESTRELLITA	104
<i>Dante Fuoco</i> / What distance isn't long / what clock isn't you	22
<i>Isaiah Back-Gaal &amp; Kurt David</i> / Jersey Shore, or WHEN WE WERE PIRATES!	23
<i>Ella Deitz</i> / Girl's Night	24
<i>Mitch Monroy</i> / Body of Blue	25
<i>Steffan Triplett</i> / scuttle	27
<i>Raphael Jenkins</i> / The Homie	29
<i>Jordan E. Franklin</i> / poet ponders poetics in the White room	30
<i>amalee bea</i> / Solo – there are cracks in this world,	36
/ Obituary for Ambiguous Losses	124
<i>Edward Salem</i> / DREAMING OF AN OUD	37
/ ODE TO	40
<i>Eden Nobile</i> / TRANS (MANIA) DEVIL	38
<i>Adam Spiegelman</i> / Sonnet About Steroids	39
<i>sienna fereshteh</i> / WORMS	41
/ BAKLAVA	84
<i>Seth Creeper</i> / Pantoublock with A Soul in a Baby Blanket	42
<i>Toby Sharpe</i> / keep me on my toes, lil fella	55
<i>Starlight Shamsi</i> / TRANSMINITY	78
<i>Grayson Thompson</i> / for anyone holding their breath	79
/ joy came after the prerequisite courses	108
/ my therapist crosses his leg	110
<i>Mickie Kennedy</i> / Uncle Ronny: The Beading	81
<i>Reggie Edmonds-Vasquez</i> / Eulogy for the Bathroom Mirror	82
/ My Grandmother Makes Catfish for Dinner	89
<i>Liam Strong</i> / inconsistencies experienced after the disability application was declined	90
<i>Ugochukwu Damian Okpara</i> / No One Teaches You Anything About Exile	101
/ Ghazal for Becoming your Own Guardian	102
<i>V. Rodrigo</i> / anomalous nomenclature	106
<i>Topaz Winters</i> / No You Say It First	123
<i>Kei Vough Korede</i> / Visitation Hour	126

<i>Javeria Hasnain</i> / AUBADE AFTER A BLIZZARD	127
/ AFTERSHOCK AS TELOGEN EFFLUVIA	128
/ SONNET FOR THE END OF THE WORLD	130
/ ORGASM	131

## PROSE

<i>Chris Schmicker</i> / How to Eat an Endling	9
<i>Lio Abendan</i> / Occupancy Notice	31
<i>Maya Denkmire</i> / Teens Killed and Ate a New York Village's Beloved Swan, Police Say	43
<i>Charlotte Joyce Kidd</i> / Half-Moons	70
<i>Sam Saxton</i> / Things My Mother Has Not Forgotten	91
<i>Nathan Alling Long</i> / Seattle	105
<i>Addison Hoggard</i> / Room to Grow	111

## HYBRID

<i>Daniel W.K. Lee</i> / Collusion	7
/ Flour Massacre	132
/ Palestinian	136
<i>Gianna Starble</i> / 3 Bikes	26
<i>Lauren Levin</i> / Letters from Reversi	56
<i>Anne Gerard</i> / An Answer Key for My Mother's BIO-104 Exam	85

<i>Contributor Bios</i>	137
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## ◆ ◆ EDUARDO MARTÍNEZ-LEYVA ◆ ◆

### MORDIDA

God came down the valley one dust-covered day.  
Told you to gather His flock. He spoke slowly  
and carried a passport. Rounded his shoulders to get closer  
to you. His speech was low and raspy like a headmaster's  
or the hot wind that capsizes rowboats on summer nights.  
The one that makes widows out of wives. He was looking  
for two just men who had fallen off the wagon again.  
Asked you to roll up your sleeves. Asked if you had ever shot a gun.  
If your conscience was clean. Asked if you spoke English.  
If you paid off your loans. Asked for your credit score.  
¿Caballero, cómo nos arreglamos? To enter into this kingdom,  
he said, you must pay the toll. He folded up your documents  
and smacked the palm of His hand with them, waiting impatiently  
for your response. Where is your brother, He asked?  
What is the circumference of your wound?  
What can you do with your mouth? Let's see it.  
Show me what's under your tongue.  
Do you own anything that isn't your shadow?  
Why are you shaking? He scooped you up like a yearling.  
His hands were soft but firm.  
He could break you like morning bread.  
What can you tell me about the rooms you've ruined?  
I'm going to touch you now.  
Are there any areas that are tender, sensitive?  
What else besides your body do you carry  
that is illegal? Will your body also carry bullets one day?  
What other type of dark alphabet do you know?  
Write it down. You keep shaking.  
I'm only going to ask you this one more time.  
How is it you keep going  
when so many who look like you are dead?  
Keep dying. Tell me, how many more elegies  
do you still have left inside you?

# CHRIS SCHMICKER

## How To Eat An Endling

How to eat an endling:

1. Carefully unscrew the jar, keeping it upright to prevent the frog from escaping. Pour steaming water over it. This strips off its protective mucus.
2. Drain the water, then reach into the warm jar and grab the frog firmly in one hand, but not so tightly that you crush it. You need to keep it alive through step 5.
3. Hold it belly-side up where the skin is clear and soft, and locate its white liver by tracing the faint, red line of its dorsal vein up from its intestines and stomach.
4. Using your box cutter, gently slice into the frog's belly, piercing the liver to release its toxins. This takes practice. Make sure you're using a fresh blade.
5. Stick your finger into the incision to coat it, then rub it under your tongue, where the toxin will be absorbed through your sublingual blood vessels.
6. Discard the carcass. Wait for the high to begin. (Usually takes 5-10 minutes.)

Tanner first introduced me to glass at the end of our senior year, when classes were nearly finished and nothing seemed to matter anymore. It grossed me out at first. The room stank like spoiled milk when he poured hot water into the jar. We'd been together for nearly nine months then. "We could've had a baby together by now—how nuts is that?" he liked to joke.

Summer loomed like a thundercloud. We were all electric with anticipation. *Soon*. I was feeling kind of nostalgic, too, and started a list of things I wanted to do before I left Kapa'a in September. O'ahu was only a 30-minute flight from Kaua'i, but seemed as distant as the moon. Eight-lane freeways and forty-story skyscrapers. *How nuts is that?*

Mom was proud that I'd gotten into UH Manoa. "Real deal college," she gloated to her friends, even though I knew she was sweating over four years of tuition fees. Dad seemed certain I'd become a crime statistic. "You're too trusting, Vanessa," he scoffed. "The big city boys are gonna eat you alive." Most of my friends would be commuting to Kaua'i Community College that fall, 30 minutes down Kuhio Highway.

Not Tanner. He'd gotten suspended for pummeling a guy who kept making passes at me one night when they'd all been drinking. He could be chivalrous like that. I told my parents he had to take a year off from school to work, which was a lie. That he was helping to pay off his mom's medical bills, which was a partial lie. That he still planned to get his GED eventually, which I hoped would be true.

We were at his friend's house for a party when he asked me if I'd ever tried glass. His eyes were hazy with beer. I shook my head. "Don't worry, baby, I'll show you how," Tanner whispered into my hair. He's so much taller than me that my skull fits cleanly into the cavity

beneath his chin when we hug. My bare feet were standing on top of his, and he started to walk me forward like a marionette, which made me giggle. I felt like a kid learning to waltz on her dad's shoes. "C'mon, little miss perfect, you deserve to have some fun," he purred.

Shawn's house was packed when we pulled up. Pickups parked out on the lawn. Reggae music and a roar of voices inside. But by then the crowd had already thinned out, moving on to other parties. Graduation season gets rowdy. Each week the Sunday evening news opens with the same headline: "A [insert *Kapā'a/Waialua/Lihu'e*] teen is facing DUI charges after a [insert late-night/high-speed/multi-vehicle] crash last night that left [insert two/three/four] people in critical condition."

Tanner flagged Shawn down and we went out to his bedroom above the garage. The door was locked. He made sure no one was watching, then reached up for a key in the crook of a gutter. The room was a mess, like Tanner's always was. Unmade bed. Wet board shorts on the carpet. A comically large bong being used as a hat rack. The one thing that was tidy in the room—that seemed obsessively neat and clean, in fact—was the huge terrarium that dominated one wall.

A blindingly lit box full of rainforest. Islands of moss, prehistoric-looking ferns, and knots of acid-green vines. "The lights keep them sleepy," Shawn said, tapping on the glass. "See?" I leaned in closer, squinted my eyes.

Then it suddenly came into focus, like a Magic Eye poster. Thumb-sized frogs on every leaf, perfectly camouflaged. "They're beautiful," I said. Their bodies were translucent. They looked like dewdrops with legs.

"A stash of glass like this: easily 10 grand," Tanner said. "That's why the door's gotta stay locked."

*This was glass? I thought you were bringing me up here to smoke,* I said.

"Then this'll blow your mind." Shawn smiled. He hopped up onto a chair next to the terrarium and slid open its lid, fishing out a sleeping frog.

I remember the look on Tanner's face as he egged me on. Eager, wolfish. My pinkie hesitated over the frog's torn belly. Its body convulsed as it died in Shawn's hand.

"Decide now. It's gotta be fresh," Shawn said.

*C'mon, little miss perfect.* I'd done the work, gotten my acceptance letter. Graduation was two weeks away. I stuck my finger in.

What does glass feel like? Shawn says glass is a dissociative anesthetic, which means you feel euphoric and disconnected from your body. Tanner says it's like getting high while going over the top of a rollercoaster.

Glass felt incredible. That first time at Shawn's, it turned me liquid. Like a *Vanessa*-shaped ziplock filled with water. For the first hour the water was ice-cold. Tanner's fingers fluttered over the goosebumps on my thigh. Then the water got warm, like a bath. My body felt gooey and slow while my brain evaporated, floating up somewhere above Shawn's ceiling fan. "I knew you'd like it," Tanner murmured, and kissed my neck. Way better than weed.

*Hyalinobatrachium pacifica.* Shawn says there are glass frogs all over the Amazon, but the type he's got is endemic, which means Hawaii's the only place that has them. The South American ones get you sick, not high. All glass frogs are magicians. Octopuses and chameleons may be able to turn colors, but glass frogs can turn clear. Cloudy-clear at least, like candle wax before it dries. You can see their tiny hearts beat beneath their skin.

Life after graduation was paradise. We wasted the mornings diving off rocks and frying on the sand. We smelled like sweat and coconut oil. When it got too hot, we ate pints of mint chocolate-chip ice cream in the parking lot of 7-Eleven with the truck's AC running. Then we'd go back to Shawn's and get glassed, laughing at stupid videos on our phones or rocking back and forth in his hammock watching Java sparrows commute across the sky.

Sometimes Shawn's girlfriend was there, and we'd all take turns giving each other shoulder massages. "You got a knot down here, Van," Tanner would say. "Let me take care of that for you." His hands would knead lower and lower, and then we'd have to excuse ourselves and rush downstairs to find some privacy. Everything glowed brighter when you were on glass. Even hurried sex in a garden shed.

I noticed wet clumps of eggs in the terrarium one day, clinging to the lower leaves like tapioca pudding. "You've got babies," I told Shawn.

"We're gonna be rich!" Tanner pressed his face against the glass.

"Bro, you know I don't sell," Shawn said, hopping up onto the chair. "They don't reproduce fast enough to sell. I'd run out of supply for us to use."

"Just breed the same pairs over and over, and sell the babies."

"Baby glass will fuck you up. Do not touch that stuff, trust me. It's like triple-concentrated." He slid open the lid. "Patience is part of a grower's job. This is a sustainably managed natural resource," he said proudly.

He plucked a sleeping adult off a patch of moss and carried it to me. "Wanna do the honors?" He held out his box cutter.

I shook my head. That part still made my stomach turn.

"So what's the deal: are you in a throuple?" Kelsey asked me. We were flipping through the clothing racks at the thrift store.

"Shawn has a girlfriend!" I said. "And Tanner would never touch another dude."

"So what then? You guys spend every afternoon at his place these days."

I told Kelsey about glass. Her eyebrows crept higher and higher as I talked.

"Honestly, Van, that is super creepy. I wish you hadn't told me."

"Seriously?"

"Sacrificing little frogs and eating their guts together? Yeah, super creepy." She folded her arms. I hadn't thought about it like that. "Did you even research this stuff before you started using it all the time? Like what're the side effects? Can you overdose on it?"

"We don't use it all the time!"

"Oh please, you're over there constantly. We never hang out anymore."

"I'm just having some fun. Shawn said it's harmless."

"And you've known him for how long?"

"I don't see why I'm the one being judged here. You're the one who nearly got expelled for selling Oxy."

Kelsey glared at me. "Thanks for that. For the record, I'm not judging. I'm trying to *educate* you, as your friend: always do your homework."

I rolled my eyes at her. But back home that night, I searched for more info about glass. The Internet didn't have much to offer. *Did you mean crystal meth?* It didn't even seem to know glass existed, beyond a passing mention in some academic paper on 'awa and other narcotics cultivated by ancient Hawaiians. Finally I found a few posts about gl@\$ in a Reddit community called 808HighLife. People thought they were so clever. I added a post of my own:

Posted by u/trashpanda\_07

Have tried gl@\$ a few times recently. How often can you do it? What happens if you do too much? Need advice pls.

What I did find was a lot of stories on the South American frogs that Shawn had mentioned. They were dying out. A fungus had spread across amphibian populations on the continent. It caused tiny cysts that multiplied within the frogs' skin, draining it of moisture. Eventually the frogs suffocated.

One site had a photo gallery of glass frog species that had already gone extinct over the past decade. In the first picture, a bug-eyed frog peered through the wall of its tank. I read the caption:

"Pictured here, the last known individual of species *Hyalinobatrachium resplendens*, also known as 'bare-hearted frog' in its native Ecuador. Prior to its extinction in the wild, individuals were collected for captive-breeding programs which sadly proved unsuccessful. Researchers named this individual 'Lonely Luis' and recorded his unanswered, nightly mating calls for posterity before his death."

An endling is the end of its line. Once it dies, the species is officially extinct.

My phone beeped. Someone had upvoted my Reddit post. It beeped again a few minutes later. A comment from the same user: "i wanna join ur party ;) can I have?? share address." A different sound. Someone was trying to private message me: "You selling homegrown or wild catch? Need a new source. How much?"

"Dinner!" Mom shouted.

I jumped. Maybe this was a bad idea. Could someone trace my identity on here? I'd listed my real birthday on my public profile. *Always do your homework.* I deleted the post and deactivated my account, then took a breath and joined my parents.

My roommate was from Vancouver. She was sun-drunk. Her skin peeled off in gauzy strips after her surf lessons on Saturdays. "This place is paradise," she said happily as I watched her rub aloe gel across her bubblegum-pink chest. "Everyone back home's in parkas right now. How could you ever leave Hawaii?"

"I haven't yet ..." I said.

Still, Honolulu felt like a departure. Not just because of the shopping malls that seemed like cities unto themselves, the clubs where you could dance 'til two a.m. without bumping into a single person you'd gone to grade school with. But also because I woke every morning to an alarm I'd set for myself, instead of my mom knocking on the door. Because I could read in the common room for hours without Dad interrupting me to ask for a foot rub, another beer.

Because after the first month apart from Tanner—without his arms always latched around my shoulders, his chin always resting on my head—I'd stopped feeling like half of something, like a component part.

I knew when he was glassed at Shawn's 'cause my phone would blow up with random videos from him: hands kneading a blob of glittery slime, a manta ray breaching in slow motion. *Made me think of u*, he'd text. And I'd look at the time-lapse he sent of shiitake mushrooms sprouting and wonder what he meant.

When he'd try to FaceTime me, I wouldn't answer. Not because I was annoyed but because I was jealous. I wanted to feel what he and Shawn were feeling at that moment. Seeing their moony grins on camera would just sharpen the craving. I'd discreetly asked a few classmates where you could get glass here, but none of them had heard of it.

We studied sea-level charts in my environmental studies class. The ocean would sink miles of Kaua'i's coastline in thirty years, a blue mouth gnawing the edges of the island like a muffin. And a part of me thought, Good riddance. We'd already lost the coastline years ago. Let the ocean turn the timeshares and golf courses into aquariums. We'd snorkel through their wrecks. Maybe my parents' house would be beachfront by then.

The teaching assistant had reefs of freckles on his forearms and a snaggletooth that I couldn't stop staring at. I caught his eyes wandering toward me sometimes in seminar. *The big city boys are gonna eat you alive.* But at the end of the semester when he asked if he could speak with me, he looked like a kid in church—his scrubbed face reverential, his elbows at his side.

He asked if I'd chosen a major yet. My lab project showed real promise. Could he persuade me to consider environmental studies? Standing above him on the steps of the auditorium, I saw premature gray threading through his black hair like spider silk. And I smiled down at him and thought, No one has ever looked up at me like this before.

Christmas break back home. Santa paddling an outrigger canoe in front of the Texaco station, arms frozen mid-stroke. A parking lot of fir trees shipped in from Oregon, expiring in the tropical sun. I found myself slotting back into Tanner more easily than I'd imagined. Our old, familiar routines. But I wondered whether we'd last another semester apart.

Shawn finally invited us over to his house one day. I'd been waiting for him to text. Something was different, though, when we walked into his bedroom. Where the enormous

terrarium once was there were now two smaller tanks. Each tank stood in its own separate bay, cordoned off by curtains of plastic film that were duct-taped to the floor and ceiling.

“What’s all this for?” I asked.

“Something happened when you were gone,” Shawn replied. “Here.” He handed me a bottle of Purell.

A few of the frogs had started displaying odd behaviors: They slipped off branches, sat sluggishly in puddles. One had eaten the eggs it’d laid a day earlier. Shawn had quarantined them from the others.

Tanner shook his head like a disappointed parent. “Defective inventory,” he said, then pulled a plastic panel back from one of the bays and waved me inside. “After you.”

A dozen or so frogs huddled at one end of the tank, which had been cleared of plants. They looked duller than I remembered, like a window pane smudged with fingerprints. I guessed, then, what this must be. Would the plastic stop it from spreading?

Dear customers,

It's come to our attention that some units of *Hyalinobatrachium pacifica* have defects that may pose safety risks to themselves and to users, and are being recalled. Please discard affected inventory immediately.

“Why keep them?” I asked Shawn.

“Maybe they’ll get better.” He crouched down, peered into the tank. “And even if they don’t, I dunno, maybe these ones don’t deserve to get used.” I pictured the president pardoning a turkey. *Run along, little guy.* That always made me sad for some reason. The futility of that gesture.

We stepped into the second bay, where everything still seemed normal. Shawn pulled on a pair of nitrile gloves, cracked open the lid of the tank, and scooped up a fat-looking specimen that slept on a glossy leaf. It was wet and bright like I remembered.

This time, when he made the incision, I shut my eyes.

Tanner called me a few days later, on Christmas Day. “I got a present for you. Don’t go anywhere. I’m coming over.” I heard him honk from the curb a little while later. His car was full of stuff: backpacks, plastic thermoses, sleeping bags.

“What’s all this for?” I asked.

“Get in, we’re going camping,” he replied.

“Tanner, it’s Christmas. I have dinner at my uncle’s tonight.”

“Don’t be a downer, Van. Everything’s all packed.”

I sighed. He was always almost charming. It had poured buckets at my sister’s graduation party, and we’d huddled gamely in our fancy outfits under a tent in the backyard. My heels kept sinking into the sod. A sweet song had started playing—*I’ve seen fire, and I’ve seen rain*—and

when Tanner grabbed my hand to dance I’d blossomed with happy surprise. He was usually barefoot, always going to or coming from the beach. But he’d looked like a different man that day, wearing a blazer and polished leather shoes he’d borrowed from a cousin.

Then he’d pulled me out from under the tent and into the hot rain. “Isn’t this romantic?” he crooned, swinging me around in circles while my hair unraveled and my eyelash glue melted. “You’re getting all of this, right?” he yelled out to a friend beneath the tent with Tanner’s phone in his hand, filming.

Still, a camping trip sounded fun after the past four months in downtown Honolulu. When he’d called me one night in my cramped dorm room, I told him I missed seeing stars. Had he remembered? If nothing else it’d be time alone together to properly test the seams of our relationship—to decide whether to mend them or let them split.

“Let me talk to my mom,” I said.

“We’ll be waiting.”

“Wait, who’s we?” I asked.

A head appeared behind a pile of bags. Tanner’s half-brother Wesley waved sheepishly up at me.

We switchbacked up Waimea Canyon’s west flank that afternoon. The breeze through the open windows got cooler, more supple as we gained elevation. Each time we passed a lookout, Wesley whooed quietly from the back seat. “Such a dork,” Tanner muttered. Wesley had just finished ninth grade. He’d been an accident, Tanner had told me. A goodbye present from one of their mom’s ex-boyfriends. They both wore the same faded red Rip Curl T-shirt. Buy one, get one free.

It was nearly sundown when we arrived at Kōkē’e campground. There were only two other cars in the parking lot, their haunches caked in mud. Picnic tables rested beneath the pillars of hundred-foot-tall Cook pines.

“Did you know they always lean toward the equator?” Wesley said as we got out of the car.

“The trees?” I looked up.

“It was in a show I saw. They can sense magnetic fields.”

They did seem to tilt a bit, like drunks walking home from a bar.

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” Tanner laughed. “C’mon, help me unload all this stuff.” Wesley flushed with embarrassment.

I was glad I’d remembered to pack a fleece. It got cold up there at night. Tanner made a fire with too much lighter fluid, howling with excitement when the flare-ups shot towers of sparks into the air. He pulled smoked akule fish and a carton of boiled peanuts out of a backpack, and grilled burgers made from ground-up deer his neighbor had hunted, handing the first one to me, juices dripping down his wrist.

“Thank you,” I whispered to him later that night as we lay in our tent. Stars spun above us in the darkness. “This is really nice. Even with your brother here.”

“That wasn’t the plan,” he sighed. “But Mom’s not well enough to take care of him right

now." He traced absentminded arabesques down my shoulder. "Did you miss me, Van? When you were away?" I pulled the sleeping bag up over my skin.

"Of course, I did. I told you I did."

His warm breath filled the space between us. "Think you'll stay in Honolulu, after college is over?"

"I'm not leaving Kaua'i."

"But you are. In two weeks."

"You know what I mean. This is still home. It will always be home."

"That'll change, eventually. You'll change."

Here's the wild thing about Hawaii, the snaggle-toothed teaching assistant had told us in class. You have all of these endemic species that evolved here, in the middle of nowhere. And that gift of isolation meant remarkable rates of adaptive radiation. So over time these species don't just become unique to the Hawaiian Islands as a whole; they become unique to a specific island.

"Let's not talk about it anymore," I said to Tanner, turning over on my side. "Come. Let's just be here." He felt like a sun-warmed towel when he wrapped his body around my back.

We woke to a delicate fog. The parking lot had vanished somewhere within it. A rooster crowed distantly across the field like the foghorn of an unseen ferry. Tanner walked to the visitors center to pick up a trail map.

Wesley fizzed with excitement, circling impatiently as I heated water over a butane stove for coffee. He was already wearing his daypack. "Want some?" I asked him. "Not that you seem to need it."

"Doesn't coffee make you pee a lot?"

I chuckled. "Have you ever tried it?" He shook his head. "Here, I'll show you how to do it." I unfolded the filter, measured out the coffee grinds, dribbled water through them.

He held the cup up to his mouth hesitantly. "It's awful." He grimaced after taking a sip.

"You'll get used to it," I said.

We chose a trail that ran alongside a white rope of river. For an hour we followed the threads of water, trekking steadily downhill through tunnels of kahili ginger and quiet cathedrals of bamboo. Tanner chased speckled goby fish in the river's bubbling pools, soaking his shorts and getting pebbles in his shoes. Wesley combed the edges of the trail like a shell collector, stooping down every so often to photograph something in the undergrowth, then furtively plucking it up and stashing it in his bag. The fog pursued us, muffling our voices and licking at our necks with its wet tongue.

Twice the trail crossed the river, switching to the opposite bank. As we made the second crossing, Wesley lost his footing on an algae-slicked boulder and crashed into the water with a shout.

Tanner hustled over and hauled him up onto the muddy bank. "Wesley, are you hurt? Show me your leg." He looked genuinely concerned. I wondered if this was how he might be as a father.

"I'm fine. It's nothing."

"It didn't sound like nothing." Wesley gripped one of his ankles and Tanner gently nudged his hand away. Just a scrape. But with an ugly bruise emerging around it like a violet halo.

"I told you, I'm fine," Wesley said, pulling his leg away. "I can keep going."

"Let's take a quick break," I offered. "I'm tired. We've been walking for a while now." Wesley seemed relieved.

"I thought for a second I was gonna have to carry your ass the whole way back," Tanner said, getting up and brushing off his shorts. "All right, you guys stay here. I'm gonna go pee."

Wesley and I sat on the riverbank, waiting. I felt the red mud seep through my tights. "Damn it. Does it look like ... ?" I asked, turning my butt up to him.

"... like you crapped yourself? Yep."

I laughed and Wesley started chuckling too.

"I think your shoes are the problem. They're too big," I said, pointing at his feet. "I noticed you were walking funny earlier."

"Tanner's old shoes," he shrugged. "Mom said I'd grow into them."

"What've you been photographing by the way? Along the trail."

He looked at me cagily.

You just seem very ... focused, on something. That's all."

"I'm ... gonna get a tattoo. Next week."

"A tattoo?"

"Have you heard of skeleton leaves?"

"I don't think so."

He unzipped his bag, dug something out, and presented it to me. It looked like a photo negative of a leaf. A mesh of fine white lines, punched through with tiny pinholes.

"This is the craziest plant I've ever seen," I said.

"It's not a plant. It's a disease. It eats through the pulp of a leaf —any leaf—so only the veins are left. That's what makes it look like this. Then the leaves fall off and bleach out in the sun."

"And you want to get a tattoo—of this?"

He nodded. "I'm taking pictures so I can finish the design. I'm gonna go to the shop Tanner got his tattoos at."

"Aren't you a little young for a tattoo?"

"It's for Mom. I want her to see it before..." His gaze drifted up to the canopy overhead as it swayed with a gust of wind. I put my hand on his shoulder. "Please don't tell Tanner," he said. "He'll say it's stupid."

"I won't, don't worry."

I could hear Tanner behind us somewhere and turned. He was wading along the streambed, raking through a bank of ferns.

"Lose something?" I called out.

He looked up, startled. Stepped back onto the trail. "Let's keep going," he said. "We still

got an hour to go at least."

The path veered away from the stream at some point, the drone of the water dropping out of earshot. We began to climb uphill along a ridge line, our sneakers crunching drier dirt. Somewhere behind the veil of fog a hot sun burned and tickly beads of sweat slid down my stomach. Finally we crested the ridge and the trail halted suddenly at a rocky bluff.

"This is it?" Wesley asked. Tanner checked the map again.

There was nothing to look at at the lookout. Fog obscured the waterfall below us and the canyon's cliffs beyond us. I squirted my bottle of water over my head to cool down.

"Guys, do you hear that?" Wesley said.

I cocked my head. A low growl, somewhere in the distance. From which direction I couldn't tell.

"It's getting louder." Tanner took a few steps toward the edge of the bluff.

The growl grew into a roar. The air around us began to churn, grit biting at our legs. In the sky above us, the dark shape of a helicopter appeared. It approached the bluff, hovered overhead for a deafening moment, then swung around and fled. Mainland tourists on a chopper safari, hunting for social media content through vacuum-sealed windows.

"Assholes," Tanner grumbled.

"C'mon, let's go back," I said.

The next morning, Wesley took a tentative sip of coffee. Scowled. Handed the cup back to me.

"Don't waste it on him," Tanner said, tipping the contents of Wesley's thermos into his.

The sky had cleared overnight. Color swelled back into the world with the sun. The treeline shone green as a gecko's back. I said we should go back to the lookout again and finally see the view. But Tanner insisted we try a different hike he'd read about. I followed his finger to a marking on the map: Alakai Swamp. He saw my skepticism and draped his arm around me. "Would I ever lead you astray? It's supposed to be super cool, I promise."

The back of the trail map said Alakai Swamp was the highest swamp in the world. The bowl of an old caldera, filled with rainfall from Mount Wai'ale'ale nearby. If you were lucky, you might spot one of Kaua'i's endangered honeycreepers, once plentiful, which had retreated from the lower forests to wilder spaces like this.

Tanner's phone buzzed. "Holy shit," he exclaimed, pulling away from me.

"What is it?"

"Shawn. His place got robbed. They took his glass. Everything. Fuck!" Things were always getting stolen in Kapa'a. Someone had sawed the catalytic converter off of my dad's Honda last year while it was parked in our driveway.

"That must suck for him to have to start over again," I said.

Tanner looked up, glaring. "You have no idea, do you?"

"About what?"

Tanner put his phone down. Wiped his palms down his face. Then told me that when I was away in Honolulu, he'd finally convinced Shawn to start selling. The disease hadn't just

hit their stock, it'd started hitting other growing operations too. The biggest growers, the ones who kept hundreds of frogs in scummy garage tanks and sunless storage units, were getting decimated. Small growers like Shawn were faring better.

"One thousand dollars," he said. "*Each.*" That's what people were paying now for a healthy frog of breeding age. The break-in had just cost them fifty thousand, maybe more. Starting again wasn't an option anymore.

Of course, he hadn't told me this before. Hadn't thought to tell me that his next career move would be drug dealer, while I crammed for tests, and ran between classes, and tried to make new friends in a new city. Instead he'd just texted me stoner videos and dick pics. "So that was the big idea: you and Shawn were gonna be the last dealer standing? What were you planning to do when all the glass was gone?"

"We're a clean operation! You saw it."

"Tanner, this is bigger than that. You can't stop it with hand sanitizer and shower curtains."

"So you're the expert now, huh? The girl who didn't even know what glass was six months ago."

"I'm just saying ..."

"I needed this, Van!" he said, throwing his hands up with exasperation. "You get to go college and be a fancy doctor or lawyer or whatever. You get to leave. I don't have that. *This* is the opportunity I have. *Was* the opportunity." He kicked a camping chair over. Wesley fidgeted nervously.

"Okay, Okay, you're right," I said to Tanner. "I understand. I'm sorry."

He crossed his arms. Looked away and shook his head. "I can't believe it's all gone." Then he groaned and sat down next to me. "I guess I should tell you why I brought us here," he said.

Every scar has a story. In school we learned their histories. "Who gets to decide how nature gets used?" my professor had asked one day, gesturing dramatically to the bored-looking freshmen in his lecture hall. "Kings or commoners? Locals or foreigners? King Kamehameha II stripped Hawaii's forests of precious sandalwood to pay off bad debts. White colonists turned those forests into sugarcane fields that drained aquifers and blackened the skies with smoke during harvest fires. They introduced the mongoose from India to control feral rats in the fields, but the mongoose ate our native birds instead. The U.S. Navy took the island of Kaho'olawe from the state and turned it into a bombing range that's still uninhabitable today. Real estate developers took the prime cuts of our other islands and served them up to strangers with an appetite for second homes."

And then there's us—Tanner and me—hiking to a remote swamp the day after Christmas to hunt for soon-to-be-extinct frogs that sell for a grand each because people like us want to get high for a few hours and forget our own scars.

"What have we learned here?" the professor had bellowed. Not much. That pure, wild-caught glass was way more precious than grower glass. Tanner admitted he'd chosen this campsite on a tip that wild colonies of glass the fungus hadn't reached still thrived up here.

He'd originally aimed to catch enough to shore up Shawn's existing breeding stock. Now wild glass was the only hope for rebooting their operation.

Rickety steps led down from the caldera's rim. I stepped carefully over missing treads as we descended. Wesley had insisted on coming too. Back at the campsite, I'd watched him watching Tanner. There was a weird mix of caution and pride in his eyes. He'd been in on Tanner's plan all along, I realized.

The trail plateaued at the bottom of the steps, and we continued along a narrow line of wood planks raised above the deep mud. Thickets of *'ōhi'a lehua* trees surrounded us in every direction, their branches felted with moss. Everything dripped. What felt like rain was condensation that clung to the leaves and fell on our heads as we knocked around the undergrowth with sticks we'd found.

The trick of invisibility that the frogs pulled off had seemed magical in Shawn's bedroom. Here it was maddening. We weren't looking for a needle in a haystack; we were looking for drops of water in the ocean. Soon my back was sore from crouching to inspect the undersides of leaves. A young couple passed us and smiled, oblivious to what we were doing.

Mists whirled in as we reached a clearing where the planks crossed a wide bog. The air smelled aquatic. I pushed my stick into a puddle to test its depth, but had to yank it out before it sank away completely. Queen Emma had made the difficult pilgrimage here on horseback in 1870, while grieving over the deaths of her husband and son. I pictured drowned white horses below our feet, slowly trying to kick up to the surface. This was a place where things came to an end.

"Try over here," Tanner said, ushering us toward a rill of water that trickled through ferns growing alongside the planks.

"When do we just call it, Tanner?" I asked. "I'm tired."

"They said they'd be here. They're supposed to be everywhere out here." He whacked at the ferns with his stick.

"Maybe the disease got here first. It's been ages, and we haven't seen a single one."

"Wait, is that . . . ?" Tanner squatted down to look at something. "No!" He lunged out and grabbed something from below the ferns. Wesley and I rushed over.

"Did you find one?" Wesley asked excitedly.

"I think, um, I think I killed one. Accidentally. My stick must've . . ." Struck it. In Tanner's open palm, a scrawny little frog was dying. Its legs were twisted and limp, and one of its eyes had torn open.

"Oh, God, just put it out of its misery," I said, turning away. It was horrible to look at. "I can't watch."

"But we can't waste it, can we?"

"Are you crazy?"

"It's almost dead already. What if we never find any more? What if this is the last time we can ever feel it?"

I turned back to him, glanced down at the frog, then studied his face. I could see the

hunger in his eyes again. *Baby glass will fuck you up.* What had Lonely Luis's mating call sounded like? "This one doesn't deserve to get used. Not this time."

"We'll just do a little," Tanner nodded. "Take a break for a bit. Then we can keep looking." When he took out his pocket knife and began to cut, I started to walk away. "Wait!" he called out, dropping the knife. "You're leaving?"

But I had already started running.

◆ ◆ DANTE FUOCO ◆ ◆ ◆

## What distance isn't long / what clock isn't you

*for Mark*

Today I did all kinds of things with my body, things that you'd love. I danced in the mirror. Really put my whole pussy into it. I smoked some weed and the sun yellowed in, orbéd squares on the wall and I drew outside the lines with my body. I worked out—pushed up, sat up, dipped down, squatted up-down, up-down.

I got sweaty for you; you make me like myself.

I jerked off twice and the second time I didn't want the fucking phone anymore so I smelled myself, sniffed my armpit like a cantaloupe's navel, the fruit only wet sweet orange if it's musky. I was musky. I bit the pillow and hardened into lollipop, melted into sticky gum.

Baby—I've worked hard today.

I brought home cherry tomatoes, laid them atop a bike bag stuffed to the gills with eggplant, potatoes, melons, lettuce, and kale. I biked up that hill, faggaliciously. But when I turned onto my street the cherry tomatoes spilled out onto the road. Bros on a roof shouted to the approaching SUV *No! No! No! Stop!*, and I watched from the other lane, waiting for SPLAT. But: no SPLAT. Nothing. Nothing got crushed: the car's wheels straddled the fruit. Me and the bros—we cheered together. I picked up the tomatoes. The bros said *we should help* but they already did, and they were on a roof.

Last week, when I left you in New York, I drove away, so sad. I held my two cherry tomatoes; the right one throbbed. My love. Let me say what we already know: I am here, and you are there. Any decent fuck in the ass starts with a good throb. We know how to breathe.

Some nights, I hate myself. Some nights you wake, and I'm a mylar balloon. Helium, pressed sad to the ceiling. *Open the window, I beg. Let me float away.*

You shake your head. You wrap my string in your hand. *Baby, come back.*

## ISAIAH BACK-GAAL & KURT DAVID

### Jersey Shore, or WHEN WE WERE PIRATES!

We bluffed at the scuffed-up table. Like a sore loser  
the Atlantic rose and spilled over the bluff  
all night long. Sandpipers grapevined along the water's edge

like us on prom night scouring  
the beach for trash, time-stepping toward Cheetos  
and coming up with orange beaks. When our knees hurt

our fathers offered us their pins. The sound of tin on tin  
foretold the rain and when we ran inside we found our families  
sitting at the same seats they've always sat at shuffling

playing cards. I knew a mother who sang  
to her nine children every single night. Once, I saw her  
rhyme *Diane* with *picayune*. It transformed me. A bayside loon

falls in love and changes its feathers to match, someone  
told me. That would explain the roof. That would explain  
the coffee percolating on the countertop. Music like

the laminate I was thrown onto or the sea's rusty cough.  
Half-empty bag of licorice, woven chairs. We're home.  
The knots are insecure. At sunrise, I untied

my sneakers and ran into the ocean, hoping you'd be awake by the time I got back.



## Girl's Night

*"If there were no rules in your life for one day, and you could be outrageous, what would you do?"*

*Brook Lee, Miss Universe 1997, answers, "I would eat everything in the world."*

Hillary swallows dirt and it tastes better than she thought it would when she was pregnant and digging up the garden for the first time. The daisies die with the soil and we sing a song of mourning before sucking up their corpses like spaghetti. Suzie says *We're sooooo bad* and it's barely heard over the sound of every street sign in the city breaking in our mouths. Sandra steals a man's phone and swallows it whole. She takes a bite out of his wallet and the inside of his driver's license is gooey. His credit card melts on her tongue like a sugar cube and despite all of the coins in her stomach, she is weightless. *These are dangerous* says Sophie after gulping down her first three birds. Their hollow bones give song to her throat. We all go out dancing and the bouncer is mean so we eat him. And then we eat the entire club. We eat a police horse. We eat the clouds heavy with rain. We drink butane and breathe fire. Judy pours grenadine syrup into Lake Michigan and garnishes it with five maraschino cherries before sucking it all up through a bendy straw. We devour Mount Rushmore and the men taste like chalk and gunpowder. We slow cook the president's German Shepherd and cry because we love dogs but damn, isn't this meat tender as a grandmother's palm? Victoria says, *This is just sinful*. And then she smiles.

What miracle  
That we are larger than life  
And hungry for it

## ◆◆◆ MITCH MONROY ◆◆◆

### Body of Blue

Off Interstate 69 a billboard offers a reward for  
Reporting illegal aliens. I've never felt more

Seen- Surveyed. Next door to Fast Eddie's Lube Wash,  
A stranger patrolling the pkwy yells: faggot! out their car window

Before knowing of being watched:  
The site was a body of blue. Sweet to the lips,

Mi mamita pleaded not to drink the water. In my mind's eye-  
She was the only one doing the looking.

Unnoticed & unburdened gave my body into depth  
Truth; never hated being a woman

Rather the cruelty of being perceived  
Removed 15.7 pounds of breast tissue to let God in.

There. I said it.  
Omnipresent, my Lord, impossible to hold—

Reached for a boi I love instead  
Felt their skin on my bare chest

Our bodies 95% water I poured-over  
Together, we created an endless blue mouth.

**GIANNA STARBLE**

## 3 Bikes

I flew over my handlebars and face-planted into the overflow of the Cherry Creek River, sinking straight through the shallow water until I hit cement. My right front tooth came right out. I didn't even feel it, just felt the absence of—the warm rawness of my vacant gums. I looked for my incisor in the water but only found silt. My shimmery blue Specialized (the nicest bike I ever owned) went unscathed, allowing me to ride the rest of the miles across Denver back to my apartment as blood and tears dripped from my face to my thighs under yellow strobes of streetlights. The next day when I went into work at the restaurant where I made kale salads and plated chocolate cake, the chef saw my mangled mouth and said, "You were too pretty to work in a kitchen, this helps with that." Surprisingly not as scary as the time I got t-boned by a drunk couple in a silver sports car riding home on my Craigslist mountain bike in New Orleans. I had made it through the steel trap of the St. Claude Bridge when I saw the bug-eyed headlights careening toward me. I remember thinking it was the end. My body suspended in the air as I watched my bike crest above me—a swan hurtling the night sky. The couple in the sports car at least stopped, apologized profusely in loose sentences, and gave me and my bike a ride home that I should have refused. How ironic when the following night, after many gin cocktails in the French Quarter, I made the same journey home on the same bike but don't remember it at all. The other time when I got hit by a car was not *that* bad but was made out to be an ordeal because it was at a three-way intersection in Chicago. It was a cab that hit me, and the cops just happened to be there. I stood stunned as the cab driver, with a Greek accent as thick as his black mustache, kept saying, "Bikers! You think I can see you—I can't see you!" And this policeman who looked like Vin Diesel asked for my ID to write an incident report. He eyed me up and down, then studied my driver's license photo, and said, "You looked good with long hair." He told me the witnesses said I didn't have the right of way and I wondered *when the fuck did he have time to talk to witnesses, what witnesses?* My eyes searched the gray buildings and buzzing neon for someone who would understand my desire to be a body moving through the night as fast as blinking stars, but there were only somber city sounds and the sobering weight of my pink Raleigh's unbent frame against my thigh. The tooth? I got a fake one put in and sold the bike.

## ◆◆◆ STEFFAN TRIPPLETT ◆◆◆

### scuttle

*for E. Hughes & Joshua Aiken*

something strange in the air  
texture thick, heady tempest brewing

a body will lead you out a door  
& into more livable atmosphere

how black folk know more than anyone  
how you gotta listen to your gut

listen to where the body pulls  
no scheduled orbits, only spinning outs

so we'll flee: me, a friend from years ago  
& a new friend made in hours just between

a new little trio, seeking refuge  
just pairs of walking legs

sometimes you need a coffee or  
alone time next to another being alone

absorbing each other in all sorts of spans  
mirror neurons wrapped up in one

punctuality isn't always a requirement  
missing something scheduled is not

the worst thing that will happen to us  
we must remind ourselves of this—

sometimes people burst into quiet stars  
in front of you, ascending toward the

heavens, we'll miss out if we aren't there to look  
find them only after, shaking stardust off  
their sleeves—a person can showcase galaxies  
when they're new to us, if we let them

yes, there are bigger things  
yes, there are smaller things

we can be a little late  
& life will still go on:

drake will threaten a new album drop  
the sky will shift an odd color

then back to beauty again  
the spider in your room

will scuttle across the floor  
it won't harm you

**RAPHAEL JENKINS**

## The Homie

I don't know the proper name of the tree in front of my house, so I call him homie. We play the dozens while I smoke my joints on the porch. In winter, I roast my nigga bout his bald head, & the homie notes how my elbows, dry as they are, more closely resemble bark than anything human. One summer day, sun-drunk & swaying, the homie tells me of his momma. How she scraped sky, & grabbed sunlight by the fistful as one would a lover's hair or hand. A new parking lot made my nigga an orphan. He hates parking lots now. Banks too, all their hoarded green that will never brown, the fluorescent lighting & forced smiles. I want to hug my nigga, to find his still heart & place my pulsing one near it, sharing my cadence. I want to squeeze him til his bark breaks my skin, til we are blood bound brother-cousins, but the homie is not a hugger. We dap, exchange knowing nods as the wind blows. We aren't typically into I Love You's, but I say it anyway, & the homie chuckles, calls me soft. & I cannot deny this.

◆ ◆ **JORDAN E. FRANKLIN** ◆ ◆

poet ponders poetics in the White room

I N P U T	1. There should be no more than three colors in a poem.  2. Stanza means “room.”  3. The color “black” is a mixture of all colors.	
O U T P U T		<p>If a Black girl sits in a White stanza, who eats whom? Does she break the stanza’s good bones in two? Is she even there? Always the Black girl in White stanzas—the past’s and present’s bellies full of White, White rooms— black girl strapped down to the very marrow of those White stanzas ‘til only her black pupils could move—to be a black girl in a White stanza means you have all these colors rolling in your skin but none of the power to escape the White room.</p>

## LIO ABENDAN

### Occupancy Notice

My body is the plaything of both higher and lower beings. It is the intermediary between yeast and a satellite. It is the medium through which god contacts the worm.

Today I am nurturing a prescription medication. It kills the other things that my body grows. If I were to stop growing right now, not coming to a rolling stop but rather cutting a cord, jarring a harp, it would go on killing until eventually I am too overgrown with weeds and invasive species, too populated with insects and common household pests, for its killing to carry on.

Here is a house.

Cahigan leaves his suitcase by the front door for the entirety of the first week, because to move it past that invisible threshold would be to accept that he's really going to stay here for longer than a week or two, and also because he forgot to renew his prescription before he moved and going to a pharmacy is the kind of thing that he can only do when he's already on his meds.

He never moves the suitcase. The suitcase doesn't move itself either; like most objects, it chooses to remain inanimate. Every morning Cahigan thinks maybe it's time to push it all the way inside, but he can never work up the courage. His hands tremble with the thought of it. With every month that passes, the suitcase grows less conspicuous, its colors fading to a dull brown like it is trying to blend in with the cracked wallpaper and remain blissfully unseen.

Today the house stinks of rat poison and mothballs. There's a long black stain over the floorboards in the foyer that Cahigan has already learned how to circumvent, but the mold that grows over the stain is leaving. The mold is drying up and clearing itself out. A prescription has taken root and replaced it, pushed in through a long syringe like the proboscis of a butterfly invading a flower.

A shadow keeps putting up notices on the front door. They're not legal documents, nor proper eviction notices, but once a month Cahigan wakes to find another red note on the door, scrawled in illegible, hateful text, and sees the little thing scurry away on its many legs like it doesn't want to be seen. Each month the notes stay up longer and longer like a warning or a countdown.

"How's the house?" Cahigan's mother asks. Her name is Riz, short for Rizalina. She has a scar like a comet's path across her pelvis from when she had Cahigan via C-section, and her voice is distorted by the shitty landline, made unfamiliar and strange, like she's yelling each word down a tunnel and the tunnel is altering it on the way out. Cahigan hasn't seen her since he moved out of her house and into his own.

"It's fine," he lies. "How's your health?"

There's a long pause. "What? You're cutting out."

"How are you doing?"

Riz is chopping garlic into tiny, tiny pieces like she's planning to skin a vampire the way someone might salt a slug. "I'm cooking."

Cahigan used to have fangs before the orthodontist filed them. "Smells good."

The house creaks with longing.

"Come to the phone!" Riz calls, even further down the tunnel. Through the fuzz of static, Cahigan hears someone shuffle around with the hunchbacked gait of an old man. His father didn't use to move like this. He used to stand up tall like a telephone pole at the end of the block. He used to run powerlines right through him.

"Who is it?" Mitch grumbles to his wife. His voice reminds Cahigan of Vicks Vaporub and prickly pear. Of Sundays spent in an outdoor pool learning how to hold your breath underwater, even when your lungs cried out with terror.

Riz hands him the phone. "It's your daughter."

Here is a house. I am afraid of becoming the house because I know what it means for me. I know what it wants.

At birth I am imprinted with the memory of encasement. At five years old I am laminated by the knowledge that I too am the output of a gachapon, a hollow plastic shell, a matryoshka doll, a bassinet, a house. When I am 16 I start to think of myself as not just a house but also a block, a suburban unit. I look down the block and I see a long line of decrepit buildings with their windows all papered over and shuttered up, their bodies burst open like rotten paper bags. I see my past and my future. A house that grows inside a house inside a house inside a house. The walls grow around me like a cocoon, but my maggot body doesn't change like it's supposed to.

"Did you know there's only a thousand of us left?"

"Really?" says Cahigan. He has the phone wedged between his shoulder and ear.

"Yes. Only a thousand Cahigans left."

Rizalina Cahigan was born in 1998 in Manila. Cahigan was born 30 years after, in a city that's not Manila. "I didn't know that."

There's a hammering at the door of the house. The shadow is putting up more notices that he can't read. He runs to the foyer the moment the noises start and rips open the door, but that fucking thing has already scattered itself to the wind like it was never there, even though the nail pinning the notice to his doorframe is only half-in.

Cahigan tears down the paper and crumples it into the smallest ball he can force it to be. He calls out in case the shadow is crouched in one of the bushes that line his driveway: "Keep your notices to yourself. I'm not leaving. You can't make me."

"Kasie? Are you talking to me?"

He scrambles for the phone with clumsy hands. "No, sorry. Were you saying something?"

Riz is quiet for a long moment before she speaks again, with a sigh. "I asked you if you've grown anything yet." Her voice is raspy like someone has taken sandpaper to it, the kind of

grainy, unfinished rasp that you think of when asked to *imagine the voice of a stone or to think of a sound between a click and a howl*. She used to sing to Cahigan above his cradle, calling him *my love, my beautiful girl*.

"No," Cahigan laughs. "Give me some time, I'll get around to it." He neglects to mention that he's barely unpacked, barely sorted himself out yet. "I don't think I'm going to be growing anything for a long while."

"What about a grandchild?" she says.

A long time ago my ancestors didn't live in houses like the ones on this block. I'm talking about nice two-story suburban affairs, HOA-approved, a veranda, shingles, shuttered windows, the whole deal. Neocolonials or Vancouver specials. The kind of house with a shitty, useless balcony on the top floor. The kind that could be done up and repainted a standard shade of beige on Queer Eye or the kind that you drive past a little slower, their windows boarded up and a cardboard sign pasted in the bottom floor window, the kind of house that gets talked about by its neighbors. But this is not the kind of house that my mother's mother's mother's mother (or her mother's mother's mother's mother's mother) was born in. They used to live in stilt-houses. I've seen it online.

I'm not supposed to be on this side of the ocean. I keep trying to stand up on my stilt-legs and clambering over the roofs of the other houses, but they are all shingles where I am thatch and I keep slipping, losing my footing, falling into their backyards.

What if I'm not meant to be a house at all?

Cahigan's yeast infection clears on the sixth day, so he can stop looking at his body in a mirror. There's still half a tube of medication left, so he tosses it far into the back of the medicine cabinet where he doesn't have to see it, the same way he no longer has to look at himself. When he showers, he averts his eyes or stares at the ceiling out of respect for the body that he is inhabiting. She has been too often looked at with eyes that want desperately to transform their gazes into touch, and under all the hatred that Cahigan bears toward her there is also pity and grief enough to keep him from harming her himself. His body (her body) still smells like medicine.

Inside his ribcage, muffled by soft tissue and musculature, the shadow whispers: *you need to tell your mother, or I'll keep putting up notices. I'll crush you. I'll drive you out.*

Here is the house. Look. You have to see it yourself. It's not a western style house but I think that makes it worse that I'm doing this. It's a bahay kubo crammed into the space between nothing and nothing and yet it's pressed against these two invisible walls, craning its neck up like a bird or a spire. It's a plant poked up between the cracks in the cement, trying to escape and begging for sunlight, begging for mercy, and I am standing over it with a trowel and mortar.

The house stands at a crossroads and there is an eviction notice posted, an occupancy limit, no pets, no furniture, no wi-fi, no guests for more than three days per month year-round. The listing's not up on Craigslist or Facebook but instead it is stapled to telephone poles and photographs and the front of my chest. I make it as inhospitable as I can, but in this city there

is always a shortage of homes and yet too many empty like this one and I know someone's going to want to live here even if it's burnt to a husk or a blackened brittle bamboo stalk so I leave the key under the doormat because there are rules to this, and I am not allowed to throw away the key or swallow it or drop it down a well because I am too young for something so permanent and the house is more important than I am. But I back away from the doormat once the key is under because I am afraid of the way the wild grass rattles out a warning. It can smell my fear like a shark, unless that's not fear that sharks smell but blood, or unless that's not sharks that smell fear but dogs instead. By *it*, I mean the house.

You always wanted children. That's what houses are for: occupancy. Invasion. Inhabitation. Houses are not meant to stand empty like I do now.

I think I'm going to tell you. I think you need to know.

Riz listens silently until Cahigan is done talking. She doesn't ask him if he's planning to change his name or tell his grandparents, which is a relief, because he's still not sure how to do either. The lump in his throat swells into a tumor and begins to carve away at his insides, cutting off little pieces of him like strips of sushi-grade salmon and eating them, delicately.

Riz takes it better than he thought she would.

"Oh, Kasie," she whispers. "Why didn't you tell me before? I never saw it in you when you were a child. I never saw the signs."

Here is a house. This house, I am killing.

Every day I am growing taller and soon my head will burst through the top of the house and then my shoulders, and eventually the house will break apart as its support beams make way for my bones. This is a house made for dolls, for Barbies or Bratz or other dolls I did not play with as a child. Its womb expands to encompass what I am, but still I grow too big to be contained within four woven walls.

This is a house of nipa and anahaw. This is a creature struggling to stay standing on its stilt-legs, wobbling like a colt. It is still a child, always a child, and I am a child inside it and I am breaking it open. I see your smile twice in all my childhood photographs, once in your face and once in my own, and I know that we are a box within a box within a box. The house says it's not my fault; that it will always love me, that I will always be its child, but I can't stop myself.

Now I am growing other things, like mold and new bones and new organs that the doctors will never learn the purpose of and will conclude is purposeless. They will suggest surgery or amputation to get rid of them, but I am an adult man. They need me to sign their thousand papers before they can operate, and I will never, never let them have what is mine.

When I step out of the house, leaving it neither half-full nor half-empty unlike the proverbial glasses of the optimist and pessimist, the house will die. It will still call me on weekends but I know that it's crying as soon as I hang up, or a little before. I hear the way your voice shakes when you try to tell me about something kind and beautiful that I was not there to see.

"I'm sorry," I tell the house, as its roof splinters above me in a shower of dry thatch. "I'm sorry. I can't do anything else." I can't save you. I was born before I ever got the chance.

But this time, I'm going to be something different. I'm not going to let them have a piece of me. I'm not going to take up any more land.

I'm going to be a creature on 60 stilt-legs like a centipede that moves too fast to ever carry passengers. I'm going to carry a message between god and the worm myself with my own hands and not the hollow of my body.

I'm going to carry your last name with me in the center of my heart like a peach pit although I will bear no fruit. The earth below me will grow dry and barren, but from the shucks of brittle grass there will be thatch.

Come over, and I'll show you the life I can make without creating any. You'll see. You'll watch me do it. I'll take you with me. I'll carry you on my back. I'll put a notice on my door and tear listings off the telephone poles and grow you a garden instead of a grandchild and hope that the cycle stops if I end it here, even if we don't change.

 **AMALEE BEA**

Solo – there are cracks in this world,

and the seams are ripping. out of the corner of my eye I see flashes of light, glimpses of shadows with no reference point. in the distance I can hear singing rising out of the highway. every thing I touch has a parallel life. my movements

push against the curtain that divides us, brushing the texture of death. I say death because death is the illusion of separation. like this poem.

*the truth is:*

I am being coaxed out of a cocoon that has been spun over centuries from fear and violation. But I am unraveling. I am “going mad,” or coming home, I am emergent reality. I am the activity of love. I am trembling, wet wings shaking as they push toward unfolding. I am tightly packed blossom, ready to bust. I am the birther and the born. Some things are made to be torn.

EDWARD SALEM

## DREAMING OF AN OUD

Raed's sperm flailed helplessly in the dark,  
dying over the next few hours.

His skin looked like plaster in the cold light  
as he napped, rough and poreless.

He'd been inside the settlers' homes,  
breathing their air, and now he was here,

breathing it into me. I hadn't *looked*  
at a man in a long time. I liked looking

at him but didn't like seeing what my son  
would've become. When he left,

we kissed like a married couple,  
a wife sending her husband off to work,

only he'd already been to work,  
and then he'd come here, and now

he was going home to al-Arroub camp  
to rest before another day working

construction on the settlement.

**EDEN NOBILE**

## TRANS (MANIA) DEVIL

i would have no trouble passing if my transition was to tasmanian devil. if instead of being a *trans-man*, a *trans-something/other*, if i was a trans-manian devil (*sarcophilus*, meaning flesh-lover); i would pass, no problem. tasmanian devils have dog-sized, rat-proportioned bodies. big ass skulls to accommodate the strongest bite force of any animal on land—so when their jaws unhinge it's like the open yawn of a gulch a giant could curl his back into. the english on the shore thought their screams were sent via satan to torture the living. what you would call true is that i'm horned, *vegetal hermaphrodite*, they call me, or i call myself. but the word *devil* comes from the root meaning *slander* and *tasmania* comes from the name of a dutch “explorer.” the island doesn't have just one name. back before land mass broke away, during storms the devils would hide in the same caves as humans. these devils had no name, save *purinina*, which has no tether to the idea of the devil. an idea which was molded from satyrs on pots, swinging their dicks and drinking on dionysian feast days. *purinina* ate the sheep the settlers brought, making them devil-ish. the devils devoured the sheep, the same way the satyr devoured the goat. the same way the devil devoured dionysius. the same way satan froze *purinina* in a cave and held him, in uneasy truce, waiting for thunder to pass. gods, animals, words, get eaten. horns are placed atop our heads regardless, and what can we do but continue munching on carrion. like always, dionysius is raised by sheep and by nymphs, *purinina* rests his scarred maw in the dirt, and the demons lie eating flesh: girl-faced and terrible.

◆◆◆ **ADAM SPIEGELMAN** ◆◆◆

## Sonnet About Steroids

Steroids turned me into an enemy of poetry but a friend to all.  
It never came so furiously, so insistently, this literal-ness.  
When I was tired, I slept. When I loved you, I told you every time.  
You'll understand I always wanted to be good. I made lists and lists.  
Lists in favor of and lists against. I was a muscular camera, bellows  
Drawn for a field of infinite focus, eating the summer like cake  
By the fistful standing over the sink. Summer of almond soap,  
Summer of aching scalp, and all the time the same great, arcing search  
For a place where I might do everything again for the first time.  
I walked shirtless up and down city streets, beaches, train stations,  
An advertisement of vexed perfection. Brighten the whites, I said and they did,  
Turn up the magentas, lower the greens. I took myself to Luna Park.  
Michael was there too. On the boardwalk, speaking with a mouth full of hotdog,  
The sauerkraut and ketchup oozed down over his knuckles like bloody mucus

## EDWARD SALEM

### ODE TO \_\_\_\_\_

Take off your pants as you read this,  
push them down to your ankles.  
Keep your underwear on,  
don't be gross.

Open Instagram, close Instagram,  
open Instagram, close Instagram  
for two minutes straight,  
which may feel absurd.

What are the odds you would've seen  
slain Palestinians with your pants down  
if you kept Instagram open?

Don't resent me for this  
line of questioning.  
This bearable conflation,  
like magenta carnations  
at the mass grave.

The action I'm asking  
you to take  
in this piece is...  
you decide.  
Just do something.  
\_\_\_\_\_ the president.

SIENNA FERESHTEH

## WORMS

A creature unfurls inside me—  
enthroned, unleashing silver swords  
against my right side—tonsils, lymph  
nodes, ovaries—inflamed pickle-  
blue, howling—

A worm pulsates in my pothos;  
I thought I was alone.

Bed-bound, we cry  
together—a tear for Frida, two  
for Forugh, three for every plant  
I killed while keeping myself

watered—

We invite the creature closer, unafraid  
of his hideous groove—it's true, we all  
have our dirt.

**◆ ◆ SETH LEEPER ◆ ◆ ◆**

## Pantoublock with A Soul in a Baby Blanket

A soul in a body is tethered to the earth. A soul free of the body is limitless. Limitless freedom is what the soul craves. My soul was entrapped in a silver lamp and stashed across a channel of desert caves. A soul free of the body floats through space unimpeded by paradox or dimension. I came here for you, to be pulled out of your body. My soul was collected from crags and chasms at coordinates where the rocks concaved. The pieces were wrapped in a yellow baby blanket and delivered to the hospital on horseback. I came here for you, to be wrapped around your neck and shoulders, sleep like I was dead. My soul was pieced together and hammered smooth before being placed into the infant body. The pieces were fragile and a few fell to the tile floor where they shattered into dust. I came here to be your son. To tether myself to your soul. My soul was pieced together to ignore the training wheels on my bike and fall crying into your arms. They poured the sand of my soul into a flesh mold and placed me in your arms. I came here to be your son. To know the ephemeral bonds of maternity. My soul fractured when you left, taking handfuls of sand into the Bardo behind you.


**MAYA DENKMIRE**

## Teens Killed and Ate a New York Village's Beloved Swan, Police Say

### **Mansfield**

The swans have been ours forever<sup>1</sup>. Didn't you see the silhouette carved into the Welcome to Mansfield sign on your way in, long neck dipping coyly down? Haven't you read the street names? Cygnet Place, that's where the mayor lives, with his shiny black shoes like two dogs' noses. Didn't you see the creatures themselves, spots of tufted cream afloat on the paleblue pond? Didn't you lift your foot off the gas just slightly, involuntary movement like biting a tongue? Didn't you crane your neck in awe, sure you couldn't have seen what you thought you'd seen, a mother swan, her mate, and their three babies too? Isn't it just too good to be true? Can you believe that every day Jacob Diedrick can drive that pickup down mainstreet and honk to them, and they'll lift up those great regal heads, and Mary Gregory's daughter will get married with the swans swimming sweetly in the background? Isn't it wonderful that mother Rose will glide right up to you if you hold out bread, and that little Jeffrey Collings took his first steps towards her, saltine crunched in his tiny chubby hand, just last Wednesday?

When we heard what had happened to Rose and her three beautiful babies, we couldn't believe it. Our hands flew to our mouths. The elder and more delicate of us fainted right to the brightgreen grass of our perfectly maintained lawns! What a terrible, ghastly, thing to have happened to what has always been a peaceful, close-knit town. How can we return to normal knowing that a murderer lives among us? How can we host the strawberry festival in the fire station knowing that Mrs. Shuman won't be able to dedicate her prize winning shortcake with the melting whipped cream to Rose any longer? How can we sleep at night when the calls of swans in anguish still echo in our ears?

### **Police Report 218984, 03 July, 2024**

At 7:24 pm, July 30th, Mansfield police responded to a 911 call from 124 Cygnet Place where a frantic voice begged law enforcement to "please help us" as someone had murdered their swan. On scene, officers found Mayor Peter Claremont, his wife, Anna, and their 14 year old son, Leo, on the front porch. Within the house, an elaborate feast was laid out on the table. Mr. Claremont confirmed that the main course of said feast was in fact the meat of a swan. He told police that a young man from just outside Mansfield, Remy Nelson, had killed, cooked, and served the swan to him and his family. It was only after they finished their meal that the family realized what they had been eating. According to Mr. Claremont, Remy had befriended his son and taken advantage of his connection to the family in order to commit such a vicious

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1 *3 Teens Killed and Ate a New York Village's Beloved Swan, Police Say*, Jesus Jiménez, The New York Times

crime, which could only be seen as a threat to the livelihood of the town of Mansfield itself. The family appeared to be in a state of shock. Mr. Claremont told law enforcement that his son had vomited after learning what they had eaten. Leo Claremont was unable to make a statement at the time due to his emotional distress.

The corpse of a swan was later found discarded behind the family's home. She was identified as Rose, who had been living in the pond maintained by the Claremont family for over 15 years. Remy Nelson was discovered on foot several miles from the house. He is currently being held for questioning. Police are still actively searching for the three missing cygnets that belonged to the murdered bird. Any information regarding their whereabouts can be called in to police at (315) 440 9872.

### Mansfield

Remy Nelson? Son of Karen Nelson, poor girl, and some lowlife who skipped out on her before we ever met him? We knew him. Of course we did! We knew everyone. We knew him for his pale hands and marshy smell and counting under his breath in church. We knew him for staring into the Up There like something might fall down. Nothing wrong with that, no, no harm in a mother who got pregnant at 16 and worked at the paper mill, bringing home the scent of rotting pulp. No harm in siblings crawling up the walls like baby spiders, no harm in a dog tied to a stick outside the leaning house just outside of town. The town of Mansfield does *not* judge the less fortunate. We had not even an *inkling* that he would do what he ended up doing. We hoped he'd grown out of wet-dog shagginess and bent shoulders...and yet. A town knows those within it like a mother knows the scent of its child. We closed our hands over the drawers of the register when he walked into the Quality Shop. We crossed the street and linked arms and gigglewhispered into the curl of an ear. Something off about that kid, with the bitten down nails and one eye wider than the other.

### Leo & Remy

Leo tall, Remy short. Leo blond, Remy with brown hair falling in the eyes like last year's leaves. Leo, lost on his way home the long way, gritting his teeth and picking his way gingerly through grass dried up in shock of summer heat, stumbling upon Remy, silent, up to his elbows in the creek. "Sorry!" leapt from his mouth immediately, as though he had walked into Remy's private bedroom.

Remy did not look up. "I've almost got it. You can come see if you're quiet," he said. Leo did not understand until he peeked over Remy's shoulder and saw the crayfish inching toward him beneath the dappled surface of the water. In a flash, Remy's hand shot out and grabbed it. He brandished it in Leo's face. "Ta da!"

"I'm Leo," Leo said, stupidly, because he couldn't think of anything else to say. Remy inspected the crayfish, poking at one of its thin legs. He held it very gently between his thumb and index finger as it wiggled. "I know who you are. We're in the same English class. Yesterday when Mrs. Parsh called on you, your face got very red. And you're the mayor's son. Now your

face is getting very red again."

Leo pressed his hand to his cheek. It was hot.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"You didn't. I was just thinking about how much I hated when she called on me." "You don't like talking in class?"

"I don't know what I'm supposed to say."

Remy seemed to consider this. "Who says there's anything you're supposed to say at all?" he asked. Then he thrust the crayfish into Leo's hands.

### Mansfield

We didn't even know the boys knew each other. Wasn't Leo a bit too...buttoned up for Remy's tastes, anyway? Can't really imagine him down at the Nelson place, BB gun pointed at a coke can, now can you. Never saw them share a glance in the halls, anything of the sort. So why would he have done what he did to the swans, the pride of his family? Jealousy, that's what it must have been, jealousy eating Remy like the elms behind 124 Cygnet place got eaten up by the fungus last summer. Spidery growths all up their fronts and in between places till they were sick and rotted right down to the core.

### Remy & Leo

After the crayfish, two puddles seeping together in a dip in the burning asphalt. An empty seesaw perfectly balanced. Into Mansfield Public Library to the back corner with the DVDs where no one really went. Up and down the street, kicking a stone. Back at the bridge behind the mill, Leo's phone full of texts and shut off, eyes closed and back against sun-warmed wood. Remy up a tree, wind lifting his hair off his face. Leo quiet, Remy talking. Leo quiet, Remy listening.

### 124 Cygnet Place

The slow cooker was broken. The countertop smelled damp. Peter Claremont, every morning, fresh cup of coffee in his hand at the window, staring. The swans, circling beneath his gaze. *Rose is looking beautiful this morning. What do you say we take some photos, send them out to The Gazette? They'd like that, don't you think? Maybe bring in some more visitors to see them. Give her a little something extra for me this morning, alright? Little bit of lettuce from last night. Anna, another cup? Leo, did you hear me? I said we should take some pictures of the swans for...for fuck's sake, Leo, take off your headphones! Jesus Christ, you're just like your mother sometimes.*

### The Would You Rather Game

*I have a question. Would you rather have a water dispenser right next to your bed, or be a bird?*

*What?*

*Just answer the question, Leo.*

*Um. Be a bird.*

*You're crazy. You don't want access to water in bed all the time forever?*

I don't really get thirsty at night.

*You realize that's actually a psychotic thing to say.*

Well, it's the truth. Would you rather have dry hot hands or wet cold hands? Stop laughing!

I'm playing your game.

*What kind of question is that?*

A more normal one than water dispenser or bird. Answer.

*I think...dry hot hands. My hands are always sweating. It's bad.*

Let me feel. Oh, man, you're right, you should pick dry hot hands.

*Hey!*

*Sorry.*

*Would you rather have to shout every time you talk or never talk again?*

That's not a good one.

*Why not?*

Because it's easy. Never talk again.

*You don't want to say anything ever again for the rest of your life?*

I don't know. I don't think it would change that much.

*It would change a lot for me.*

### Mansfield

We caught Remy staring at the swans once. Leo was at the pond, tossing feed into the water. What a responsibility, but we knew it was well deserved. Good boy, even if a bit quiet. That morning we saw it, no doubt: the bright patch of Remy's neck behind the leaning oak tree. We felt the hairs on the backs of our arms raise; we felt his gaze like a cold finger pressed to the tippytops of our spines. We knew we were right about Remy. We saw then the claw marks where his fingers dug into the bark. We saw the hungry look in his eyes. We saw the drool dripping down his fangs, out of his hanging jaw.

### Leo & Remy

Remy seemed to find it unfathomable that Leo had not been swimming at the quarry behind the marsh.

"I just didn't know you were allowed to swim in here," Leo said, stepping tentatively around a smashed glass bottle towards the edge of the water. His ribs glowed white as birchbark under the noontime sun.

"Why wouldn't you be?" Remy said. He yanked his shirt over his head and ran past Leo, letting out a whoop in the moment he remained suspended in air before hitting the water with a splash. Leo winced as the aftermath of Remy's cannonball sprayed him. "Come on!" Remy yelled from the water, where he was doing something that looked a lot more like drowning than treading water.

Leo pressed a hand to his chest. His heart was beating wildly. He squeezed his eyes shut,

held his nose, and ran. The water was so cold that it took his breath away. When he came up for air, he was gasping. Everything looked shiny and soft. Remy appeared in front of him, hair dripping in his eyes. "I like how you jumped. Your legs were like this." He held up his fingers, slightly crossed.

"I was minimizing impact," Leo said, and Remy laughed. When he laughed, he always threw his whole head back, like what Leo said was so funny that he couldn't possibly hold it upright.

"How'd you get this?" he asked, pressing his fingers, still crossed, to Leo's collarbone, where a scar bubbled pink like a melted crayon.

Leo looked down. "Oh. I broke my collarbone when I was younger," he said. "They had to do surgery."

He used his arms to propel himself backwards, away from Remy. Goosebumps spread up his arms.

"Oh, man. How does one break their collarbone? That sounds awful."

"I fell down the stairs. I'm getting cold. Can we get out?"

"Fell down the stairs so bad you broke your collarbone? Geez, you must have been a clumsy kid. Leo? Leo, where are you going, we just got in!"

### 124 Cygnet Place

Peter Claremont, cheeks burning red. Leo at the table, knees drooping to the floor. *Do you think I'm stupid? Is that what you think? Do you know how it feels, stepping foot in that school that I've been pouring money into for years, and having a teacher tell me how my own son is failing English? Whatthefuckwereyouthinking, keeping this from me? Leo? Is there anyone in there?*

The sound of flesh against flesh like wings hitting water. Beyond the windows, swans circling silently.

### Leo & Remy

I have to go.

*Go where?*

Feed the swans.

*How'd you get to do that anyway?*

Dad asked.

*You do anything he asks?*

Not anything.

*Sorry. Don't you think they're sad? I bet they wish they could swim in this water, not that dyed up pond where everybody's always taking pictures.*

I don't think swans want a creek. I think they need a place to move in a circle.

*That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. What do you feed them?*

It's like a mix of grain and stuff from our compost that they like. Potato peelings, you know.

*Would you rather eat potato peelings or jump in the swan pond right now?*

Potato peelings.

*Would you rather eat potato peelings for every meal or drink the whole swan pond right now?*

That's not fair. I couldn't drink the whole swan pond even if I wanted to.

*That's the point. Your stomach would explode.*

And anyway, where would the swans live?

*What do they look like up close?*

They're bigger than you think, probably. Very quiet. I've only heard Rose make a sound once, when she got scared by a dog. She sounded like when you play a clarinet too hard. Their eyes are very dark. They reflect the water.

*Can you take me with you?*

What?

*Can you take me to see the swans?*

I don't think that's a good idea.

*Why?*

It's just not.

*How come you never invite me to your house?*

How come you never invite me to your house?

*Would you rather have me come to your house or eat a whole bucket of potato peelings?*

I don't want to play this game right now.

*Come on.*

You wouldn't like it there.

*You mean, they wouldn't like me there.*

Remy. You know that's not what I mean.

*Then why can't I visit? I want to see the swans. I want to see your room. Please?*

...Okay.

*Yeah?*

Yeah.

## 124 Cygnet Place

Peter Claremont, beer in hand, leaning at the sink. Leo, putting away dishes at the counter.

*Remy Nelson? Isn't that Karen Nelson's kid? How old was she when she had him, 11? Sure, he can come over. We'll feed him dinner. I'd love to do a little philanthropy.*

Peter's laugh, harsh against the blank white walls. The dish slipping out of Leo's hand. The rainstorm sound of shattered porcelain.

*Goddammit, Leo! Clean that up. Can't trust him with anything, this kid.*

## Mansfield

Had we ever heard anything sinister, any sounds of discontent coming from 124 Cygnet place? Well, frankly, that's not really for us to say. Not our business, what went on behind closed doors. Besides, Mr. Claremont was the best mayor Mansfield had had in decades. So involved,

he was. Paid for the new extension on the school and the art class didn't have to meet in the gymnasium anymore. Hired landscapers to plant wildflowers all around the edge of the swan pond. Rose and her babies have never looked so sweet.

## 124 Cygnet Place

"I didn't know you played baseball." Remy, in Leo's room, sticky skin cooling fast under the cranked-up AC.

Leo shrugged, hands in pockets. He watched Remy circle the room. "My dad played it. Turns out I'm okay at it, too."

"I'd say you're more than okay. You have so many of these." Remy trailed his hands along the rows of shiny plastic trophies on Leo's desk.

"Do you have to touch every single one?" Leo meant it as a joke, but Remy pulled his hand away as though scalded. Leo suddenly wished he'd never brought Remy here. Wanted to shower the smell of the pines out of his hair. Wanted the trophies, stupid, why did he even have them on display, it wasn't like he cared about them, shoved away deep in some closet.

Remy sat on Leo's bed and stared past him out the window. "You can see the swans from here," he said, squinting.

Leo nodded, came to sit beside him. By way of an apology, he asked, "Would you rather live in my house, or live in the swan pond?"

Remy's eyes on his hands in his lap, twisting. "I would rather live in your house."

## 124 Cygnet Place

Peter Claremont, at the head of the table. Leo beside him, head down. Remy, playing with his fork. Anna Claremont, laying the casserole down on the table. The room dimly lit, white walls staring hard, the blank smell of plaster pressed over everything.

"So, Remy, how is your mother?"

"She's okay, thanks. She's working crazy hours at the mill. You know how that goes. Hey, this is really good." When Remy turned his voice toward her, Anna Claremont startled, as though out of a deep sleep.

"Oh, thank you," she said, her voice watery.

"How are you finding your English class?" Peter Claremont asked.

Leo's back stiffened. He wished, more than anything in the world, that he could grab Remy by the wrist and pull him out of there. If he had his way, they would never put on shoes again. They would walk and walk until their feet grew calloused, until they could scramble up any tree without wincing. They would put their hands in the grass and pull out great handfuls and break sticks off dead trees and scoop globs of mud out of the creek bed until they had enough to build a hut, and then the only things they would ever talk about would be the shapes of the stars and the smell of the woods and who saw a fox and where.

Remy shrugged. "I've already read the book we're reading, so it's not the most interesting to me."

Peter Claremont's eyebrows raised. "You've already read *Brave New World*?" Remy nodded. "Not my favorite. But definitely an interesting world."

"Was it for a class?"

"No, just for fun."

"You hear that, Leo?" Peter said, his voice pressing Leo flat to the table. "I wish my son had that kind of initiative. To think that a kid from down by the marsh has more interest in reading than him."

Remy's shoulders stiffened. Leo kept his eyes on the table, wishing he could bore a hole in it, wishing he could make it explode into one million tiny pieces so that this dinner would be over. He needed to say something. "How are the swans, Dad?" he finally managed, his voice coming out in a croak.

"Oh, they're just wonderful! I've just had the gardener re-dye their pond. It's been getting scummy and brown since the thaw."

Remy's eyes flicked to Leo's. There was something there that scared him, but Leo didn't know what. *No, Remy*, Leo thought desperately, but it was too late. Remy spoke. "Isn't that bad for the swans, though?"

"Excuse me?" Peter asked, as though he hadn't heard correctly, though Remy had spoken perfectly clearly.

"Isn't the dye bad for the swans? I think I read somewhere that pond dye can be harmful for certain types of waterfowl. It's not good for any type of wildlife, actually, including aquatic plants. And the pond is so small, it's probably putting something toxic in their food."

Peter laughed, as though Remy was very young and had spilled food all over the floor. "Son, I'm not sure where you're getting your information from, but I assure you that I am giving my swans the best care possible."

Leo looked to his mother, silently praying that she would choose this moment to break her silence, but she appeared to be occupied with something on the wall behind Peter. She swayed back and forth, slightly.

Remy appeared nowhere near finished. "Your swans?" he asked, leaning forward. "I thought they belonged to the town."

"As long as I am feeding them, they are my swans," Peter snapped, matching Remy's lean.

"But you're not feeding them," Remy said. "Leo is."

What happened next flashed so fast before Leo's eyes that he was almost sure that he imagined it. His mouth twisting, Peter slammed his hand on the table. Remy shoved himself backward and lost his balance. His chair slammed to the floor and his cry of pain lit up the room so brightly that for a moment, Leo couldn't see. Blindly, he leapt to his feet and ran to Remy, curled on the paisley carpet with his left hand wrapped around his right wrist. "Let me see, Remy, let me see," Leo begged, placing his fingers on the bend in Remy's wrist. Remy winced, his face screwed up and red. "Does it hurt? Can you bend it?"

"You need to leave," Peter said, his voice even. He got to his feet, napkin clenched tightly in his fist.

"Dad, his wrist, what if it's broken?" Leo said.

"Leave this house," Peter repeated. "Leo, get off the floor. You look like a child." He dropped his napkin onto his plate and left the room. Remy took a shuddering breath. Leo helped Remy to his feet. They stumbled out of the house, into the yard where dusk was falling heavy over the pond.

### Leo & Remy

Remy, Remy I'm so sorry. I told you I didn't want you to come, I knew it would be—

*I'm sorry. Don't cry Leo. Leo, don't.*

I'm not. How does it feel now? Should we go to the hospital?

*I think it's only sprained. Hey, shh, listen. Would you rather fall backwards out of your chair or have wet hot hands?*

Stop, it's not funny.

*Then why are you smiling? Answer the question.*

I guess...fall backwards out of my chair. Because that's temporary. Wet hot hands is forever.

*I take offense as someone who has wet hot hands. Would you rather fall backwards out of your chair or...give your dad the punch he deserves?*

Punch him. Easy.

*Okay, a harder one. Would you rather hit me in the face or... hit Rose?*

Well, you're already not doing too great. I don't want to do any more damage.

*So you'd punch a swan.*

Well, you don't have to put it like that. Would you rather hit my dad in the face or have a water dispenser next to your bed?

*Hit your dad, for sure. No offense. I should go.*

Remy, I am so sorry.

*Yeah, I know.*

I'll walk you home.

*No, you should go back in. I think your dad's waiting for you.*

### 124 Cygnet Place

Peter Claremont, pacing, all in one breath.

*The lack of respect is fuckingmystifying. In my own home where I had welcomed him I don't have to do these things, you know. Have people like him over for dinner. Those swans are ours. They've always been ours. Howdarehetalktomelikethat like I haven't given my life for this town. Jesus, Leo you sure know how to pick them.*

*I don't want you speaking to that kid again, you understand me? Don't need that kind of influence since you won't be able to tell him no, not ever, notmyson. Can't even grow a spine for his own father. Fuckinguseless.*

Leo's mouth hanging half open. Eyes glassy, pointed past his father, out the window. Rose, glowing starkly white against the muddy background of the lawn. Beak in the weeds by the shore, wings folded gently.

**Mansfield**

Now that we think about it, there was something evil in the air that night. Too quiet, when we stepped outside to gather firewood. Crickets' spindly legs paused, cicadas clustered silent in the trees, waiting. Like when you can't tell if the sky is black from clouds or falling nighttime. We all felt it. We locked our deadbolts for the first time in years. We shut the curtains over cold, empty glass. We stepped out to watch our dogs when we let them into the yard.

**Remy & Leo**

*...Hi? You never call me. What could possibly be so important that you would deign to—*

Oh my god, Remy, oh my god.

*Leo? Leo, what's wrong?*

I—I did something bad. I did something really, really bad. I don't know what to do, I didn't mean to hurt her, I promise. I'm so scared, Remy. I'm so scared.

*Hurt who? I don't understand.*

I couldn't stop thinking about what you said, the would-you-rather. I thought about hitting him, I really did, but he'd just hit me back, it wouldn't work. So I thought, which would I rather. She's dead, Remy.

*Rose? You killed her?*

Her neck was so easy to break. It just snapped.

*Jesus, Leo.*

He said I'd never stand up for anything, not ever. So I showed him. No more pictures for *The Gazette*, no more showing her off to guests, oh, look, there's my very own swan in my very own front yard! Not anymore. She's on the table and I made gravy and everything.

*Gravy? You're not making sense.*

I said I was making dinner, I said it would be a nice surprise for them, and I went down to the pond and she came right up to me, because she knows I always bring food. I'm sorry, I'm so sorry. Remy? Remy, are you still there?

*I'm here.*

I don't know what to do. I don't know. They're—they're almost done eating.

*Leo, take a deep breath. Did you eat it? I can't hear you when you nod.*

Yes. Yeah.

*Where did you put...the rest of it?*

It's behind the shed. The head's behind the shed.

*Okay. Okay. Hang up, go into the bathroom, and throw up.*

What? I don't understand.

*Thanks for having me to dinner, Leo.*

Remy? Remy, are you there?

**Mansfield**

We heard they found Remy easily. Body heavy with fullness he was slow and sluggish and laid out, an easy target, in the field behind the school. We heard when the police came upon them,

Remy's hands were smeared with swanblood, his stomach distended like he'd never had a meal this rich in his life. We heard he was smiling.

**Officer Scherer and Remy**

Can you please state your name for the record?

*Remy Nelson.*

And Remy, why are you here today?

*Because of the swans.*

What did you do to the swans?

*I—sorry. I killed one. I killed Rose. I gave the meat I got from her to Leo.*

Leo who?

*Leo Claremont. Then I took the babies and hid them in the field behind the school.*

About what time did you take the swans from the pond?

*5:30 pm. I knew Mr. Claremont had a meeting with the city councilor and wouldn't be back until it was dark. I knew he wouldn't notice Rose was gone. I killed her behind the shed by the pond. Her neck was so easy to break.*

What happened next?

*I gave the meat to Leo.*

And what time was that?

*6 pm. I told him it was duck meat from my brother's hunting trip. I told him to make it for dinner for his family, as a thank you for having me over the week before.*

Remy, are you aware that this was not only a violent attack on the private property of the mayor of our town, but also a violation of the New York State Environmental Conservation Law that states that mute swans, as well as their nests and eggs, cannot be handled or harmed without authorization from the Department of Environmental Conservation?

*Yes.*

You were aware of this fact when you killed Rose?

*They thought the swans belonged to them. I wanted them to know they don't belong to anyone at all.*

**Mansfield**

Peter Claremont gave the most moving speech in the town square this Wednesday to address the tragic death of our swan. Words cannot describe what they meant to us and what we have lost, but we appreciated his nonetheless. "The public needs to know that this is not ending," he said, hands gripping the edge of the podium on which he stood. The wind swept his hair off of his shiny forehead. Leo in the front row, head down. "We will continue to have swans," Peter yelled over the gusting breeze. "And hopefully, at some point, get back to normal."<sup>2</sup> We held one another. We dabbed at our eyes. We cheered. We patted Leo on the back. "We're so, so,

<sup>2</sup> 3 Teens Killed and Ate a New York Village's Beloved Swan, Police Say, Jesus Jiménez, The New York Times

“sorry,” we said. He looked up at us, eyes bleary and red. The poor boy. He’d been through so much. “Thanks,” he said. “Yeah, thanks.”

## TOBY SHARPE

### keep me on my toes, lil fella

when you reached to grab something from the shelf earlier  
i saw the soft sliver of a basa's underbelly and that was like  
pretty cool, i guess

i am wibbling in the mournful breeze and you are ultra-mega-cute  
and doing quite well in capitalism-o, which is proving irksome at the moment  
because i'm having a career crisis, i'll be honest with you, guvna!

i speak in a cockney accent whenever i want to throw myself into a lake  
and this banana bread is not making me feel stable and sane  
but the escitalopram ain't working either, and the mirror wobbles at my touch

having squishy feelings is like shoving a thousand pins into my solar plexus  
and yes, i refuse to google what a solar plexus is—maybe it's in your stomach?  
whatever, sue me, i'm not a marine biologist, not in this economy!

but: there are little pink dolphins thriving in the amazon, i think,  
or at least that's what my mum narrated to me when i was a kid—  
she has cancer now for the second time which is a tad depressing

she used to tell me about a narwhal and a monkey who were best friends!  
what happens to childhood's imaginary friends when you age  
and denature? fill out form 67-B to tell me immediately

i am communicating across the spheres in an attempt to seduce  
but also, like, snuggle? god, i am sick of talking about how i'm a huge talent  
for people to respond, “aren't you sick of talking about how you're a huge talent?”

take care of me and i will tell you facts about monotremes and marsupials –  
that's a fair trade, right? my mum has cancer and i'm a flop so just  
take care of me, please

things are unspooling, don't you see? slowly but surely: it's terrifying!  
reach again for the shelf's heights—for me—  
and i'll compare you to a platypus and we will be alright, together

## LAUREN LEVIN

### Letters from *Reversi*

10/18/2017

Dear Em,

You've been dead almost a year. Longer than the six months I knew you. While you are dead, Rihanna launched Fenty beauty; countless abusers and rapists, in their domination of the headlines, secondarily exposed themselves to us; Sara wrote a crystalline, refractive account of a party slipping through time and space like a mix between *Twin Peaks* and *The Waves*.

I was half-dreaming the other night, thinking about my grandmother, Ganee. I felt her presence floating near me. I'd felt her echo in books before. Mrs. Ramsey. The grandmother in Proust. The comforting half-light of effortless giving.

Though such a thing—effortless giving—doesn't really exist, its gentle shadow moved alongside my grandmother, was always with her, even (or especially) for how much she could frustrate me. How plaintive I felt putting my head in her lap. How fully I gave over to her presence, as when Othello says of Desdemona: "But there, where I have garner'd up my heart, / Where either I must live, or bear no life; / The fountain from the which my current runs, / Or else dries up; to be discarded thence!"

I felt Ganee close by. I felt a little drunk. Reaching out mentally for others, I found some still living—my mom, like the timbre of her laugh plus the time it takes to sound, minus the laugh itself. My dad sardonic and melancholy, a raised eyebrow. With my new power I reached for your presence, Em, but couldn't find it, however far I stretched.

Othello and Desdemona discovered each other first in narrative. She hears his voice down the hall, his audience's laughter, and quickens her pace. He notices the quality of her attention. Later, he finds her alone, tells his tales of adventure to have them reflected back: "She gave me for my pains a world of sighs./She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,/'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful."

You and I met. I gave you dollars for coffees. I wondered about your gender, you commented on my stack of books. Then it became books we liked in common, narratives we'd written. To get your writing was like pulling teeth but I drew it out, which made things more intimate and more uncomfortable. You knew about my panic attacks; I knew the content of your porn searches.

You were into Trisha's work, and Zoe's. And yet we hadn't heard of you. Alli was jokingly skeptical: "I think she's cat-fishing you." When I said Timeless was putting out my book, how you looked at me. You represented that rarest commodity, attention.

I was never clear about my gender roles but I understood one "feminine" thing, how to bring people out. In college I befriended Marc. He was slender with a milky-white face and a dusting of buzzed orange hair. He planned to be an investment banker. Our friendship was arguing day and night about capitalism and religion. He was unhappy and reserved. I threw all my powers, those of an emotionally labile person determined to pull affection from their stoic parents, into breaking down that reticence.

During a late-night conversation he told me he was gay, started to cry. I remember holding him, his bony shoulders, trying to comfort him. My pride that he came out to me. And over time his outlines seemed to resolve. He did become much happier. I thought I had played a part in making him. My arrogance—not knowing how to make myself, to audience him was my thrill.

Emily Dickinson wrote to Mrs. Jonathan L. Jenkins: "we think of others possessing you with the throes of Othello." This instance, with its reference to jealousy and same-sex desire, is one of the many in which "[Dickinson] used imagery referring to Asia, South America, and Africa, to express aspects of herself that deviated from ideals of white femininity such as self-denial, self-sacrifice, purity, and reticence."

Desdemona's fantasy is the prototype for Dickinson's, and countless others (the notorious first sentence of Joni Mitchell's autobiography, "I was the only Black man in the room"). Othello becomes Desdemona's instrument to fantasize about forbidden desires. Othello looks to Desdemona, too, for something he feels he lacks.

The legitimacy her whiteness represents, is Iago's take—"Faith, he tonight hath boarded a land carrack. If it prove lawful prize, he's made for ever." Desdemona's pity also gives Othello back the vulnerability he's been forced to bury: "She loved me for the dangers I had passed/And I loved her that she did pity them." There's an opening there to a different way of being, albeit one that's bound up with another form of extraction. When what he loves in her is her pity for him, he relies on her listening to prop up a masculine facade.

She sees, in him, herself as conquerer, acting as an extension of his arm. There's an opening there too, as when he calls out to her, laughing, overcome, "Oh my fair warrior!" She revels in her aggression: "That I did love the Moor to live with him/My downright violence and storm of fortunes/May trumpet to the world." Unspoken is how her freedom waxes as his wanes. Her whiteness gives her life-or-death power, should she denounce Othello to her father: My life upon her faith.

She calls him “the Moor.” He obsesses over her purity. This is how they see each other, but have audiences, directors, or critics ever seen them otherwise? The lovers embrace in a bubble of intent privacy. The lovers embrace in the thick of the crowd, their reaction turning to mildly comic embarrassment. The thing is you can’t make yourself by yourself. Sometimes I forget that.

*Not Now, Sweet Desdemona* is a 1969 one-act, a dialogue between two actors, Jamaican and white South African, rehearsing as Othello and Desdemona. The actors are lovers, and have a ferocious quarrel in which the actor playing “Othello” rejects “Desdemona’s” view that the play is about love and jealousy. He insists it’s about race and power. “In particular, the white liberal manipulation of the Black man.”

There’s a strain in Othello criticism that argues, raging, that Othello and Desdemona never consummate their marriage. This tradition finds any connection between them, however distorted and prurient, intolerable. More than a century’s worth of Othellos weren’t even allowed to die upon a kiss, playtext be damned. The kiss between Paul Robeson and Uta Hagen caused an audible gasp every night. I’ve wondered about a staging that tried to incorporate that distance. A staging in which Othello and Desdemona are only seen on split-screen, or played by new actors in each act.

Marc and I gradually drifted apart. He went to study abroad and wrote me a long letter about the moment we connected. I never replied. I suppose once his secret had been pulled out, he was less interesting to me. *My work here is done*, and he hadn’t become a particularly interesting gay man. That’s the easy way to say it, the self-skewering way. But the less comfortable truth is that by helping articulate certain insights for him, I had dodged them myself. If I hadn’t cut the thread with him, I might have been next.

The definition is tenuous. Collaborative. Gelatinous. Ellis says “So petty, I love it.” Audre Lorde says “If I didn’t define myself for myself, I would be crunched into other people’s fantasies for me and eaten alive.”

Desdemona looked to Othello for a male figure who wasn’t just prohibition. But when he became the law—scoffed, struck her—she got numb. Critics are confused that Desdemona, who starts out so defiant, sleepwalks through the final scenes. But it’s not so much inconsistency as the welling up of a familiar script: *That’s just how men are*. She gives up believing in an Othello who’s more specific than that.

In Trevor Nunn’s production, first Othello, then Rodrigo sneak into Desdemona’s room, trying to break open a locked cabinet. Desdemona calls him “the Moor.” Julian told me how, in colonialist rhetoric, native peoples were either “friendlies” or “hostiles.” After Othello’s suicide, his estate passes to Desdemona’s uncle Gratiano, a white heir.

We learn ourselves through each other, there’s something sexy and cannibalistic about that. When I met Tony I had a terrible crush; I thought he was beautiful, shy and aloof. I went to work asking questions. Put my hand on my chin and listened. Later, when I asked him why he’d been drawn to me, he said “You were sweet. So interested in me.” And honestly, I hated that.

Like Paolo and Francesca, Othello and Desdemona read their doom to its end. They batter each other; they are readers together. Having a correct interpretation is neither possible nor sufficient. The awareness of oneself as the scene structures all of life.

The pair keep searching, keeps being pulled into each other’s bodies. You can’t live inside someone else’s body but can you live in your own. Where is an inside to be found. “Any fiction wants you to become it.”; *My community has not found a language to untangle the strands of racism and desire*.

As I sit in the coffee shop, I see a white cock or a plaster dildo in the stucco next to me, a blotch as long as my forearm. A work of anti-proximity and encroaching presence. The world as a great pornographic manifesto, crumbling to dust.

When you finally sent me your work, you wrote me, “Teeth pulled!” You were alive. I opened the file eagerly. I was afraid it would be bad and yet I knew it would be good, and it was. You were alive. You sent me your work. I read the part in which your porn searches for “tranny” and “she-male” reflected your body back to you—twisted in a funhouse mirror, but desirable, how distorting and how necessary. Feeling that particular compound of joy and envy with which writers read, I thought that I’d never gone far enough; I opened a window to write and tell you so.

Natalie wanted to give me your copy of *The Braid* thinking maybe you had underlined in it, but it went to Ghost Ship with you and was destroyed, gone. She gave me your volumes 4 and 5 of *Saga* and your cozy orange cardigan, the one you wore over overalls when we walked around the lake. She gave me your dramatic vest.

Your death was the occasion of my first tattoo. It pushed me past some reluctance.

Nat also sent me your newest work, excavated from your laptop, messy drafts you never would’ve wanted me to see. Reading through it, looking for more life, just a little more, I found myself in one of your poems: “Walking around Lake Merritt, Lauren tells me life is relational/She’s right and I hate it.”

Love, Lauren

June 9, 2021

Dear Em,

To flit along the words is all I want. This is old writing that I'm putting together now, so the date's always going to be wrong, but I time stamp it to anchor somewhere.

From the other, getting permission to be alive. I fell for Eve Sedgwick reading *A Dialogue on Love*. Can there be writers who are intrinsically lovable on the page? She seems to be. That irks some people about her. That and the gay kids essay that might be transphobic. But I didn't know that. I thought she was trans. I thought she was the way she felt to me.

Em, I liked that you held me off. You were still and yet eager at times, unpredictable. Part of my love for Sedgwick is love of her serene unconcern, tinged warm, that allows you to exist close by without trying to change you. The rats don't produce their warmth for me, but they sigh and push their snouts into the crook of my elbow.

I don't remember why I started reading *A Dialogue on Love* but I found, in Sedgwick, dispersed identification: her queerness wasn't unitary but a group of different dispositions to be read together. Her straight cis husband, their commuter marriage, the gay male platonic love she householded with, her masturbatory feats (genderless banquets of hours) she described as trumping any shared sex, her writing. Her essay on fisting in Henry James—her excavation of the endless, dripping material. Her anxiety, her soft skin, her love of death.

That might be the closest thing I have to a tranniversary. Reading *A Dialogue on Love*. She said that when you're a fat woman, if you don't want to hate yourself, you have to learn to see yourself other than how you're seen. That practice helped her understand herself as, if she dare say it, a gay man.

I've been calling this letter "Reverse Iagos." Jamie said if we did New York School cosplay, I could be Frank O'Hara. I should have told them that's the nicest thing anyone ever said to me. But I blushed and stumbled. Frank would've taken the compliment with beautiful insolence. I would pick Barbara Guest for Jamie: the elegance. Gnomic poems with little image-daggers. I asked Jamie who they would be and they said "Jimmy Schuyler of course... mental illness and..." and? I don't remember the other thing Jamie said, but I would be Jimmy with them. Mental illness and a field of flowers.

Eve Sedgwick would loan her grad students her ties for conferences. Standing in front of her gay sons, tying the knot. After Sedgwick died her students went to José Muñoz. When Muñoz died, his students went to Lauren Berlant. Where will Berlant's students go? I don't know, but I have to believe they go somewhere, that it continues.

The rats are fighting and I yell over at them, "Could you stop it you dumbasses I'm trying to work over here." Usually I just croon to them in baby talk. Ale laughs uproariously when I call them buttholes, because it's something I'm not supposed to say. I pluck Ziggy out of the fight, tuck him into my cardigan. He starts eating my shirt.

I told Ellis that when I was so freaked out about "taking up queer space," I assumed that everyone longed to be queer and how could I allow myself something so infinitely precious. He laughed and said "Oh, you sweet baby angel." It was at Timeless that I learned that the words "cute" and "angel" were gay. You sweet baby angel! Tofu soup for lunch? That sounds cute. When I tell Tony this he says "But everyone says cute." I say "Yeah, no, it's different." I learn the gay "she," to give and receive it.

When I write it's a matter of reading until I get a cadence in my head. Then I talk into that rhythm and hope it winds up sounding like me. A wish to be Evan Kennedy, writing about android sex and a tattered condom. Bernadette Mayer, Octavia E. Butler, Marcel Proust, Tatiana Luboviski-Acosta: open my mouth and a book falls out. Writing is being flooded by another. Though the Renaissance view of masculinity was one of "rational self-command," boys' education was ventriloquizing other voices, letting Caesar and Cicero fill you up. The *Metamorphoses* were studied only when a boy was mature enough to resist being transformed into a flower or a flexing twig.

Audre Lorde said, "When I read Shakespeare in high school, I would get off on his gardens and Spanish moss and roses and trellises with beautiful women at rest and sun on red brick." What *A Dialogue on Love* is to me, *The Second Sex* was to Lorraine Hansberry. She carried the book around; chatted with it; called it Simone. She was a lesbian married to a Jewish man. Like Eve Sedgwick's husband and mine he was her biggest fan, a source of financial and psychic shelter.

Tony, who's a romantic, would always say that he felt like he was Jewish and I was Mexican. But alas, he married a feckless white bourgeois. I asked if it was true that it was his most upwardly mobile aunts and uncles who married white people. He said yes, then thought about it again and said no. The men, upwardly mobile or not, married white women. The kids from those marriages moved into higher income brackets, while Tony's aunts married Mexican guys and stayed working-class.

I'm watching Marlon Riggs' last film, *Black Is, Black Ain't*. Riggs is talking about his death directly to the camera: "I want my mother and my grandmother and Jack to be there to hold my hand and rub my head and feet and let me die." Jack is Jack Vincent, Riggs' long-term partner. Vincent said when he first saw that scene, he thought, "Jack, who's Jack? We know Mama, we know Big Mama, but who's Jack?" Vincent is white. He hadn't appeared in any of Riggs' films. The article I'm reading thinks Riggs wasn't ready to open the white-lover can of

worms: "It's likely he knew he couldn't be all things to all people and still be an effective voice" (SF Examiner).

I sit and think about it. There's the community politics, yes. But also, Vincent's whiteness meant that much of the world would value him over his partner. Riggs had a secret life in the world of his films. Maybe it would be too much for him to figure Jack into his work, that sovereign space. Vincent, whatever his irritation, could accept waiting in the wings. There's generosity there, in a person who can be part of the ground of your being without also needing to appear on its stage.

Riggs got shit for making a film about Black love and having a white partner. It was seen as a paradox. But wouldn't a white partner be hard enough with self-love, never mind without it? Between the borders, groups, persons (genders) grasping for each other. Like a butterfly knows to be drawn by lavender, blue, soft sage, vermillion.

None of my exes have dutifully reproduced. Some of them had beautiful gay voices; some were smooth and impish. One got mocked for being light in the loafers, which was where I learned that term. When we walked together in the park he would skitter along the tree limbs like a squirrel. One of them killed himself. They were all mostly the same size as me. We could've lined ourselves up eye to eye. Tony and I still wear the same shirts, jointly buy band t-shirts and button-downs. I don't know if that's identity, but I know I'm tired of prohibition, of ruling myself out.

Tati is saying to me "You know, I've always been a moderate person. That's why I'm bi and nonbinary." This makes me laugh. I feel the same way. We're so scandalously reasonable! Not lukewarm, but a braid of incommensurates.

At Ale's three-year-old check-up, the doctor asked them "What's your full name?" and "Are you a boy or a girl?" These were the developmental questions to make sure they were on track. We hadn't taught them their full name; they said they were a "grill."

Sedgwick wasn't sure what to make of her therapist at first. He was a friendly, dull, straight man, not smart enough to hold her interest: she was turned off. But she slogged on with therapy because it helped. She works to find points of connection, writing about his lovely queer adupois, a nice sagging out of masculine ideals. She liked the androgyny of his name, Shannon. I suppose most of all she liked that he was curious, that he wanted to go with her, to help her find her way into wanting to live.

If that's not allowed, there's no depiction of persons connected across their differences without imagining them to be mutually destructive. No picture of the navigation of life with some other

weirdo, its eroticism and its petty annoyances—hard, frustrating, humorous, compromised, and, well, fun.

The fact that Marlon Riggs had a white partner doesn't undo the fact of love found Black body to Black body. You have to feel yourself as desire-producing in the circuit of your own machinery. To achieve love for my straight male partner I have to articulate desire in whatever body I have.

If Tony and I are now straight and queer, we were man and woman before. We exchanged one supposed difference for another. The variegated terrain we crawl over during our lives is both boring and fascinating. One shifts, the other shifts in response, one clicks into place and the other flies off, a kaleidoscope in and out of focus.

Baldwin had a dream in which a young, black woman "merged" with him: "her breasts pressed against my shoulder blades." Lorraine Hansberry's husband preserved her lesbian writings. Love is not love that alters when it alteration finds. But it has to, then. If it won't alter, then you're stuck.

Which is why I can say, candidly, that I found the person (a person) I was going to love early but that wasn't enough. One doesn't just need a person but a mechanism, a drive with which to love that allows you to exist, too. Call it gender or sexuality or prosody. Like, my straight love was under some cloud until I was gay, which is confusing. But I've never been an efficient person. I read whole books for a line, or for nothing.

I ate an edible. Time got confused. Words sat heavy on my tongue and I spat them to Tony, then said "I'm saying stoned things." I was trying to say that his appearance and the feeling of his skin were coming to me with remarkable clarity. As though he were extra outlined by a dark stroke, as though touch could somehow be outlined (extra-dense) like kohl elongating the eye.

Tony laughed about sped-up vampire sex. It reminded me of our early days—sleeping together on the narrow twin bed with the broken springs jabbing my spine—our whole skins touching in depriving cold or heat, out the window the cough of trucks revving, the steady pulse of their alarms. A hormonal cascade turned my pain into pleasure, the delight of his nearness taking up my displeasures and subsuming them into part of a pleasurable whole, so that during the day I would masturbate frantically in the bathroom at work, longing for the lumpy mattress, the jabbing springs, the eye blinks of uncomfortable sleep a centimeter from another body. I was apart from my exhaustion; nothing exerted me. Myself temping in a variety of offices. I didn't know how to use a copy machine. In polyester pants and pink-and-black zebra-print tank top from the chain store's \$2.99 rack, I was a rumpled faun or dilapidated Maenad, sweating my sexual reverie, completely unconscious. I wore my stupidity for the gauntlet of the city

streets, large enough for any difficulty. It was a time for the pleasures I had been promised but that had never arrived—I had found them, these furtive pleasures, in sex but only when the daylight time spent with someone was capricious and painful. Sex had only made up for human relations but here it was enhancing them.

The edible collapsed time so that limerence came flooding back. I lay back and I attacked. I felt like a pool, deepening with seductive power. I think I scared Tony. We did it twice but I hung out half the night more with myself in the excitement of fantasy roused by anything. I didn't need narratives or images—there was a feeling of persons, a concept, sensation. I discovered the ability to fuck myself with my own imaginary dick. I wondered how in all my onanistic exploration I hadn't noticed I could do that. Later on, when I sobered up, I couldn't.

Love, Lauren

5/5/2021

Dear Em,

*The past is not for living in; it is a well of conclusions from which we draw in order to act.* So says John Berger, and *We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice.* It's this act of choice I'm calling reading. To turn toward nothing like the sun.

Othello was called Shakespeare's "American play"  
performed for a Cherokee group in 1752  
(the audience intervened to stop the swordplay)  
for Gold Rush miners in the 19th century  
63 performances in Memphis pre-Civil War  
an anti-miscegenation play on the Southern stage

Othello has no one to speak his funeral oration, so he has to split in two—to speak it himself. He lacks the ensemble. Neither Lorraine Hansberry's nor James Baldwin's explicitly queer writing deal with Blackness. JB on Giovanni's Room: "I could not handle both propositions in the same book. There was no room for it." The identities had competing demands.

Julian has been using the pronoun *it* for itself; as it does, affectionately, to describe animals. A dog, a bird. It hops up. For Julian to say *it* for itself, too, is a way of bringing yourself closer to other life, sloping down to the earth. People argue that they pronouns are confusing to use for one person: you could get the individual and the group mixed up. But what's so terrible about getting mixed up?

Historically, the main line of feminism (white feminism) has had an internal conflict: a failure to recognize that one group (cis women, white women, wealthy women) is not the true form of womanhood, the one others should aspire to. Black and trans feminisms have been the ones to articulate that we have many bodies, not one.

Maybe the only way to get around the pitfalls of identification is to do something together that couldn't be done without our differences. Pat Califia says "I have sex with faggots and I'm a lesbian."

I brought Ale to preschool and threw her into the arms of her teacher Dulce. I saw Dulce's face and it was gray. Dulce's brother died last week. He was 24. The school hinted that it was violent. Over Alejandra's body struggling between us Dulce did not have tears in her eyes but her face showed something frightening. My eyes got wet, so they would hold themselves in I stopped myself from blinking. Tears at the bottom lid. We looked at each other.

Something spread to me but it wasn't what she was feeling.  
Which was something I couldn't understand. She was at work.

Tony and I are having a conversation about whether you can compare any two things. It's a pleasurable talk about the elasticity of language. A tooth and a car, Tony says. I say they are both shells. It's within difference that relationship is experienced. Without an other that disappoints, there would be no self. As simple as that?

Adam Phillips said Freud on jokes reveals that "we are divided against ourselves/our internal divisions give us pleasure." You have to step to the side inside yourself in order to have a position to think. So what is Othello thinking when he tears himself in two? The perspective he gets, recognizing his internal split, is cut short by his suicide.

Fred Wilson used Othello as a starting point for his installation *Speak of Me as I Am* in the 2003 Venice Biennale. There was a chandelier of black Murano glass, melting like wax. Wilson evoked Othello's tears, the dripping of the body into tears, the caricatured eyes of Sambo figurines sliding off faces as tears. Drip, drop, plop.

Chris Ofili paints Othello with his forehead full of eyes like little fish and dandelion fluff, the stars, drinking his own tears as they fall into the cross-hatch of his mustache. Are tears the pearls? Wilson has skin drip, crying itself as tears, tears that are ink. Write with those inky tears, they bathe the page.

Fred Moten, writing about Chris Ofili's gorgeous *Othello* illustrations, sees the play itself as an Iago. He calls it an "intense and gorgeous flatulence...Shakespeare's ill wind," and a crime that Black readers have been coaxed into taking responsibility for: "So that the terribly beautiful, evilly compounded genius of it is that what we are constrained to do with Othello when we enact him is act like him."

In the folio, Othello calls himself "the base Judean" rather than "the base Indian." Othello's ending invokes the Moor, the Turk, the Indian, the Jew...the easy transferability onto one another of racialized groups.

Queen Esther was a racially passing woman with proximity to power through sex. Hers was "a story of resistance and assimilation" that taught Jews strategies for living in Diaspora. Black women also used the story as authorization to speak out, to fight. Christina Sharpe says (paraphrasing Douglass) that representational power can't be entrusted to whites: "the injury slips from slavery to blackness or being blackened." Though tactics can be handed back and forth, in conditions of inequality, we can't be trusted with one another's injury. (Mel Brooks: "Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die.")

Janet Suzman, who directed Kani, felt that a non-racist *Othello* was impossible, because white audiences would inevitably project their racism onto Othello's killing of Desdemona, and further project the traits they imagined in Othello into Black actors who portrayed him. But Moten raises the possibility of a Black actor who plays Othello without being responsible for Othello. Without Blackness reading as Othello's crime. An actor who would simply not take up the audience's insinuation. Like Zora Neale Hurston refusing tragedy. *Because he is so clearly in love with Othello...Chris Ofili responds to him by beautifully and brilliantly declining to take responsibility for him.*

Othello's "I Am" becomes a company of roles: Soldier-Servant, Unlucky Lover, Avenger, Villainous Judean, Infidel Turk and Venetian Christian. Ducis, the play's French translator, wrote of "le sans-culotte Othello." Paul Robeson is remembered after Othello rehearsals, studying Chinese and listening to records backstage. Moten adds a drop of Falstaff to the compound. Falstaff adds distance, a vantage outside the tangle of the others, a useless laughter. To set the rest in motion, into the quicksilver physics of an ensemble. To make an Othello who didn't yet know who they were going to be.

That must be why I pursue these stories of groups. Of love for the self in the other and the other in the self, each doing something different even as part of the same, as in synchronized swimming. The men around Marlon Riggs. Lorraine Hansbury's circle. I don't think of myself as an ensemble player but I listened to Jamie read and watched Sara watch Jamie read, and their faces, their eyes brought me to myself, circuitously.

Lorraine Hansbury quoting WEB DuBois: "Somehow you have got to know more than what you experience individually." So a character like Othello is patched together, a centuries-old montage of being and being seen. Something new can always be added.

Othello is fictitious. He's a knot of time and vantage. I'm real, but so am I. There's life, and death, and there's talking to them both: the web of common listening. A painted figure that doesn't generate the sensation of movement, says Leonardo, is doubly dead. For being an illusion, and one that doesn't make the mind or body change.

*Later I went to the drag bars. My attitude really changed. Instead of just watching the show + feeling self-conscious + worried I'd be read, I was aware of who I liked + who was liking me. Now when someone's looking, I think they're cruising me instead of reading me.* That's Lou Sullivan.

Em, you're dead, but you're not doubly dead, because you changed me.

I tell Alejandra I'm going to change in my room. Out of the corner of my eye I see them rushing to their little potty. Their underwear at their knees, they calls out "Mama, I think I need to go."

I say okay are you okay my own shorts are at my knees, I rush out to check on them, their eyes are terrified, I grasp their hand, I say are you okay they say "I'm trying to poop," they're clearly scared they're three, I say "It's okay, just let it out," I say "Do you want me not to look at you?" They say "yes" I start to move away, they say, a little panicky, "No, Mama," I kneel again and take their hand, they say look at me (it must have been the double negative that confused them,) the smell of shit, dank and relieving around us they still seem scared I say "You don't need to worry about doing it you are doing it already." When they get up they are so proud and it becomes quickly comical, they sit down again, get up, open the blue lid of the potty to look at their shit, discrete curl nestled in urine, but it's the feeling of the moment I don't want to lose how it's so serious. Really, I'm afraid of what's happening in their heart I feel the need to be next to them and the fear never fully put aside / of having to learn the body its movement and change learning to be with it, how impossible, walking, shitting, breathing, be with a body, with and against how it's seen.

"When he directs, Brecht seems to forget that it is he who has written the play. One often has the impression that he is seeing it for the first time. Sometimes he seems surprised by it and has somebody else explain the most obvious things to him. He asks the actor playing Azdak: "But what is Azdak really like?"

It was recorded that men wept at Othello's fate in 1610.  
 You called yourself a fuddy-duddy, and I laughed.  
 The white sap comes down the black fig stem, it smells green.

Love, Lauren

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## ◆◆ CHARLOTTE JOYCE KIDD ◆◆

### Half-Moons

At the telebanking call center, I spent my day in the void. Disembodied voices shouted or sobbed into my ear about how the corporation whose workings I only shallowly understood was hiding or stealing their money, although we'd usually just fine-printed it away. My body was kept tethered to my desk by the coiled wire of a headset.

The office was on the twenty-seventh floor of a massive industrial tower. We got two fifteen-minute breaks and a thirty-minute lunch. Lunch was long enough to travel down to the basement food court and try to tamp down the horror with a cookie or some greasy noodles. The fifteens were all but useless to your average worker—long enough to check a few texts, stand and stretch if your algorithm was overwhelming you with wellness content—but not to me. I had an escape.

I'd go to the bathroom and make sure it was empty. I'd stand over the sink, stretch toward the mirror, and rub a hole in the foundation on my chin. Then, squeezing, pinching, squeezing harder, my stomach clenching, my fingernails striving, I'd work until something yellow and greasy emerged from a pore, smiling, to greet me. Relief filled me. The triumph or failure pushed me to repeat it.

It wasn't purely relaxing. There was the guilt, of course. I lived in fear of the moments where someone came into the bathroom and I had to jump away from the mirror, flick my hair over my face, and pretend to be washing my hands. If it was someone I knew, I'd have to look up and say hi, wondering how much they noticed my ruined face and its half-moon welts. They never betrayed any outward disgust or dismay, but I knew they must feel it. I waffled between believing the comforting lie of their indifference and making myself feel the shame.

I'd do it again when I got home at night—for longer than fifteen minutes, until my back ached from bending over the bathroom counter and I was tired enough to collapse into bed. My skin was never empty, even when I had picked over every pore twice.

I didn't know Gwen Cahill, but I'd noticed her. She worked over in portfolio management, in the pool of employees who had some hope of being plucked away to work on the ground. At the awkward, wine-in-a-Styrofoam-cup happy hours, she always stood in a circle of people, mostly men, who seemed to be engrossed by her stories and jokes. She dressed elegantly, in a way that bordered on but didn't cross into being old-fashioned. Her haircut and her shoes and her nails and her earrings looked expensive.

The day Gwen caught me, I'd forgotten to scan for shoes. She emerged noiselessly from a stall. I only noticed her when I'd finished with one pore and was diving in for another, nails poised to be driven into flesh. I froze. She didn't look away. We looked into each other's eyes. My mind raced. The worst had happened. I could see the revulsion, deeper, bigger, more

certain than ever before. She didn't say anything. She washed her hands and left. I screamed inside. My fifteen had ended, so I had to sprint back to my desk and jam on my headset and try to help a woman with a negative balance and a screaming child in the background even as the internal screaming continued, screaming that said, *You're a freak and now everyone's going to know*, and also, *Am I going to get fired for logging back in at 11:16?*

When I checked my messages at my next break, I had an email from Gwen.

*Would you like to come over for a drink tomorrow?*

This was not the right response, I thought, to what had happened. I answered with too many exclamation points.

The next day, standing outside Gwen's apartment, sweating into my coat in the warmth of her hallway, I regretted everything I'd ever done. I regretted what I'd chosen to wear. I regretted every book I hadn't read, current event I hadn't kept up with, interesting experience I hadn't collected. I regretted that, as I was getting ready, I'd picked at my chin until it swelled in great lumps like a hornet's nest, and I'd had to cover it in a thick layer of makeup, which hid the redness but not the texture. She would be wearing black. My chin would erase itself onto her shoulder when we hugged and she would only notice the stain later, after we'd had a nice evening, so that even if I did everything right, she'd see it and never invite me back. I regretted that our time together was already doomed. Strangely, I did not regret coming. That felt inevitable.

She'd made cocktails. I could see that she wasn't much older than me, and I wondered how she'd learned to be the kind of person who made fancy drinks. (Delicious drinks, tinged with lavender and very strong.)

She had an enormous beige leather couch on which she looked tiny and delicate. I sat on a small armchair, feeling large and angular.

"So..." She laughed gracefully and a nervous giggle half-choked me on the way out. "I'm really glad you came over."

I flushed.

"Thanks. Thanks for having me."

"Are you new to the office?"

"I've been there...I guess, almost a year now."

She frowned and I felt like I'd given the wrong answer.

"Really? I've never seen you. I had to ask around to find out who you were."

I was flattered that she'd asked around.

"Yeah, I guess I'm not that social at work."

"Me neither, to be fair," she said, and I thought she was being charitable, because she seemed to have a lot of friends. "Do you like it? The company?" She answered her own question: "You're in customer retention, right? I know, it's miserable. It'll get better when you move up."

I nodded slowly. My stomach was sinking. She's going to ask about my mental health, I thought. She's reported me to the company and they've asked her to do this to determine if I need serious help.

"Do you have a big family?"

"Excuse me?"

"Siblings? Pets?"

"Oh." I cleared the fading whimpering from my head. "Sister and a brother. My parents are still married."

"Do you get along with them?"

"I think so, the normal amount. We're not all that alike."

"I'd guess that most people aren't like you." She was looking at me strangely. "I'm not like most people, either."

I was starting to feel the liquor. Warmth was my friend now, spreading from my stomach instead of pressing in on me.

"Maybe we're like each other."

The boldness of my own words shocked me and I hurried to take another sip of my drink. She crinkled her nose and rested her manicured fingertips over her heart.

"Maybe we are."

She invited me over for drinks again the next week and the week after that. Her apartment was full of plush rugs and soft lighting. She always had drinks ready when I arrived. Then she'd make another drink, and another.

She was surprisingly easy to talk to. She asked good questions. She absorbed the answers and referred to them later. She listened more than she spoke, but when she did speak, it seemed to me that she shared deeply, honestly. She had a million facial expressions, scrunching and guffawing and looking aghast as the situation demanded. She made me feel interesting.

On my third visit, after our third drink, she asked, "What were you doing in the bathroom when I first met you?" and at this point it felt natural, as if everything had been leading up to this question and I had come because I wanted her to ask it. Still, it was hard to get the words out.

"A doctor ... more than one doctor ... called it excoriation," I said. "It's skin picking, I've been doing it since I was little when I'm bored or nervous or just because it feels good."

She had moved very close to me. I didn't notice that she'd reached for my face until I felt her thumb on my chin. She rubbed the makeup off, looked at the scarred skin underneath. I flinched. Then she reached up into her dark hair. A whole section of it came away in her hand, and when she laid it on the coffee table I could see it was a clip. She showed me the exposed patch. It was nearly bare. The hair that was growing back was sparse and feeble.

"I do the same thing. In a way," she said.

She looked at me, her face twisted, apologetic.

"It's okay," I said. I squeezed her hand.

She stiffened and I felt I'd given the wrong answer.

"It's getting late," she said.

I held my breath that week, certain that the email from her wouldn't arrive, trying to preemptively mitigate my disappointment. But it did, the email did arrive, I went over again.

"I had this beautiful, glossy hair when I was little, and then one day it turned coarse—I couldn't stand it. I know it's not real, I've had a million therapists tell me that you can't pick out the *wrong* hairs and keep the right ones, but I do this thing, I feel around and when I find one that feels too crinkly, too thick—I pull it out," she told me that night, again after the third drink. "Have you ever told anyone else?"

"My parents knew I did it in high school. I told them I stopped."

"I told my ex. You know what he did?" Her eyes shone. "He let me do it to him."

"Do what?"

I couldn't quite believe it.

"Pull his hair out."

"Really?"

"He said, your hair's too pretty. He said I should pull his out instead." She said this breathlessly, leaning forward. Then she fell back into the couch, slackened. "It didn't work, though. It's not about the pulling, is it? Or the picking? It's about how it feels."

I nodded. "I don't want to hurt myself, but—I want to feel something on the surface pinch instead."

"Yes! Did you just think of that?"

"I don't know."

"That's exactly how it feels."

Her eyes shone approvingly, darting over my face as if she could find the origin of my smart words there. I wished I could put my mouth to her pupils and drink up that look.

"So you didn't keep doing it? His hair?"

"I broke up with him. I couldn't look at him the same after that."

Gwen emailed to ask if I wanted to hang out at my place that night. She'd never been to my apartment. I was nervous. I cleaned twice.

She was agitated when she got there, flushed and hurried. The second I shut the door, she stepped toward me. She put her hand on the back of my neck, pulled my face close to hers and held it there.

She whispered, "This place is disgusting."

"What? Really?"

"Yes," she said. She was grinning. "It's filthy. It looks like you've never cleaned." She said this louder, but still softly, still into my ear.

"Gwen. What are you doing?" My voice came out in a whine.

"I know how to fix it."

"My apartment?"

"No, not the apartment. Just trust me," she said this in her normal tone, as if we were acting in a play and she'd paused for a note. She circled her fingers around my wrist and her

voice dropped back into a breathy hush. "Your outfit's ugly. That sweater's the wrong size for you."

"I thought you liked this sweater."

"No, I—" She sighed like I was a child refusing to eat. "Don't you get it? It feels the same. Doesn't it feel the same?"

"As what?"

She leaned toward me again.

"That makeup isn't fooling anyone. Everyone can see the bumps."

Finally, I got it.

"I don't think that'll work."

She looked so crestfallen.

"Can we just try it?"

"I just—I don't think it'll work."

"Okay."

She sat on my couch for half an hour, swishing her drink around in her glass. I had made cocktails like she did, but not as well.

After she left, I went to the bathroom and excoriated as hard as I ever had, harder maybe. I didn't hear from her for a week.

"I'm sorry," she said, the next time I went over. She looked me straight in the eyes. She wasn't embarrassed by apologies. "Your apartment's adorable. I had an idea and it was silly."

"I'm sorry that I didn't want to do it."

"You have nothing to be sorry for."

We drank, then, and talked like normal.

When I finished my third drink, I put down my glass and looked over at her. In the second before she caught me looking, there was this fragile sadness in her eyes and before I knew what I was doing, I said, "You dress like a duchess in a retirement community."

She turned to me in surprise, then opened her mouth wide and barked out a single, shocked, "ha".

"You are so good at this."

"You're so critical, even when you're giving a compliment. So judgy."

"Yes."

She stood up. I stood up too.

"You drink too much. It's crass," I said.

She stepped toward me. She put her hands on either side of my face like she was thanking me without words.

"Your hands are always cold."

"No one's ever really loved you," she whispered into my ear.

I pulled back.

"Sorry," she said, but she was smiling.

Gwen explained her theory to me: the picking, the pulling came from a need to punish ourselves for our imperfections. We probably didn't have more imperfections than other people, she said, our awareness of them was just particularly acute, in need of expression. I opened my mouth, but she'd been thinking about this for too long and she didn't have time for interjections.

She hadn't thought of the solution until she met me, until she saw me that day in the bathroom. And she'd wanted to tell me—about her baldness, about how she couldn't stop pulling her hair out, about how it felt good instead of painful. She thought we could help each other. We could hate each other gently, we could substitute this punishment for the other. There would be no need anymore for trichotillomania or dermatillomania. (Such clean, smooth words, I thought, for something so pleasurable jagged.)

I'd go over to her apartment or she'd come over to mine and we'd stand facing each other or sit cross-legged and very close on the couch. We'd say things to each other. They were barbed, specific things. They were secrets made whole and hard. They did feel good, sometimes. Better, the way she held my hand or rested her palm on my thigh as she delivered her words. I felt her touch acutely. It was warmer and heavier than anyone else's.

I always left her apartment feeling a little bruised, a little pinched, with a hollowness like a bubble trapped beneath my sternum—but it wasn't anything I couldn't handle.

*It's working!!!!* she emailed me, nothing else, no subject line, our secret.

It did—for a couple of weeks. Then, at home after an especially horrendous day at work, I spied a juicy pore, and the next time I blinked it had been two hours and my face was demolished. The guilt was excruciating, the thought of what Gwen would say if she knew, but underneath that, it was still an escape. It wasn't like the insults. It was pain that my skin was taking from my heart, my head. I didn't want it put back.

I thought it must be working for Gwen, but then—I guess she forgot I was coming over. The door to her place was unlocked. She didn't hear me when, gently, I pushed open her bedroom door. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, pulling out hair after hair. Her extensions were beside her on the comforter. She had the bathroom wastebasket at her feet.

"Gwen!" I said.

She turned toward me, a strand of hair still held in her index finger and thumb. Her eyes were glazed over. Her mouth was tense, grim.

"Oh my god," she said, and a sob heaved out of her chest like vomit.

I ran to her. I took both her hands in mine.

"You're okay, you're okay," I said.

She collapsed into me. It was the first time I'd seen her less than perfectly put-together.

I kept repeating, "You're okay," and rubbing her back as her crying got louder and then quieter again and finally turned to downy hiccups. I put her to bed.

When I woke up the next morning, she was making eggs and toast. Her hair was back in place; it was the weekend, but she wore fitted black dress pants and a cardigan.

"Gwen—" I started to say, but she smiled forcefully and said, "I made mimosas!"

For months, we hung out twice or three times a week; sometimes we stayed up talking so late that I slept in her bed with her. On these occasions, I found it hard to fall asleep. I wondered about how much touching in bed was normal for friends. What would happen if, in my sleep, I put my arm or my leg around her? Was it okay that I could hear so loudly the small sounds she made as she slept, that I listened to the rhythm of her breathing as if it was a wartime broadcast?

Because I didn't want her to catch me, I stopped picking at work, and because I wasn't picking at work, I stopped being so afraid of my coworkers. I smiled at them and said hi in the mornings. I learned their partners' and their pets' names. And strangely, it started to bother me less when I did pick. I moved on faster afterward; I wasn't overwhelmed by shame at what I'd done.

I still didn't love Gwen's ritual, but I endured it. Sometimes she left it so late that I'd think she'd forgotten and I'd be about to let myself feel relieved when she'd say, "Well, shall we?" and I'd shudder inwardly but I'd do it because Gwen wanted to, because Gwen said it was working. Outside of this time where we said the worst things we could think of to each other, she made me feel, maybe for the first time in my life, that I was being listened to, that what I had to say was interesting, valuable, smart. I guess the two things should have been hard to reconcile, but I chose to believe the good Gwen, the real Gwen.

I only slipped at work once, but it only took once for Gwen to catch me. When she walked into the bathroom and saw me hunched over the sink, she flew at me. She smacked my hand away from my face.

"We'll talk about this at home," she hissed before she blew out of the bathroom, letting the door slam shut behind her.

There weren't cocktails waiting when I arrived at her apartment that night. There was a bottle of wine on the coffee table, three-quarters empty.

The second I walked in, she said, "What's *wrong* with you? Do you not want to stop tearing off your own skin?"

Her voice was high and harsh, almost a yell, totally different from the half-soothing tone she used for my insults.

"It doesn't work, Gwen."

"It has to work. Nothing else works, so this has to."

I reached for her hand.

"You're still pretty. You'd be pretty no matter what."

"That's not true." She shook me off. "We're supposed to tell each other the truth."

"I don't think the things I say to you are true."

She turned her face away from me.

Slowly, I forced the words out: "Do you believe it when you say those things to me?"

Instead of answering, she said, "So you're just happy like this. Scarred. Repulsive." She didn't look at me.

"I don't think it matters so much anymore. Because I still love you, hair or no hair."

She had written *Love you!* in my birthday card a few weeks earlier, but we'd never said it out loud. I regretted it immediately, the way it sprang like a burp from my throat, the way it hung in the air, making everything else I'd said sound so foolish.

I waited an impossibly long time. She didn't say anything. She kept her face turned away from me.

"I guess I'll go then." Still nothing. "I'll see you at work tomorrow, okay?"

When I came to her cubicle the next day, she got up and walked away like she didn't see me. I waited a couple days. I tried emailing. She didn't answer.

I'd still see her at wine-in-Styrofoam night, still surrounded by admirers, still laughing and joking. She never looked my way. Then one day I heard she'd gotten a promotion, had left to an office at ground level, with windows. I quit not long after that. I got a job as a barista. I had to move into an old house with three roommates, but that was fine. I'd always assumed I couldn't live with other people, always remembered the way my mother scolded or cried when she saw the half-moons. If the roommates noticed, they didn't care. They liked me, they were nice to me.

It's been years, but I still dream about Gwen, always the same dream. I'm walking through an art gallery. I'm not wearing any makeup. On the walls are paintings of demons. They have grotesque bodies and faces. They have red eyes and panting tongues and long teeth. As I pass through the gallery, people turn away from the paintings to look at me. Their expressions are neutral; they look at my face like they would anyone else's, then turn back to the paintings.

Gwen doesn't notice me until I'm right in front of her. She's with a man. He's handsome. He looks protective and kind. When she sees me, her eyes widen in horror. I reach out to touch her, and she yells, "No, please!" My fingers are almost touching her hair when it starts to float away in strands like dandelion seeds. She's sobbing, she's crying, "No, no," but I can't stop trying to touch her. I watch her hair drift calmly away from us.

## STARLIGHT SHAMSI

### TRANSFINITY

two mirrors facing each other

Let us see

Transfinity

This poem is about t4t

*I love every face of you*

*Every place of you*

*Every moment of you*

*I put on all the clothes I've ever owned to hold you*

Know all of my selves

Love you

Even before i

Knew who

*I was or who i wanted or how or why or who*

*Strapped a bra on me and called*

me a girl

when I'm your boy

my gender is a waterfall a star a rose

*bloomed when we kissed*

*rumi wrote what was said to the rose that made it open*

*Was said to me here in my chest*

*Al haqq*

*Truth undressed*

*You changed your name when you saw it written in the wind*

*Gave your blood given name back to the earth as a gift*

*we tend our gender like a garden*

*Growing generosity*

*Sowing relationship as medicine*

Loving and becoming in each other's arms

## GRAYSON THOMPSON

### for anyone holding their breath

this is a love poem  
for all boys who have never been told they were  
beautiful for people who do not know they smile in their  
sleep for the adult children who can't call home

this is a page  
in a story that places bets on the weight of  
bobcats heavy handed with softness  
each pound a metaphor

I do not want to be alone

I want to tell you  
in the same century grief  
was first spoken  
so was breviary

and this is a truth,  
god honest

some of us  
have applied for the vacancy  
of being alive  
since before we were born

our resumes  
half spent lifetimes  
never making it to the top  
even if we stop ourselves from flying  
propelled by everything we hate

I do not know who interviewed you  
but in that round,  
the one where you painted yourself an  
emergency someone should have told you

the job responsibilities  
were never to hold it all in

**MICKIE KENNEDY**

## Uncle Ronny: The Beading

When Mitch was forced to rest his fingers,  
he always draped the dress on the back of a chair.  
It looked heavy, like a liquor-slumped body.

Mitch was the man my Uncle Ronny loved,  
a military nurse in a crisp, white uniform.  
They both lived with my grandmother.

Whenever my mother disappeared, I lived there too.  
Mitch was an uncle who loved looking  
like an aunt. That's how Grandmother explained it.

He needed the dress for a pageant,  
so they traded shifts for weeks—  
my grandmother sewing through the days,

Mitch sewing through the nights. He wanted  
every eye in every room.  
He wanted so many silver beads

you couldn't see a sliver of the fabric beneath.  
If my grandmother could stay awake,  
they worked together—hushed, huddled,

each of them holding a sleeve.  
The process an agony of precision—  
guiding the needle through tiny holes,

tying off knots smaller than gnats.  
Uncle Ronny was a background shadow:  
riffling through boxes of scuffed records,

stacking dishes on a dish rack.  
When he thought I wasn't looking,  
he'd rest his hands on Mitch's shoulders.

## ◆◆ REGGIE EDMONDS-VASQUEZ ◆◆

### Eulogy for the Bathroom Mirror

Boy is violent and safe  
enough to become

Boy apologizes for the mess  
and promises to stop  
punching holes in the walls  
while still picking plaster  
from his knuckles

Boy stuck in the mirror

Called it *boy*

boy seeping through the wreckage  
he leaves behind

Here lies my gender:  
In the glass that shatters  
against skin and shreds  
me away until I bleed  
girl into the sink

I am all bones and drywall  
I am full of holes and longing  
for a body that loves me back  
The first time I wore makeup  
as a child, I could have sworn  
I heard my mother mourning  
as she removed foundation  
from my face, thick globs  
of cold cream washing

Reflections I do not recognize  
I have made my bed  
in a broken home  
and called it a body

Called it *anything*  
but water trapped in the drain

Here lies my gender:  
blood and all

girl-risk-flowing  
down the drain  
Girl comes home  
to a ruined house  
She makes her bed, anyway

girlhood down the drain

Called it *girl*

Girl bursting  
through the pipes

Boy carving holes  
into his flesh to find

One that does not flee

I have more of a graveyard  
than a body  
The countless times  
I've buried  
myself only to crave  
a newer body  
at the sight of my face.

girl still trapped  
in her mother's bathroom  
and unburied  
One I recognize in the mirror

**SIENNA FERESHTEH****BAKLAVA**

*The thing about honey*, you say,  
and I know, by your curling lips  
something foolish is coming—  
citrus peels simmering—  
your thumb catching honey  
as it drips in the pot—  
*It's best sucked off the finger*  
*of a lover*—a bashful eye—my mind  
on softer things than fucking  
on kitchen tiles—you chew  
your lips, blow O's  
out the window—  
I'm light  
enough to sway  
from ring  
to ring—past due for a sweet—  
some fingers on my tongue—  
rose, pistachio, phyllo—splintered—  
could've been glass but we chose  
chins soaked in syrup and cum—  
we keep the blinds open—  
let the world witness.


 ANNE GERARD

## An Answer Key for My Mother's BIO-104 Exam

**Fill in the blanks using vocabulary from the matching word bank. Some words may be used more than once, others may not be used at all.**

When my mother and sister picked me up from the airport, I waited three left turns before asking for a family (1)\_\_\_\_\_. I was not expecting anything worth the words needed to tell it. Then my mother suggested a (2)\_\_\_\_\_ I rarely think about. The (3)\_\_\_\_\_ of my grandmother's death and reincarnation as a goldfinch. My mother called this a "good (4)\_\_\_\_\_." My mother said her sister, my Aunt Meghan, is "crazy, but..." she believes that goldfinches represent Patsy's (read her mother's [read *my grandmother's*]) spirit. My mother, a biology professor, said, "that's (5)\_\_\_\_\_ for you." My mother did not say that the (6)\_\_\_\_\_ of the word (7)\_\_\_\_\_ is descended from the Latin, "legendus," which comes from "legere," which means "to read; to select," the second of which could imply a (8)\_\_\_\_\_.

1. Legend 2. Story 3. Myth 4. Legend 5. Family 6. Etymology 7. Legend 8. Lie

### Matching

9. Lie	a. A past account, especially one considered historical, but not verifiable.
10. Etymology	b. Something to explain the unexplainable.
11. Legend	c. An intentional untruth.
12. Family	d. A group sharing ancestry.
13. Fable	e. A simplification of truth with didactic purpose.
14. Myth	f. A chronological account of the birth and development of linguistic forms.
15. Story	g. An account of events.

9. c, 10. f, 11. a, 12. d, 13. e, 14. b, 15. g

### Story Problems

16. I never met my grandmother, who died when my mother was in high school, but my Aunt Meghan is always singing, just like my mom, who does not talk about Patsy (read *her mother* [read *my grandmother*]) except for frantic flutters of information (read *stories* [read *fables*]). I have a good memory for family dynamics (read *etymologies*) so I know a handful of breadcrumbs (read *myths*): Patsy gave birth to ten children. She was an alcoholic. She rinsed my mother's mouth out with soap. She would not eat for days at a time, then consume an entire pan of brownies. She is not smiling in any of the pictures. In the pictures, she has the same haircut my mother has now.

Question: Do goldfinches suffer from the same body dysmorphic disorder as my grandmother (read *my mother* [read *me*])?

Answers may include: Goldfinches are among the strictest vegetarians in the bird world; my mother's breath always smells clean; the caretaker is responsible for building nests, nourishing her young.

17. Last Tuesday, I called my mother to ask for advice (read *family*) on breakups and breakfast foods. She was not exactly happy to hear from me. In a voice hoarsened from a cold, my mother told me, "You already know what you're going to do, Annie, so why do you want to complain to me about it?"

All I can remember are guesses (read *myths*) at what was said. To repeat them here would merely mean appropriating my mother's (read *our*) words (read *lying*)—not for the first time, probably not for the last.

Question: At what point am I allowed to claim this as my experience?

Answers may include: There is an edge between my mother's life and my own, a boundary we share that is not much of a boundary some days—though I am old enough to know this is a country everyone carries, not everyone lives as close to the borders as I do; the American goldfinch is migratory and moves every season.

### Multiple Choice

18. Weeks later, in an effort to escape writing about my mother, I posted on Facebook, tagging all of my mother's living relatives. I wrote, "I am writing an essay about birds and Grandma Patsy... Could someone clarify the connection to goldfinches?"

Question: Whose response is least helpful?

- a. "Patsy's favorite bird." – John (read *Patsy's widowed husband* [read *my mother's estranged father* {read *my estranged grandfather*}]).
- b. "She (read *Patsy*) mentioned that in her next life she would come back as one (read *goldfinch* [read *legend*]). One day after she died, a tree outside the window of her room was full of goldfinches. I did not witness it. That's the story that I know." – Catherine (read *my mother's sister* [read *my favorite aunt*]).
- c. "My Momma loved them (read *goldfinches*), which is true (read *legend*). The story I love is that when the hearse came to pick up her body, there were goldfinches surrounding it. Grandpa John told me that. When Kathleen (read *Meghan's daughter* [read *my cousin*]) was pregnant I told everyone that if her child's (read *Kathleen's son's* [read *my second cousin's*]) eyes were blue, it would be Momma coming through." – Meghan.
- d. "My mom (read *my Aunt Meghan*) could probably tell you a story or two!" – Kathleen (read *my cousin*).

Answer: All of the above.

### Essays

19. Earlier, before the Facebook post, in the Panera where I recorded this conversation, my mother told me Meghan became pregnant just after Patsy's death. She said that when Kathleen was born, Meghan claimed it was their mother reincarnated.

I said, "She thinks Kathleen is your mother reincarnated? That's funny." Which it wasn't, funny that is. Only strange. Beautiful, maybe.

My mom said, "Or something. I don't know."

She said, "That's all I have. Is that good enough?"

**Question: Is it good enough?**

Answers should include: In the recording, the sounds of slurping soup, bread breaking, and chewing are all louder than that of my voice and my sister's; I do not have enough distance to write this essay (read *fable* [read *lie*]); I will never have enough distance.

20. Just before my mother decided she was done with this conversation, she said she doesn't think birds are sentient, said she doesn't think of Patsy when she sees goldfinches. After which, she stood up, said, "I'm sorry. It's time to go."

**Question: Was this test stolen, copied, inherited, or fabricated?**

Answers should include: The difference between legacy and legend is in if you can undo it; paired goldfinches make virtually identical flight calls; one summer my mother taught me to mimic bird calls for fun—I am still worried they mistook my lie for an answer.

## REGGIE EDMONDS-VASQUEZ

### My Grandmother Makes Catfish for Dinner

I watch as she prepares it for dinner,  
Slides the blade across the belly of the fish.

She, a woman gutted like a fish,  
knows how to spill the blood quietly.

I too know how to spill blood quietly.  
Sometimes, I am the fish, and sometimes the blade.

Sometimes, I am gasping, and sometimes the blade  
is a man with his hands around my throat.

There is a man with his hands around my throat.  
All I can feel is the pain of his teeth.

At the table we don't talk about his teeth.  
We all know how to vanish in a man's mouth.

So we save ourselves by choking a man's mouth  
with the catfish that Grandma makes for dinner.

◆ ◆ LIAM STRONG ◆ ◆ ◆

## inconsistencies experienced after the disability application was declined

the yogurt expires on my birthday; the pink daffodils bloomed first; scuffs on the top basement step silhouette into Australia; we can't get the coffee stain out of the rug on the landing; we watched haunted house movies with the lights on; semicolon tattoo along a radial bone when there ought to be a question mark; our cat wants obedience training so he can be ADA compliant; Deftones on the speaker sans the tinnitus; i say *gimp* or *hitch* in my leg to imply a collaborative mechanism; for the evening, i was right -handed; knee meniscus, more like discus, because i feel thrown; a soap opera relationship never sounded so clean; our calluses want pity; our cartilage a kind of coastal erosion; the joke my dad made a couple weeks ago about shoe support & soullessness; a plastic window into an envelope like someone is always observing; the fast-forward button is broken; we rewind the tape to scenes we skipped, the dead body still a dead body; i'm anxious, i'm nervous, finally, reprise; to get to the part where we're living.



## SAM SAXTON

# Things My Mother Has Not Forgotten

### **When she put the milk in the fridge**

The use-by date says *25 Sep*, and the rime of yellowing scum around the top says it's off, but my mother says, "It's fine, I only took it out the freezer a few days ago."

"Why did you put it in the freezer?"

"Give it here," and she puts it to her lips, drinks, says, "it's fine."

I pour it into her tea. The tiny lumps skittering on the surface dissolve quickly, like frustration.

### **Countdown**

Channel Four, ten past two. "I know you like the numbers round," she'll say. It's a useful fiction for both of us. And if I were going to tell her I don't watch television anymore, I ought to have done it years ago.

She searches for the remote control with a practised slowness. She knows there are only a few places it could be, and that most of them are between sofa cushions. But when she inhales, through her nostrils, it is at length, and to a great depth.

Her concern is more than just exasperation at her own untidiness, it is for the afternoon ahead. I've been here for five minutes, and we've already run out of things to talk about. I've asked her what she's been doing this morning ("Shopping and cooking," she said, as though that's all she's been doing for her entire life) and whether she's seeing anyone else this week ("No, nobody in particular," she said, as though I was taunting her).

### **Walthamstow**

"How's Stoke Newington?" she asks, over the blare of the adverts. She says it with an ironic inflection, like she's asking whether Buckingham Palace is big enough.

"I've moved, remember?" I say, with as casual a tone as I can muster.

"Oh yes, of course," she says. That's all she says.

"Walthamstow's great."

"Walthamstow Wetlands," she says after a pause.

I am startled, wonder which corner of her mind she has retrieved this from. "Have you been to the wetlands?"

"Me?" she says, as if I could have meant someone else. "No." And she takes a sip of her tea. "Lovely tea."

I allow myself a few seconds of silence, but quickly regret it. The silence in my mother's flat is so much fuller than silence at home. It's stuffed with so much else.

"Yes, Yorkshire teabags."

### My dead name

"Dom now, Mum, remember? Or Dominique if you're using the full version."

"Right, yes, Dom."

### Superstition

"I won't be leaving the house today," she says, 30 seconds after I've arrived. She wants me to ask her why not, but I don't give her the satisfaction, so she continues: "Do you know why?"

"Because you've got nothing planned?"

"No!" she says, irritated. "Because it's Friday the thirteenth."

### Appearances

In her room I find a copy of *Sense and Sensibility* on the nightstand. It's an old edition I recognize from her shelves. I look for a bookmark and find only a postcard in the title page. It's dated 3 July 1992.

Hidden beneath the book is *The Pocket Book of Wordsearches*. She's worked her way through it methodically, but a page close to the end has its corner turned in, and she's abandoned the search, only having found one of the birds illustrated in the borders: a magpie.

### Forward planning

"I should get us dinner on," she says.

"It's a bit early for—" I don't say lunch "—dinner isn't it?"

"Oh is it?" she says with a faux insouciance.

"It's ten past eleven."

"Right. Well. What shall we do then?"

For a moment, I can't bear the weight of the question, but then I see in it an opportunity.

"We could go for a little walk?"

"Well where would we go?" she asks. She is frowning. She's never liked walks, thinks my fondness for them is just another one of my southern affectations.

"I don't know, just up to the shops and back maybe?"

She angles her teacup towards herself precariously, then peers into the liquid. "I can't go like I used to," she says.

She wants me to protest, but I lose the will.

"Perhaps a jigsaw then?"

"Yes, why not."

Anything so we don't have to look each other in the eye.

### Dan

"How's Danny?"

"Danny? Dan?"

"Danny, Dan, whatever."

"No one calls him Danny."

"Alright, Dan."

I find a piece that connects two rows of edge pieces.

"There we go," I say. And then, "He's ok, thanks."

"Who is?"

"Dan!"

"Oh, Dan." She starts singing. "Oh Danny boy, the pipes, the pipes are falling, from glen to glen, and down the mountain top..." Her voice is fractured, but the tune is untroubled by age. She pauses for a second and I wonder if she's forgotten the words altogether, but then she starts up again: "...the summer's gone, and all the rain is falling, it's you, it's you must go and I must bide."

She stops, and I glance at her sideways, to look at her eyes. They are glassy. I put my hand on hers, give it a squeeze.

"We had that at our wedding you know?"

"Yes."

"Were you there?" she says, suddenly, suspiciously. I don't answer, just allow the silence to refill the room, and squeeze her hand again. She looks down at my hand, until I remove it. The folds of her skin part stubbornly.

### My dead name

"I'm going by Dom these days, remember, Mum?"

"Yes, Dom, sorry."

"Dominique if you want to use the full version."

"Yes, no, Dominique."

### Her appetite

The table is the same too-large table it has always been, but the cloth is new. It's mucus green PVC, decorated with rows of vivid yellow bananas. She wouldn't have countenanced it even a few months ago, and I wonder whether it's necessity or a change of taste that's occasioned the purchase. Or perhaps one of the carers.

"I like your new cloth," I lie.

"Yes," she says, distractedly. She's fishing carrot slices out of the pan with a fork. The pan exhales a steady column of steam into her face.

One of the carers, Bernie, calls me occasionally. She's told me I have to try not to intervene too frequently, as if she can read the micromanagement in my voice. Takes one to know one, I suppose.

The peas go onto the plate next. She begins this task, too, with a fork.

"Maybe the sieve?" I say as neutrally as I can, not moving.

"Mind like a sieve," she says cheerfully, and carries on.

I think of Bernie, and distract myself by tracing the outlines of the bananas on the tablecloth.

"There you go," she says, putting the plate in front of me. A Quorn scallop fizzes at a strange angle to the rest of the food. All the elements are there, but it looks like something AI might have produced if you asked it to do a plate of food being served.

"Lovely," I say, restraining myself from asking for sauce of any kind.

She sits down opposite me with an equally woeful plate. She has strategically given herself less. She'll have been bingeing the nutritional shakes again.

"Lovely," she says and tries a smile.

I cut a chunk from the rounded point of the scallop, lift it to my mouth, blow, chew, swallow. It is too wet and too dry at the same time.

"Mmm," I say.

She ploughs her fork through the peas, pushing in the opposite direction with the knife. Nothing she does is wrong per se, but the whole operation only leaves two peas on her fork. She lifts them towards her mouth, but the tremor in her hand displaces one of the peas and, seeing that there is only one left on her fork, she returns it to the plate to try to reload. I pretend not to be watching.

"I remember when we went to buy this table" I say for the sake of speaking.

"Yes," she says, grimacing. She is concentrating mercilessly on her fork. We are both probably wondering why I must insist on using the word "remember."

I do remember it though, with a peculiar vividness. I remember the strained performative kindness she treated me with that day. I remember the ice cream she bought me. We went without my father because they'd had a big row. I don't remember what it was about, but I remember the feeling of betrayal when she asked me, in front of him, if I'd like to come with her to buy a new table, and I said yes. I didn't want to come with her, but I sensed that if I said that it would shatter her.

"I think I'm full," she says now, laying her fork neatly in the middle of the plate, tines upwards, bisected carefully with the knife.

Her scallop, perched on the lip of the plate, remains untouched.

#### My dead name

"DominIQUE."

"Dommy Neek."

#### Bernie

"No, it's Friday today, Mum. The day I always come."

I do not say, "...and always will."

I do not say, "...until the day you die."

#### Kindness

"It was you bought me that pepper grinder," she says.

"Yes," I say, "well remembered."

It's modelled on George Harrison on the cover of the Sergeant Pepper album. A visual pun. I bought it for her over a decade ago, when I was still trying to be what everyone seemed to think I was. I'd been exploring the Beatles' back catalogue, and psychedelic drugs, had spent the summer and all the money I had travelling across South America, finding myself, then losing myself again, then finding ayahuasca. On my third day in the jungle I'd voided my bowels and my stomach and my mind, and had a frank conversation with God, which began with me asking him why my mother couldn't accept me being gay, and ended with him asking me why I couldn't accept that she had accepted me being gay. God was right, of course, but it took me a while to realise it. The day I did, when she asked me how my boyfriend was, and didn't call him my "friend", was a few days before her birthday, and I decided I ought to buy her a present. Determined to choose something we could connect over, I googled *Beatles presents*.

"It's a good album that," I say. "Shall we have a listen?"

"Don't be silly," she says, "it's past your bedtime."

#### The phone call

She prefers it if I do the phone call these days. So does Bernie, I imagine.

Bernie says there are a few important things she needs to tell me this week. I try to remember to sound grateful, concerned.

Toward the end of the conversation she reminds me to try to let Mum make mistakes. She finishes by pointing out that "...we are still at an early stage."

There is a clear logic to her words, but stages have a cruel logic of their own. Especially when they are stages on a cycle. An early stage might come before a late stage, but a late stage might take you all the way back to the beginning again.

#### House rules

"I won't be told what to do in my own home," she says at an unnecessary volume. I sigh. She won't. She never would.

#### Her own outburst

She's been in the bathroom for so long I begin doing little tasks on a semi-stultified autopilot. I wrap the plate with the remainder of her dinner in clingfilm. Although it's almost cooled there's still enough going on, invisibly, to slowly cloud the film in hundreds of tiny droplets, which gather and coalesce into bigger drops. I watch them, because I have nothing else to do. Are nature's relentless cycles repeated at every level? Will the clingfilm create a kind of biome, so that the contents produce their own miniature water cycle, raining back down into the food as it cools?

"Oh," she says, finding me staring into the fridge, "shall I throw out some things to make space? I can't read the sell-by dates you know, you'll have to tell me what to chuck."

She was a care worker herself once. She understands that she needs help.

**Dan, still**

"You know, my partner."

"Yes, of course," she says, though her eyes dart upwards.

"You've met him many times, Mum."

"Yes, of course."

"You're very fond of him."

"Yes, he's lovely. Very funny."

"Yes," I say, tentatively, "he can be funny, I suppose. Though laughter seems to have taken flight from our relationship lately"

I'm taken aback by my own words, and so is she.

"Oh dear. Since when?"

"Oh I don't know, around the time you got diagnosed," I mumble. It is an unnecessary cruelty, and she punishes me by saying nothing, and slowly welling up.

**Forgiveness**

I emerge from the bathroom.

"Oh you look pretty," she says, beaming. "Shall we have a cuppa?"

**My dead name**

"I'm going by Dom now, remember, not Dominic..."

"Yes, I'm sorry. I'm getting forgetful you know."

**Hygiene**

She is sitting upright at the dining table, facing towards the front door, sobbing with an abandon I haven't seen before, both her hands over her face as if she's playing peek-a-boo.

I drop the shopping bags and rush over.

"Oh thank goodness it's you."

"Mum, what's the matter? Who did you think I was?"

"Those kids," she says.

"Kids?"

"With their... gun... full of..." Words have forsaken her, and she points at the floor. There is a trail of silly string across the carpet.

"Oh god," I say, "that's my fault, I shouldn't have left that pumpkin in the window." "Pumpkin?" she says.

I lift her up and hold her, but in my embrace she becomes irascible, asks me to let go of her. And clean up the floor.

**My dead name**

"Dominic!"

I do not answer.

**Traditions**

I've often wondered whether the joy fireworks bring to so many children is worth the terror they bring to so many dogs.

I have half a memory from a university philosophy class of some theologian asking whether all the happiness in the world was worth the tears of one small child. Forget small children, I think; what about the tears of a parent who's slowly losing her mind?

Every time one goes off she jolts, as if she's been electrocuted. Every time, she says "Fireworks night."

I try to google the quote, but I can't find it.

Maybe it's a false memory.

**False memories**

"Didn't you meet George Harrison once?"

"The Beatle?"

"Yes, well done."

"I know who George Harrison is, I haven't lost my faculties altogether. Not yet." She's distracted momentarily. Terrorizing peas again.

"And? Did you meet him?"

"No."

"I'm sure you told me that once."

"Well I might have told you Father Christmas was real once."

**My dead name**

"Dom, mum."

"Domnum?"

"No, just Dom."

"Just Dom."

"Or Dominique if you want to use the full version."

"Dominique. Like the place."

"I think you're thinking of Dominica."

"Do you mean Dominica?" she asks, stressing the second syllable, instead of the third. Now I'm the one who's confused. Which error do I correct?

I decide it doesn't really matter.

**The bath mat**

I check every time I go in there. I'm not sure where I expect her to have taken it, but you can never be too safe.

I think of her every time I clean my feet at home. I lift one foot to my knee to lather it in soap and think about how easy it would be to have a fall.

"She's had a fall" is always the first of a string of clichés that come with aging. First, it's

“She’s had a fall”, then it’s “She has good days and bad days”, and before you know it, it’s “She’d like it to be at home”. Then there’s only “It’s what she would have wanted” left.

### Christmas

“Well, I was hoping to do just the morning with Dan,” I say.

“Oh right,” she says, with a pitch perfect balance of nonchalance and disappointment. She leaves an impeccably timed pause, then adds “But you will come here?”

Somehow the implication that I might leave her alone on Christmas Day enrages me more than anything else she’s ever said, and it’s all I can do not to taunt her by saying “Possibly.”

### That time

I’m doing my nails. It’s one of the jobs I’ve found I can bring with me to pass a few minutes productively.

She watches me in the task like a child watching a pet. She has her own hands propped uselessly on the table next to me. They are skeletal, and move only with powerful vibration now. Hands always betray us in the end.

“Do you remember that time you tried to use nail polish remover on your eyes?” she says, chuckling.

“How could I forget?” I ask.

I don’t mean because it was humiliating, I mean because she reminds me frequently. Usually when I’m displaying any kind of expertise in being a woman.

### George Harrison

She picks up the grinder. “I met him once you know?”

“Who?”

“Him.” She taps the grinder.

“George Harrison?”

“Yes.”

I chew the peas as I think about how to respond.

“Yes, I remember.”

### My dead name

“Dom,” I mutter quietly.

I don’t think she hears.

### The tablecloth

She pushes me with a force I didn’t know she was still capable of, and my feet almost go from under me on the ice. Still, my first thought is for her balance. I sigh.

“This *is* your home, Mum.”

“No, I want to go to my real home.”

“This is your real home, Mum, you’ve lived here for years. You’ve been at the hospital for

a long time, but that wasn’t your real home.”

“I know *that*,” she says, as though I’m an imbecile.

“Well let’s just get you inside for now and then...” I trail off. Then what? Then I might trick you into staying? Then I might lock you in? Then I might run away and leave you for dead, and they’ll find you, days later, when a delivery worker reports a putrid smell wafting through the letterbox, and I’ll get a phone call telling me that I’m the legal heir to your estate and entitled to the money if there’s any left over once they’ve sold the flat and paid off your debts, and you’ll look down on me from heaven and resent me even more than you did in life?

I open the door and lead her over to the dining table.

“You sit there, I’ll get us a cuppa.”

She sits, and looks around her with sly glances, not yet ready to admit she was wrong. She places both hands on the table, then traces the outlines of one of the fluorescent bananas with her index finger. She looks so much like a child recovering from a tantrum.

### My present

“Well it’s a funny old Christmas Eve isn’t it,” she says. She says it exactly like she would always have said it. Her voice even sounds fuller, more definite. “We always used to do presents on Christmas Eve didn’t we?”

“Yes, we did.”

“I’ve got you a little present,” she says, “I bought it months ago, I’ll go and get it.”

I think of intervening, telling her to sit down and have her tea, but then I think of Bernie. I hear her rummaging around in her bedside cabinet and wonder what she’ll come back with. Some boiled sweets? A sock? But then she comes in with a small paper bag from Wright’s, the village pharmacy.

“I’m sorry it’s not wrapped.”

She gives it to me expectantly, and I try not to look too surprised that she’s pulled this off.

Inside the bag is a small jar of Take the Day Off Cleansing Balm. It’s a midrange brand, but probably the most expensive you can buy at Wright’s.

“Oh, Mum.”

“It’s nice that stuff, much nicer than the liquid stuff I think. Much kinder around the eyes.”

I have to hold off speaking for a few seconds.

She fills the silence with worried chatter. “I hope you like it. I mean you don’t have to use it if you prefer the other stuff, but I thought you might like to give it a go. Anyway, I think I probably kept the receipt if it’s not right, they’re very good at Wright’s, they’ll take things back.”

“It’s lovely, Mum,” I say, thrusting my arms around her in an awkward sitting hug. “Thank you.”

### Where I am

The mirror is dirty. I used the balm to remove the mascara, which had streaked, though I thought I’d used the waterproof stuff today. For some reason I try to clean the mirror with the

cotton pad I've just used to wipe my eyes. Of course it makes an impossible mess. It's the kind of thing I would chastise her for.

"Hurry up, Dominique," she shouts, "I need to use it."

"One minute," I shout back, and I give the mirror a quick wipe with some scrunched up toilet paper. It doesn't much help.

What's left is a cloudy circle, and the face looking back at me is so blurred I think for a second it could almost be her.

I leave the mess and vow to come back to it later. She probably won't notice, I think.

UGOCHUKWU DAMIAN OKPARA

## No One Teaches You Anything About Exile

on a street in memphis, a bird hovers over me,  
more relentless to show what splendor it bears.

i've been here before—have fluttered my accent  
just to be seen by a stranger who might ask

where i come from. but no one teaches you this  
about exile, how hiding too can be an act.

once i read about the war, and learned very quickly  
from the stories of my kinsmen that a tongue

could be a map and to stay safe, they knew  
to bend their tongues into many axes,

but this city offers no need for that.

◆ ◆ UGOCHUKWU DAMIAN OKPARA ◆ ◆

## Ghazal for Becoming your Own Guardian

a mouth in the shape of yours. but, here is a hand, guide it,  
let what lingers convulse like a man standing beside a morgue.

here, a train in the shape of your wild desires. to be,  
or not to be guided into life's own journey? here a morgue

sits by the highway, still, like what it tends to, the way  
hearing your name once at the park, felt like a morgue

being entered, a hand pointing to a body to assert ownership.  
tell me about your desires, your scaling palms like a morgue

abandoned for fear of too much grief. tell me about what losses  
you cling to. oh damian, show what hands have become a morgue.

EDUARDO MARTÍNEZ-LEYVA

## ESTRELLITA

He punched me until all I saw were tiny, flickering stars.  
Miniature cowboys riding on silver horses.  
He loved me. I thought. He loved me  
when he gripped my neck, when he spat Valium  
down my throat. He loved me  
until I was out like a bulb. My dreams becoming red and black,  
blotches. I couldn't see past the blemishes. I was filthy.  
Terrified. A muddy puddle at the end of a crosswalk,  
hard to avoid. Back then, everyone wanted to be famous.  
Ended up in parties I was never invited to.  
In simpler times, this could have been romantic.  
An embrace. Arms wrapped around my neck.  
He approached me from behind.  
With his right hand, he covered my eyes.  
How many chapters does this book have?  
He wanted to skip to the less graphic parts.  
Looked away, but cared enough to wince.  
He knocked me from here until all I could see  
were galaxies. Ones I didn't know existed.  
Too many to name. I didn't want to stay here long.  
I was cold. Secretly, I wanted to be colder.  
But I became the light that drags itself across the dark sky.  
Igniting the spaces of a ransacked room,  
his work clothes tossed over the dining room chair.  
I unfolded myself, an outstretched hand. Empty.  
I learned to keep going.  
Despite all of this or because of it.

## ◆◆ NATHAN ALLING LONG ◆◆

### Seattle

My recent lover, Stew, writes from Seattle again, singing of Autumn in a city of evergreens, the scent of the earth, the slow chilling of the air, the apples appearing in the farmer's market like bushels of bright colored leaves, which he feels he could drink the sweet juices from as they hang in the air. The fog rolls over the hills, he says, swallowing the houses one by one, and settles just above the bay, and when you kayak out on the water you have to duck down low to see the shoreline, to spot another boat or buoy, and when you sit up straight, your head is literally in the clouds, so that you feel that the city is far below you, that you are floating in the sky, for when the water laps around your boat and rocks it gently, it feels like how you imagine air to feel for seagulls riding currents—and if you kayak at night before it gets too cold, the lightning bugs flash in the fog like impulses across the brain and when you think something, you wonder if you then see the thought there in the air, as if you're inside your brain or your brain is the world itself—and then you see several more flashes ignite and you know—or you think you know—that you are thinking several things at once, like how ephemeral you feel despite the strong brine in the air, the smell of the bay and the sweet human scent of the conifers wafting down from the hills and into the water, how the scent grounds you while imagination lifts you out of your body, or into it, so you believe, actually believe, that you are hovering over the gray matter of your mind, and simultaneously high about it in the clouds.

Then your feet shift and the kayak rocks and you jolt, fearing you'll tip over, and you are back in your body for certain, the tiny luminescent bodies of the fireflies surrounding you, and you breathe deep the salted air and the honey sap of the pines and you feel so good, so right in the moment, that you can't imagine being anywhere else—or how you ever really lived fully back East.

But then eventually the night sinks in deep and you know you have to wake up early to go back to the bakery where you work, and so you strain your way back to the spot where you launched, and as you load your kayak into your car, you see you have a parking ticket and that it's past midnight and you have to make croissants and muffins in less than six hours and you still need to drive home and then bike a half hour out in the morning. And as you get in your car, you realize it will take nearly a half week of morning shifts to pay for this ticket and you believe that your luck never sank so low back home, back East, and it makes you wonder what you are doing here and question all the sensations you had out in the water, but as you drive the near abandoned streets you feel the calm of night, or is it the cold indifference of it?

Then you come into your group house, the smell of tonight's communal dinner, which you missed, still lingering in the air, and after brushing your teeth, setting your toothbrush next to the others on the rack, you feel somehow more alone than if you were living by yourself. You set the alarm and crawl into bed, already feeling the ache of a half-sleep morning, the ache in

your eyes and the cottony pain in your head, which even the free coffee at the bakery won't erase, and just the thought of that triggers that old familiar fear, like mornings as a teenager, before high school, when you made a wish you weren't alive, at least not living this life, and with that sensation still jittering in your head, you try to go to sleep, but can't, so you lie awake staring at the ceiling as you hear some muffled conversation through the floorboards—two housemates chatting or making love.

And so, Stew writes, he might be coming home, back East, for a visit, or possibly to live again, to give it (and us?) another chance, but he's going to take a few more days to decide, because he's heard about Winter here in Seattle, which he says sounds like *settle*, though he's not sure if it's as in *settle for*, or *settle into*, and he knows it can be rough, rainy and cold and unending, but, they say, that's what makes the Spring all the more beautiful and enchanting, what makes you fall in love with the city.

## ◆◆◆ V. RODRIGO ◆◆◆

### anomalous nomenclature

in this country a feminine voice is a docile doorbell, overpressed and open to the public. I learned I was never clean enough for sacred, never pure enough for divine. I was never conceived immaculate but rather in sullied mimicry of a constant transformation. never understood the ladygrace of this voice, an oratorio of heeled footsteps in a laboratory, the impossible purchased feminine flies in fear. masculated an un-memory, again a feminine ungendered. not long, but overgrown nails, too expensive to paint. she softens her hands, skin wrinkled and overwashed in the absurd search of a virtue in oiled blood, now drenched in coagulated blisters, picked scabs from heels. flesh for my prophetic birth comes from the surplus of such continual healing. the inheritance from a sudaca pageant pantheon. my saints embellish the ever-present gaze imposed upon them. seeing and being seen, I and She. purification rituals, la keratina and egg cleanse, performance almar in a metamorphic cycle. I was simply a shepherd next in line to be and kill the thesis, to be and birth the antithesis. she saw her mother cut her own lining to sell the idea of natural. beauty and crude oil is a birthright in my country. handed the art of contamination through placenta. the truth is a lie to the false witness, the native is a savage to the invader, a cure is a blight to the virus. a femme is born from sin, baptized in a bacchanal, a feast of now hallowed body that was never hers. I champion her carved pelvis as a trophy, finally sanctified from mirrored devours. esta marica digs her nails in softly. branded in wax, paint the unscented, paradoxal generosity for the tenacious non-ownership of nature, an ever-unfolding creative act: stubborn. I care in a non-existent refinement. the warmth I transfer to my butch's cold hands from my un-christened cradle. virtuous rebirth finally found in the erosion for a vital node under a stone. I expose my midriff to show what has been carved, consecrated cavernous grounds for an anthropocene marked by creation. high femme: she-I go against myself so much it reaches the maximum of excess. I am contained and absorbed by her serpent with my own name, I hold my bearings for a sting that numbs the pain of multiplied beauty only when drunk off it, I relish in delectable tastes curated by a fermata of my moans, I never want to sober my blood from such pleasure.

//

i a feminine voice , pressed open  
1 was  
conceived immaculate in sullied mimicry transform  
an oratorio of heeled  
impossible feminine in fear. masculated an un-memory,  
a feminine ungendered again  
wrinkled  
drenched in a virtue in oiled blood,  
flesh prophe  
of continual healing. sudaca pageant  
pantheon, my saints embellish  
I and She. cleanse almar  
a shepherd to be kill to be birth  
her mother the idea natural. beauty crude oil  
contamination  
to the invader, a cure is a blight femme  
was never hers,  
carved sanctified  
devour esta marica wax to paint the  
generosity for an ever-unfolding creative act: stubborn. I  
care in a non-existent warmth my butch  
un-christened cradle a vital node under stone.  
anthropocene high femme: she-I  
of excess. consecrated cavernous grounds for an  
I relish in pleasure. pain  
a fermata of serpent with my name,  
my blood

///

transform saints beauty  
crude cure devours. marica  
absorbed serpent blood

◆◆ **GRAYSON THOMPSON** ◆◆

**joy came after the prerequisite courses**

*for little E, who asked his mom how she knew she was a girl, so she asked her friends*

girls felt

footloose  
and furl  
pink  
and pain

the first word was rage  
everything after was scrabble  
everything in me, a crooked painting  
an orbiting mindhouse

my boyness suspended in apologies  
best dressed for family  
latched shame to my earlobes  
told me I was *so pretty*

an impatient daydream  
in a life stuck in baggage claim  
the origin story of becoming

didn't think there were girls like me  
anywhere  
who felt sad at everything green

I am so sorry

you are growing up  
in a world filled with leftovers  
of people with missing parts

you came out  
just the way you should  
feeling every injury  
lemons fileting our tenderness  
we're all made up of stardust

big bangs around a table  
making sense of microwaved fettuccine

I still don't know what being a boy feels like  
felt most like praise  
when my reflection wasn't the worst company  
when the scars wrote cry  
across my chest  
no longer terrified of what girls had

a softness that evaporates whispers  
undoing everything we project to protect ourselves  
from being held

been a mountain of mouth guards  
custom fitting all the hardest parts inside  
a cave mouth breaking  
the back of any truth trying to echo  
a rubble of surrender  
a rebellion of memories

I have 35,460 miles of grief behind me  
and baby, it's beautiful when you look at it without blinking  
made mistakes in big font  
to come here and tell you

the words in our heads don't know  
the difference between cursing and spelling  
all the wishes for future are already on our lips

this life that chose me  
gave me a blessing in swallowing me whole  
showed me that true mercy  
my honest recovery  
began with telling myself an unbearable truth  
*I love you*  
forcing each syllable in  
until everything I touched  
had to make the same choice

say it again

◆ ◆ **GRAYSON THOMPSON** ◆ ◆ ◆

## my therapist crosses his leg

I count the bounces of his foot across the bow  
of his posture, rhythming the silence

my body plays muffled music  
and the strings break all the time  
there is no noise, no feeling  
above the S.O.S scars across my chest  
is an open field

I am trying  
to keep the flowers alive


 ADDISON HOGGARD

## Room to Grow

Jake smiles and it's like he has too many teeth. I notice this every time he smiles, not that they look bad because they don't. They're perfect teeth, all of them the color of seafoam, all of them neatly arranged in that mouth of plenty. I want to reach through the phone screen and touch every tooth.

"These little danios are some of the most engaging fish I've ever kept," he says, "so curious and lively. They'll do well in a scape like this, where I've given them plenty of space." Another shot of the aquascape. The fish are silver streaks in the water. They swim back and forth, back and forth. They weave through the ribbons of sußwassertang, around each almond leaf of anubias nana petite. One of them flutters up to the surface and nudges the duckweed that floats there.

The frame changes back to Jake Iris and his sinkhole eyes and hair that doesn't know whether to be straight or curly. His skin is so pale and so taut across his cheekbones that he looks sick, but he's been this way since I found his channel years ago. He's not sick, I know, he's passionate. Consumed by the singular flame burning within him. His craft. His aquascapes.

The door to the tiny house whooshes when it opens—the place is so small, the pressure builds up with the windows shut and the air conditioner running. It sucks the air from my lungs. I can't see down into the living area from the sleeping loft, but I know it's Marlon. The heat follows him into the house, a giant panting beast. I lock my phone and slide it across the mattress.

He stops halfway up the ladder. His puffy lips and square chin hover—from the waist down he may as well be somewhere else. "Hey babe," he says, "have a good day?"

"Nothing crazy." I'm still wearing my work uniform, my red Target polo and khakis. I sit up and pull off the polo, knowing how Marlon feels about work clothes on the bed and wanting to avoid hearing how he feels about work clothes on the bed again.

"My day was great," he says, "the new clients are so cool."

"I was going to ask."

"They remind me so much of us when we started building our tiny. Honestly, they're so excited. And, I don't know, passionate."

He climbs up onto the mattress. He's Jake's opposite. Jake's hair is black, Marlon's is blond. Jake's eyes are muddy, Marlon's are marine. We kiss our usual kiss, our end-of-day, obligatory kiss—six years condensed into a half-second.

"Remember those days?" He looks from me to my phone. "Oh my god, Charlie, you were watching porn, weren't you?"

"What—no, I wasn't."

"I heard you turn off the video when I walked in."

"It wasn't porn," I say, "what if it was?"

He winks. "I'm kidding, babe, it's Friday. New Jake video. Was it good?"

When I don't respond, he says, "Why are you embarrassed?"

I hate how well he knows me.

"So I was thinking we should get a fish," he says.

"A fish?"

"I mean, you're always watching this Jake guy's videos, talking about aqua..."

"Aquascaping," I say, "but forget it. We live in a shoebox."

"I hate it when you call it that," he says, "and we can make space. I'll make space."

"I don't need a fish."

He grabs my hands and his fingers are wide and strong and slick with sweat. "I think it will be good for you, for us, to do something you love. Together. Try something new. And you have the time since your hours got cut. Business is so good these days, you could even quit Target if you want."

"Fish are a lot of work." I climb over to the edge of the loft. The whole house is right there. The tiny kitchen, the tiny living area, the pocket door to the tiny bathroom, the endless amounts of tiny storage that Marlon planned into the tiny place. There's not even room to hope.

"We built this place together and that was my dream," he says, "not that you weren't a part of it, but we did that for me. Let's do something for you."

"I don't need a fish tank. I don't."

He pulls me back to bed and rolls on top of me. I can't breathe underneath him. I shrink. "Charlie," he says, "I know, moving to Albuquerque, tiny living and all that."

Small breaths. Sips. I take as much air as I can.

"I can tell it's been tough on you." He rubs my chest, my hair, his hands sweep across my skin leaving a snail trail of hot, wet sweat. "It's just your head," he says.

By this, he means my anxiety, but it's not the anxiety. I don't tell him this. I won't argue with him. I can shout and scream all day that it's not anxiety, that it's not depression, that it's not anything I want to give a name to, and to him, it will still be my *head*. When we first moved to Albuquerque and I began to shrink, he asked me about it daily, constant wellness checks, and it annoyed me to no end. He told me once, "If you were a monster, I'd still love you. If you were anything, I mean, I wouldn't stop loving you." This was meant to make me feel better about whatever it was that I was going through—it didn't, but I played along at the time, "Like a werewolf?" I asked, and he said, "Exactly, I'd still love you, I'd rub behind your ears, scratch your belly." I laughed, then, because this was his stupidest attempt yet at trying to explain my feelings—it was so stupid all there was to do was laugh.

I pull my arms close to my chest. My body melts under the weight of him, and over his shoulder, I can see through the skylight, the rectangle of blue, the infinite sky boxed into four corners. My chest tightens.

"I'm going to buy a fish," he rolls off of me, "I'm going to buy a fish whether you come or not because you will love it."

The fish store doesn't smell the way I expected. It's cleaner, cooler. Like a rainstorm on the horizon. The tanks stretch from wall to wall, they cast wavy shadows that squiggle across the concrete floor. I try not to look at the ID tags as I walk around the store, but I'm out of my depth without Jake's midwestern monotone explaining everything to me.

The tanks get closer, closer, closer. I look up at the ceiling, the aquariums wash everything in pale blue light. I'm underwater. The fish stare at me, bob their heads. Closer, closer, closer. The pressure rings in my ears.

Marlon loops an arm around me from behind and I imagine it's Jake. "Let's go talk to the guy at the front," he whispers, "see if he has any recommendations."

"I'm okay," I say through gritted teeth.

He pats my back. "I know. Let's just ask."

Behind the register sits a man, more of a boy, with his pimpled face buried in a calculus textbook.

"Excuse me," Marlon says, "do you know of any fish that would do well in a small tank? We don't have a lot of space."

The boy glances up at us. "College kids?"

"What?"

"Your type comes in two flavors," he flips a page, scribbles something with his pencil, "third-breakdown-this-month and stoner-looking-for-something-to-stare-at. Which are you?"

Marlon crosses his arms. "You work here, right?"

The boy huffs, looks me in the eyes. "Third-breakdown-this-month, I see."

"Just answer the question."

"It's not that hard, dude, get a goldfish."

"Goldfish don't do well in small tanks," I say, "that's a misconception. They require a lot of—"

"People put them in bowls all the time," the boy says.

"And that's inhumane."

The boy glares. Marlon drapes his arm around me. "Babe, let him be. He's doing his homework. And obviously doesn't know what he's talking about."

Marlon leads me deeper into the store. He spins me around and puts his hands on my shoulders. One of his check-ins.

"Focus on me," he says as he blocks everything else from my vision, fills me up with his presence. "Take a deep breath. Don't let that prick get to you."

Then I see her, right behind Marlon's head. She paces, swims in one of his ears and out the other. I point over his shoulder. "That one, she's perfect."

He swivels. "That's a goldfish."

"A fancy goldfish," I say.

He pulls his dad-face, his lips and eyebrows flatten into parallel lines. "You just said that goldfish need a lot of space, right?"

We peer into her tank. Her fins flow behind her like a wedding dress. "This one is still small," I say, "she'll be good for another year or two. And it's not like we're putting her in a bowl. We're going to give her a good home."

"Okay, but then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"What happens in two years? When she's bigger?"

"We get a bigger tank."

"But babe—"

"You said that you'd make the space." I smile. "Show me how."

On the way home, I cradle her baggy in my lap. She's lava-red, molten. She's got fins of fire. She swims in a little loop, rubs her body against my hand as she passes.

"So what's her name?" Marlon asks.

"Reba."

"Why?"

"I don't know," I say, "she looks like Reba."

Marlon taps on the steering wheel and sings, "Here's your one chance, Fancy, don't let me down," and God dammit, I think I'll be alright.

Reba watches from the couch as we bicker. Marlon bobbles his head, a flurry of half yes's, almost no's.

"I'm telling you," I say, "the only space is going to be on the counter."

"I think the loft is a better idea. On the nightstand."

"How the hell are we going to get a ten-gallon tank full of water up the ladder? And maintain it, clean it?"

"There's no space on the counter."

"So move something. That plant, for example." I point to the counter and land on no plant in particular, seeing as there are at least ten strewn about the space that's meant to be used for food prep.

"My calathea? It gets perfect humidity there." He blinks fast. "The coffee pot," he says.

"The coffee pot?"

"It's summer. All we drink is cold brew."

"And in winter?" I sit next to Reba. She swims in concentric circles, eager to leave the plastic prison we brought her home in.

Marlon unplugs the pot and holds it in his hands like a stranger's baby. I say, "Under the vanity, in the bathroom. There's room in the cabinet."

"Right."

"I can't believe this," I say. "Remember when we used to talk about moving out west? We dreamed about the wide open sky, the desert stretching out. And then you built a tiny house."

"You knew this was the plan. The tiny house was always the plan."

"That's not true," I say, "you were never interested in this stuff before you found that channel."

"I was always interested in tiny houses. Minimalism. Having a life that sparks fucking joy or whatever. *Tiny Tins* is what showed me it was possible."

He plops down on the couch next to Reba and me. "The point is, Charlie, we've got all this space outside, plenty of room to grow. Plus, I couldn't build tiny houses and not live in one. That's bad for business."

He goes on, "We're so lucky to have gotten this land. We own this place. It's ours. Why can't you be happy? You used to be happy."

We look at each other. His face is in a wrinkle, his hands knit into a tight ball in his lap. Why can't I be happy? The question is a vacuum. A spacious prison. A ring box. It is large in its smallness, small in its largeness. It expands and contracts around us. He watches me, he's waiting for a reaction, but I won't give it to him. I will not.

He sighs, puts his hand on my knee. "We've got everything we need."

He's shown me enough *Tiny Tins* videos, said these words to me so many times, that I have the propaganda memorized. *We own this. No one can take this from us.* There's no arguing.

"Everything we need," I say, "a tiny house and ten-thousand cactuses."

"Actually, it's cacti."

I laugh—a loud, cavernous laugh—and so does he. It surprises me. It surprises him.

Reba is static in the water. I follow the gaze of her tourmaline eyes out the window to the mountains and their ruby glow. Marlon does the same. "We should've named her Sandia, she's the same color as the mountains," he says, and I hum out a sort of agreement, but really, I would have never named Reba after something that boxes me in.

I'm in the tank with Reba. She leads me from wall to wall. We bounce on the anubias leaves, slide down strands of sußwassertang. Marlon comes home from work and he's still in his work clothes, normally he changes before coming home, but he's still in his work clothes and Jake Iris walks in behind him. Reba and I watch as Marlon leads Jake around the tiny, pacing like prisoners. I ask Reba, What will they do? She doesn't answer. Jake sees us. He cracks his lips and his mouth foams with flotsam. He comes eye level to the kitchen counter, and Reba and I stare into one eye each. I am so small, small enough to swim laps in his pupil. He plunges a hand into the tank and we swim, we swim, we swim so fast my sides ache, we swim from his hand, his outstretched fingers, and when he gives up trying to catch us, I ask Reba why we swam away. It's instinct, she says in a breathful of bubbles.

I wake up gasping. Marlon's hand is on my chest. "You're so wet," he says.

The sheets stick to every part of me like seaweed in the surf. His hand is heavy, crushing, a weight too heavy to move. Then it does move, it creeps down my belly, meanders into my boxers like a wandering minnow. "Even here," he says, "it must've been a good dream."

"It was a nightmare."

"You get hard when you're scared? That's new."

"It's not like that," I say. "Go to sleep."

He pulls me closer. His breath is wet with night, he strokes me up and down. "I could drown in you," he says.

"It's impossible."

"Actually, you can drown in a teaspoon of water. Or sweat. Or other things."

I wriggle free from him and climb over to the ladder.

"Where're you going?"

"Bathroom."

From the toilet, I see Reba in her tank. I hear her voice, all raspy and drenched, a voice like a waterfall. It's instinct. I unlock my phone and go to Jake's Patreon. I send fifty bucks and a message: "Longtime Patron here. My name is Charlie. I did my first scape this week. If you're ever in ABQ, I'd love to show you."

It's the pressure, the whoosh of the door that wakes me up. I check my phone, still no response from Jake even though it's been a week. Maybe he's not that kind of guy, maybe he doesn't talk to his followers. Maybe he doesn't give a shit. Or, he's busy. Yeah, busy, busy, busy, too busy to respond to the hundreds, no, thousands of messages he must get. What did I expect?

I send more money. A hundred-fifty this time.

The door opens again. Marlon yells up to the loft, "I picked some tomatoes for breakfast—" then, "What the fuck?"

"What is it?"

"Charlie! Holy hell."

I scurry down from the loft and he points at Reba. My heart skips a beat as I look into her tank, expecting to see her belly-up and bobbing along with the filter's current. But she isn't dead, she is very much alive.

"How did this happen?" Marlon says, "You said this tank would hold her for a year or two."

"It should," I say, "or should have."

"This makes no sense."

Reba's fins tangle the plants, sweep the glass. She is twice as big as she was yesterday. She trains a planetary eye on each of us, mouths words neither of us understands.

"She doesn't have enough room," I say.

"Obviously, but what are we supposed to do about that?"

"We have to buy a bigger tank."

"And put it where, Charlie?"

"I don't know."

He sets his jaw. "If she's growing this fast, what are we going to do? Buy a new tank every week? Space is going to be the least of our worries—God, think about the money."

I wiggle my finger in front of her and she blows me a kiss.

My phone buzzes. A message from Jake: "Hey! Thanks for all of your support recently, Charlie. It goes without saying, but that money goes a long way in helping me make content. So exciting that you built your first scape! Why don't you send me some pics?"

"Who's that?" Marlon asks.

"No one." I snap shots of Reba and her miraculous body.

Fish grow to the size of their tank. This is a myth. And it's not something that I learned from one of Marlon's spuels (*Well, actually, fish don't grow to the size of their tank*) or even from Jake, but rather from a simple Google search: Why has my fish grown so much?

The larger Reba gets, the more of her there is to love. I wish I could be as expansive as her, take in all the emptiness of New Mexico and grow until I am everywhere and nowhere all at once.

When Marlon first got obsessed with tiny houses, we had already vacationed in a few through Airbnb and I always had a shitty experience. Marlon says I'm claustrophobic. I don't think that's it, he just likes to diagnose. No matter what he believed or what I said in protest of us going tiny, he insisted.

This was essential to him, he told me. His passion. He used massive words like *destiny, fate, calling*. All these massive words that leave no room for debate.

I thought it was sexy, a man who knows what he wants. I was happy to see him get so inspired. He had drive. He had the fire. I couldn't understand it, but I could appreciate it. And who was I to question it?

We got our land, a plot of burnt-brown desert that expands in every direction. We moved out west with his truck and my car and 1,760 miles between us and home. The first time I saw the land, I couldn't believe how the heat warped everything. The sky bent and bowed, cloudless and somehow too close yet too far. The mountains and their peaks wrapped all around. It was a fishbowl.

Marlon had promised that I'd feel boundless in this place. That the Land of Enchantment would open me up and fill the spaces that were once occupied by pine trees and cotton crops and swamp. The first time I saw the land, though, I did not feel boundless. I felt smaller than ever, a guppy in the ocean. When I tried to tell Marlon that, he shushed me in his polite, self-assured way and said, "You'll feel better once we get the tiny house built."

Marlon designed every aspect of the tiny house. He chose the flooring, the cabinets, the windows, the toilet. He picked the interior color scheme, all gray and beige and earthy browns and greens, and the exterior as well, black steel with oak detailing. He filled what little space there was between those walls with bits of himself. His plants, pictures of us on trips to destinations that he had picked and paid for, pictures of tiny houses that he admired or had designed himself, furniture and home goods that were all off-white, not-quite-gray, barely-black. Artifacts of his zen life. All the stuff I had brought from home was stashed away in the tiny compartments he'd built into the house.

The evening it was finished, we sat on the small front deck with glasses of sangria the same color as the sunset. "Where the hell am I?" I asked him.

"Home," he said, and I cried. He probably thought I was crying because I was happy or amazed or proud and he cried, too, for what I guess was all the right reasons. I apologized and went up to the loft. I tucked myself into the itchy Japanese linen he had special-ordered and burrowed down into a bed that was not mine and that would never be mine.

After Marlon's left for work, I get a response from Jake: "That's a beautiful fancy, but she's way too big for that tank. You need at least a thirty-gallon."

Reba grows by the minute. She demands space. She is determined to make it for herself. And she is so lovely, well, she deserves it.

I respond, "I'm trying to get a bigger tank ASAP. The problem is space, I live in a tiny house."

"A tiny house?" He says, "Don't take this the wrong way, but you should have thought about that before you bought a goldfish. They grow."

"I know," I say, "she was a gift."

"You could keep her outside if you have a nice shaded area. Get a water trough or a kiddy pool for the time being and put in a pond later."

Out the window, a field of pure sunshine stretches from the front of the tiny to the edge of the heat-blurred mountains. Not a slip of shade in sight.

I text him, "I'll see what I can do," and send him another hundred.

I am not in love with Jake. I am inspired by him. I am not in love with Jake.

It was easy to be passionate about Marlon when we met. Back in North Carolina, he was doing construction work with his family. His dad and grandpa were contractors and ran a small family business putting on tin roofs. Marlon liked roofing well enough, but his heart wasn't in it. And I was working at another Target, the store back in NC. I went to university for a bit and dropped out after two years because I couldn't decide what to study. On the tail-end of my indecision was when Marlon and I met, when two listless bodies came together and found something to love.

Because all we had to love was each other, it was a good love. Pure and easy. We didn't argue. We lived in a house that his family owned on the outskirts of Greenville in a nice neighborhood where all the streets were named after characters from King Arthur's legend, something that I knew nothing about but that Marlon, of course, inexplicably did. Our house was on Guinevere Lane, sat back from the street on a shady lot with a pecan tree in the front yard that littered the ground with hard nuts in the fall.

No one warned me how easy it is to lose yourself when you're anchored to someone else. When Marlon started watching *Tiny Tins*, I watched it with him, even though I found the videos a bit boring—it was always the same thing, a parade of hippies and new-agey types bragging about how minimal they've become, how they managed to shrink their lives down to nothing but three pair of underwear and a guitar, blah blah blah. But Marlon was hooked, and since I was hooked on him, it felt horrible for me to feel the way that I did, jealous, maybe,

when he started drawing up blueprints and schematics and looking for a parking spot for the tiny that he would build, and it felt even more horrible when he bought the land and bought the trailer and I, selfishly, absolutely, did not want to uproot my life. But I would do it, in the end, because where else was there for me to go?

And while Marlon was busy planning, drawing, stoking that flame inside him, I found Jake's channel. I lost myself in the underwater world of his videos.

Marlon puts on his dad-face as soon as he comes in. "Why the hell is Reba in the sink?"

"It's our only choice for now."

"You've lost it, Charlie," he says, "Tell me why the sink was a choice in the first place."

"Well I was thinking of solutions and I remembered how you used to say that one day this big old butler sink would come in handy, right? And you insisted on having it, remember? We spent an extra thousand on this sink, and now I see that you were right. It came in handy, like you said."

"You mean I spent an extra thousand, and obviously this is not what I meant when I said it would come in handy. Where are we going to wash the dishes?"

"The bathroom sink."

He purses his lips, crosses his arms. We both stare down at Reba, her orange burns against the white porcelain. "I swear," he says, "she grows every day."

She surfaces, unfolds her giant mouth to mutter words I can almost hear.

"This is it until we get a bigger tank," he says.

"Yeah."

"I will not have a fish in my bathtub. If it comes to that, swear to God, her next tank will be the toilet."

"But we have a composting toilet," I say.

I laugh and he doesn't. The most he offers is a grunt. "You get the idea." He sits down on the couch and I'm in awe at the absurdity of it, at how, right now, I can tell he's pissed. It's a new look for him, and as he scrunches himself up on the tiny couch, I know he feels just as trapped as I do. In moments like these, we need the space—who wouldn't? I sit next to him not because I want to, but because I want him to know how I feel, to understand that in all the expansiveness of New Mexico, there is not a single space for me. I'm overfilled and he's overflowing. I want him to feel that, too.

"It was wrong to bring you here," he says, "I didn't know you'd be like this."

"Like what?"

"So unhappy," the word buzzes around our heads like a fruit fly, then he says, "Do you miss North Carolina? Home?"

It's the first time he's asked since we moved. "No," I say, and I look at Reba in the sink, "No, I don't miss it."

"Babe," he says and puts his hand on the inside of my thigh, "I think you should go home for a while. Let me take care of Reba, and you can spend some time with your family."

"No. I don't want to see them."

"Well what can I do, Charlie?"

Reba swirls, splashes water onto the floor.

"I don't need you to do anything," I say.

Reba won't stop. Reba is a force of nature, liquid fire. A wonder of the world.

Over the span of two weeks, I move her from the sink to the washing machine to, finally, yes, the bathtub, and by the time I move her to the tub she is as big as a toddler. A slimy, scaly toddler. And I am more in love.

The fire. Jake's fire. It burns deep in my stomach, the sparks flutter up into my chest.

I explain this to Marlon over and over again. He won't stop complaining. I tell him I will do anything for her. He calls me crazy. I sleep on the toilet next to Reba to avoid him, but it's impossible to avoid someone in a tiny house.

He wags a finger at me on a Wednesday morning and says, "You're getting in the way of my dream."

"And you're getting in the way of mine."

Reba sends a tsunami of bathwater across the room and soaks his clothes. "The fish is not a dream. It's a problem. Be real with me, Charlie, you have to see that this is crazy. I'm showering with the water hose, for Christ's sake, shitting in the bushes!"

"It was your choice to get Reba."

"I thought we'd buy a minnow. Or a betta. Fuck!"

He shimmies up his cargo shorts and walks away. I follow, I know I shouldn't but I do, I follow and yell, "And I thought I'd have room to live my life. This fucking tiny house!"

He climbs into his truck, slams the door and he's gone. The dust kicks up—a golden, shimmery cloud bigger than the tiny house, bigger than anything.

Reba squirts me when I go back to the bathroom. I pat her head. It's only instinct, she reminds me.

Hours later and I'm pacing the length of the tiny, phone in hand. I check it and check it and check it, but there's nothing, and each time I check all I see is the time (11:27) hovering over a picture of Marlon and me in our wedding tuxedos.

I send Jake two-fifty and wait and wait and wait. Sprinkle some pellets into Reba's gaping maw. Wait and wait and wait. I call out of work, feigning fever. The bossman says there's no one to cover my shift, I've skipped too many shifts lately, don't bother doing something—I hang up and miss the last part. I wait and wait and wait and send Jake another hundred. I open the chat and it's all lopsided.

A string of unread messages.

He uploads a video, but won't respond to my messages. It's not even Friday and he's uploading. He's at Aquashella doing a collab with another scaper. He's got time for this but not to reply to me?

I send another message: "Jake, I watched your new video. That was a great scape!"

And, when my phone dings, Reba looks at me, and I look at her, "This has got to be Jake," I say, and it is except it couldn't be because the message says: "Charlie, this is getting out of hand. Thank you for your support as always, but I have no choice but to block you. Please do not try to contact me again and please do not send me any more money."

I type, I squeeze the phone so hard the tips of my fingers go numb, I type so hard the tendons in my thumbs burn, but before I can hit send, the chat disappears.

It's right after one o'clock. Marlon won't be home until after five. I grab my keys.

I've watched enough of Jake's videos to know what I need from the hardware store. Pond liner. Epoxy. A reservoir for a sizable pump and filtration medium. Bulkheads to close off the plumbing. Waterproof tape.

"Building a pond?" the cashier asks in a voice that tightens the air. I cross my fingers and hand her Marlon's credit card—no doubt mine is maxed out.

On the drive back to the tiny, I make a mental list. I've been around Marlon enough to know what I have to do. I helped him build the damn thing, I know it inside and out. I know what needs to be plugged.

I'll unhook the electrical. I'll spray the foam in the drains and the sockets. I'll tape every crack I can think of. I'll spread pond liner across the floor and staple it down. I won't stop until I know that every last crack has been sealed. I'll open the taps in the kitchen and the bathroom, haul the water hose up to the roof and hoist it through the skylight. The water won't leak, I'll make sure of it.

It will be a scape like no other. Jake's never done anything on this scale. But who cares what he thinks? Maybe I should record it, put it on YouTube. Or hell, once it's all said and done, plaster it on those billboards out on I-40. People love a good roadside attraction, and Reba, well, I think she'd like the attention.

I can see it now: Marlon's plants, separated from their pots, bobbing in the water, their tentacle-roots in search of something solid; a dull school of his Muji underwear swirling through the kitchen; the photos he has hung up on the walls, the blueprints and the tiny house posters and the tiny models turning into fish flakes. And Reba—I will dive down into the house with her and she will twirl me in her fins and we will both be so whole. I will be the best fishkeeper in the world.

Marlon's truck is out front when I pull up, it's covered in a sheet of dust. I spill out of my car and run towards the door, but he's there with Reba in his arms. He tosses her out into the sand and I fall to my knees, my skin tears on the sharp sand.

She squirms in the dirt, steam rolling off of her red scales.

"Enough of this," Marlon says.

I crawl over to her, take her in my arms. She opens her mouth, opens her mouth, opens her mouth, but there's nothing but the sick sound of sucking, her gills flare, and I can't breathe, I stumble to my feet with her in my arms and make for the door, but Marlon blocks me.

"It was a mistake," he says, "just a huge mistake," and I can't breathe, "Reba can't breathe," I gasp, and he pushes me back.

I fall and the dirt is hot and hard. Reba's color is going, she's paler, yellow, "Marlon, please," I say.

Reba stops moving, she's cold even though the heat is roiling. I squeeze her tight. We can't breathe. She feels tiny in my arms, minimized—how much could she have grown?

He's on top of me, pulling me away from her, fighting me, his body curls over me like a question mark, there is no space between us, no room to even hope. I push him away and I sprint, I run toward the mountains, weave through the ocotillo and the agave, I run so fast my sides ache, straight toward the mountains to what must be the boundary of me, it's instinct, I run until the dry air leaves me panting and breathless—no, breathing, breathing, and the mountains are still so far away.

**TOPAZ WINTERS**

## No You Say It First

The part of the movie where we run  
into each other's arms in the pouring rain.  
Or where the judge bangs the gavel & you fall  
to your knees sobbing as the guards  
drag me away. Where we walk away  
from the explosion hand in hand, smoke  
singeing our shadows. In the hospital room  
where I confess just as you lose consciousness.  
Wake up from the dream. Say it like you mean it.  
I'll say it first if you come back to life.  
Of course I still think about you. I'm the one  
who turned you in. Yes I wish I'd looked back.  
Say it like I'll hear you. Like I'm waiting  
just outside the operating room. I'll drive the car  
backwards out of the lake. I'll raise the gavel again.  
Drink the coffee while it's still hot.  
There is a world where you never stopped  
singing to me on the subway. Where I made  
you dinner & then slept through the night.  
A world where we pass each other  
on the street without making eye contact.  
Where you were dead for years before  
I met you. Where the city followed me north  
& the relapse with it. Where you never light  
another cigarette & I know who  
I'm asking for forgiveness. Smoke laying  
its black kisses across the belly of the horizon.  
You're not coughing. I make a comb  
out of my fingers & run it through your hair.  
I am engorged with the distance I thought  
I wanted. I'll say it first if you say it louder.  
I'll say it first if you stay awake.

◆ ◆ **AMALEE BEA** ◆ ◆**Obituary for Ambiguous Losses**

*Lyá, if when a person dies we guide its soul safely to the ancestral plain, can we do the same for other deaths? there's too much grief for us to hold. let us guide the soul of every lost thing to its next life.*

what might it become, if it was properly buried & blessed? think of all the spirits of connections and seasons that have died without being grieved, without being named, without getting flowers and food, so they are all still wandering around your body & mine & the streets of this dimension raising hell instead of in the realm where they belong.

*and a river runs through it.*

there is a door on the coast of Senegal called the door of no return. likely I had some ancestors pass through it, likely you did too. the plot twist was I came back.

the other day while I made coffee I thought, *death is the door that returns.* Remember? we are visitors here, our feet brushing the ground. heaven is home, earth is a trip to the store.

and I sipped that coffee and thought it's time we have a homegoing for me & you. time we sent home what's been begging to die, what's decaying in the doorway. time to bury that shit— because it don't belong here no more.

*and a river runs through it.*

what does it mean to die if rebirth is guaranteed? does the phoenix know it comes from a long line of burning? does it know it's next, when it sees the blaze coming?

and what if the phoenix forgets? when the embers start to catch, and it fights the fire because it can't remember what comes after ash.

*and what prophecy have you forgotten?*

I tried to explain to my therapist last year that the ten year old child in me was getting beat into oblivion. I wished I could show her the little girl in my chest, so wounded and small. I can't remember what my therapist told me to do for her.

so I took her hand and told her, it's okay, you're a phoenix. when you feel you've reached the end, that's where you begin.

*and a river runs through it* ☯

I went to the river the clear belt of water ringing in my ears & I bathed in the river in shatters of gold sunlight so brilliant and warm & I didn't know then and don't know now if what engulfed me was water or flames.

**◆ ◆ KEI VOUGH KOREDE ◆ ◆**

## Visitation Hour

You know the rules. Morning starts with  
The clanging of metals, belligerent whistling  
From the guard towers, surveillance cameras  
Raised at each corner of your whereabouts.  
Barbed wire fences separate you and the inmates  
From the rest of what society considers innocent.  
The same guard who locked you behind your home of bars  
Leads you to the yard where your family waits for you,  
Your children, flanking each side of your wife's hip.  
You see hope through the blur of your pain.  
They hug you through your mistakes and hectic grief.  
They hug you like you've finally done something right.  
But you have marred the book of American fiction called constitution.  
This same land your father fought for, where he returned to  
As another folded American flag blessed with posthumous mentions.  
You learned from a young age that death is a cruel acceptance humans can  
Never get used to. You unwrap the food your wife brought for you,  
Watch them watch you eat. Your boy tell you stories about basketball lessons  
While your daughter riddles you with tales of good grades in school.  
Your eyes, your wife's eyes speak a tacit language of frustrations.  
You tell them about who is who in jail. Even, in prisons, we  
Have society. The dangerous ones and the good ones.  
The ones who are a caveat of your mortality and the one  
Who teaches you introspection. Soon, the post guard will signal closure.  
You'll stand up from this familial moment, the visitation hour finally over.

◆◆◆ JAVERIA HASNAIN ◆◆◆

## AUBADE AFTER A BLIZZARD

Callous water. White  
as spit. Outside

your window, nude  
branches clutch,

then abandon, snow.  
I jostle into dawn—

the ripple of your glacial  
breaths condensing

against my neck. Death  
on my mind. The love

you made into me—  
made *me* into—

hardened between  
us like ice. We will

slip if we walk.  
We must walk.

## AFTERSHOCK AS TELOGEN EFFLUVIA

In the months that  
followed, my hair fell in

mouthfuls—soupy  
noodles slipping from

the cold metal fork of my  
fingers. I'd brush

in the shower, eyes closed,  
drain open, water

I didn't care for  
wasting seven waters

away from home.  
During those months,

I held my hair how I imagined  
holding him when he was old:

humming softly one of our many  
favorite Rafi songs. *Abhi na jao*

*chhor kar.* Don't leave me  
just yet.

Instead, he'd fling my arm,  
insist he can care

for himself, that he's still  
as strong as he was when thirty,

working three jobs & raising  
three girls. I am imagining his

tight coils, once inky black,

later the color of thick clouds

when sunlight is blocked  
through them.

During one of my visits,  
I sat between his knees,

both of us gazing in the  
same direction, his oily

fingers warm on my scalp,  
making hair appear on

each bald patch: a gardener  
tending to his never-

ending season of spring.  
& taking it with him

whenever he left—

## SONNET FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

Unsure if it's Orpheus reciting his favorite Greek lyric or Israfil finally breathing into the trumpet. O how he has longed for this moment all his angellife! Each day memorizing notes, taking mouthfuls of air between his lips, tip of his tongue always at the top of his teeth. ﷺ—and what he believes will be music screams in his own ear. The dread he has not once imagined shakes his wings like a dove's flesh when it's longing to reach out of reach. He looks toward God like a child believing mercy, who, like Eurydice, disappears—

## ORGASM

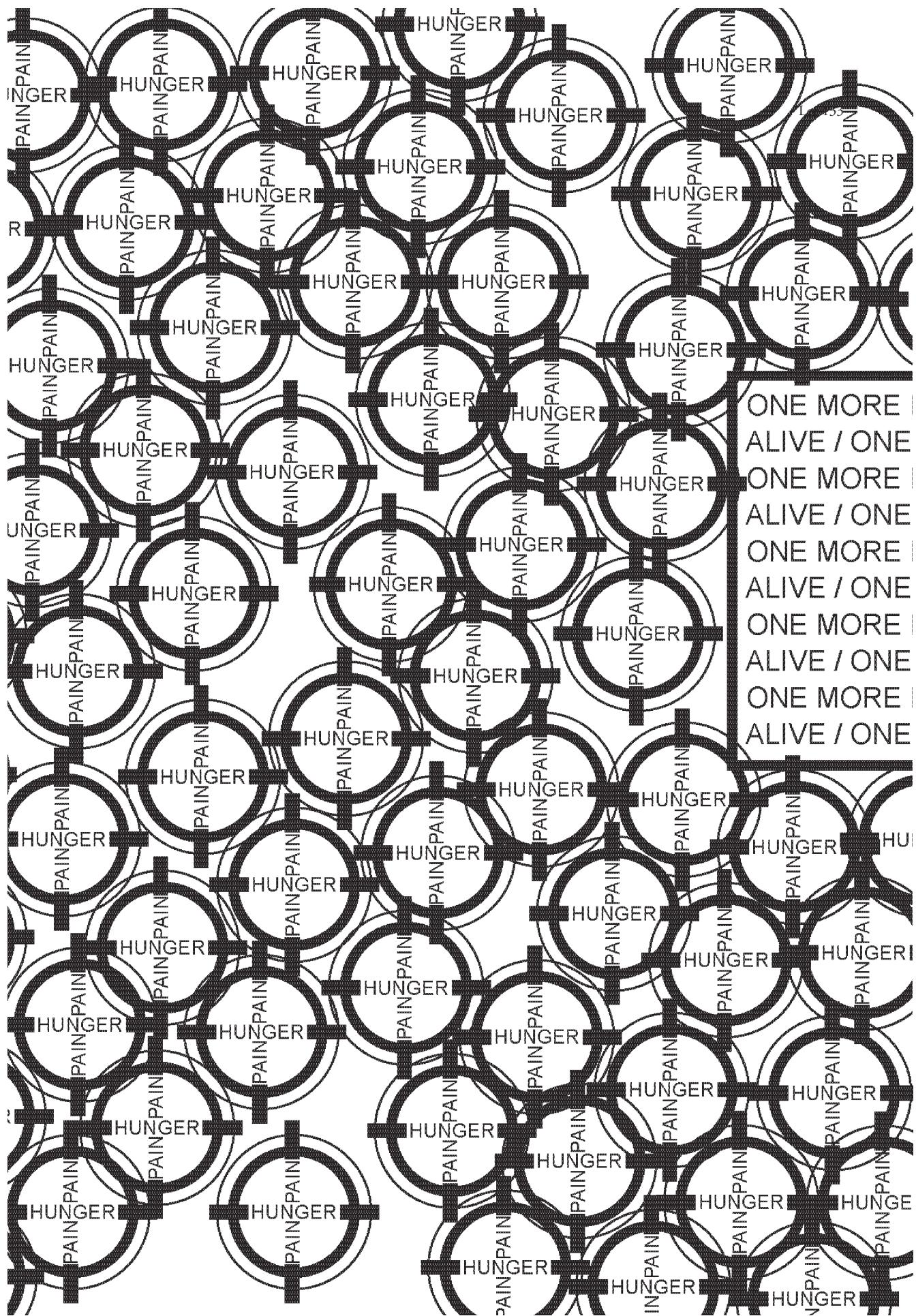
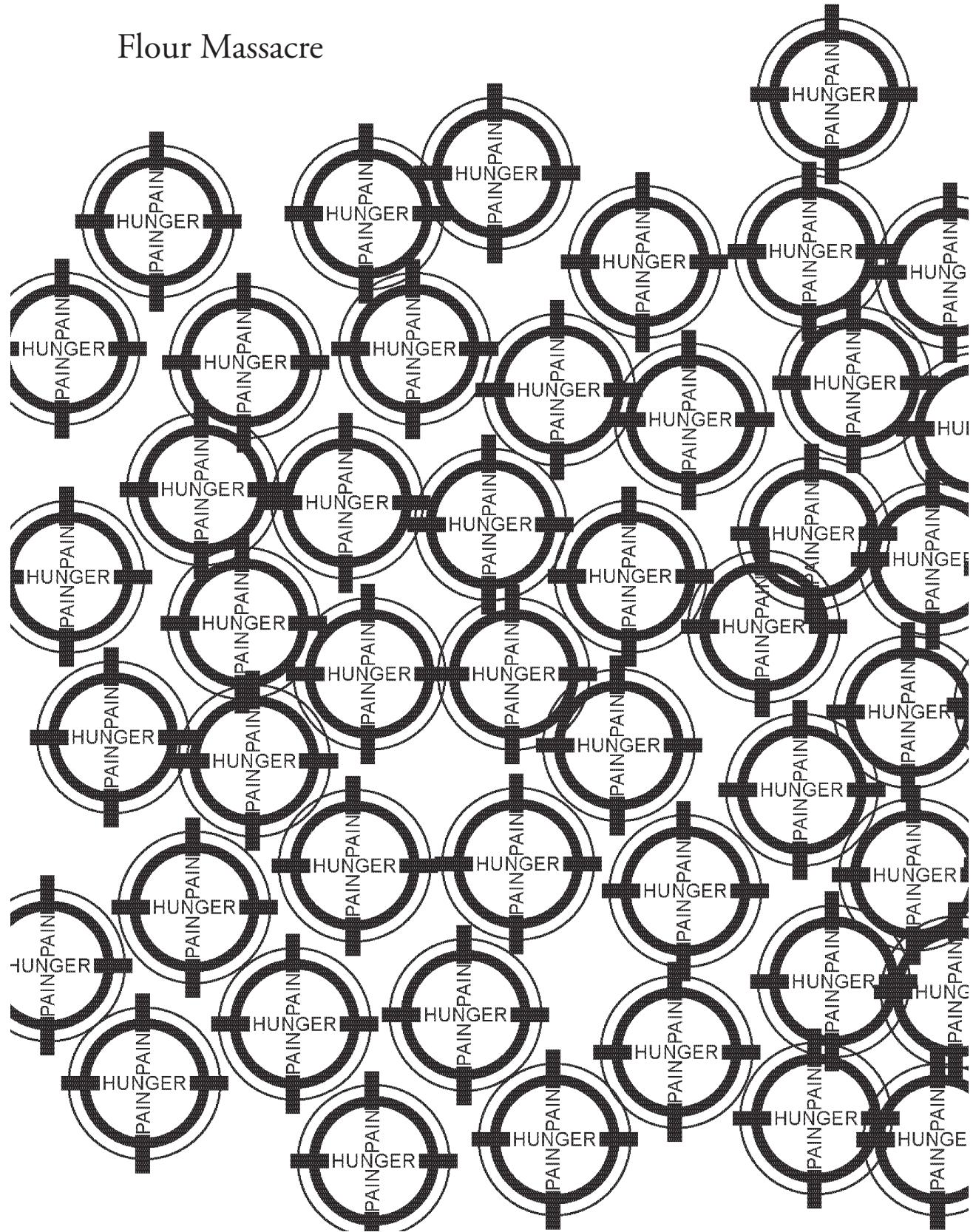
How I fear death every breath, but ask you to choke me with more strength. *Harder*. There is nowhere else I am as close to *death* than when against your breath. How easy your warm fingers drape over my neck, as if tailored especially for it. You could hurt me like this. It would be nothing but natural.

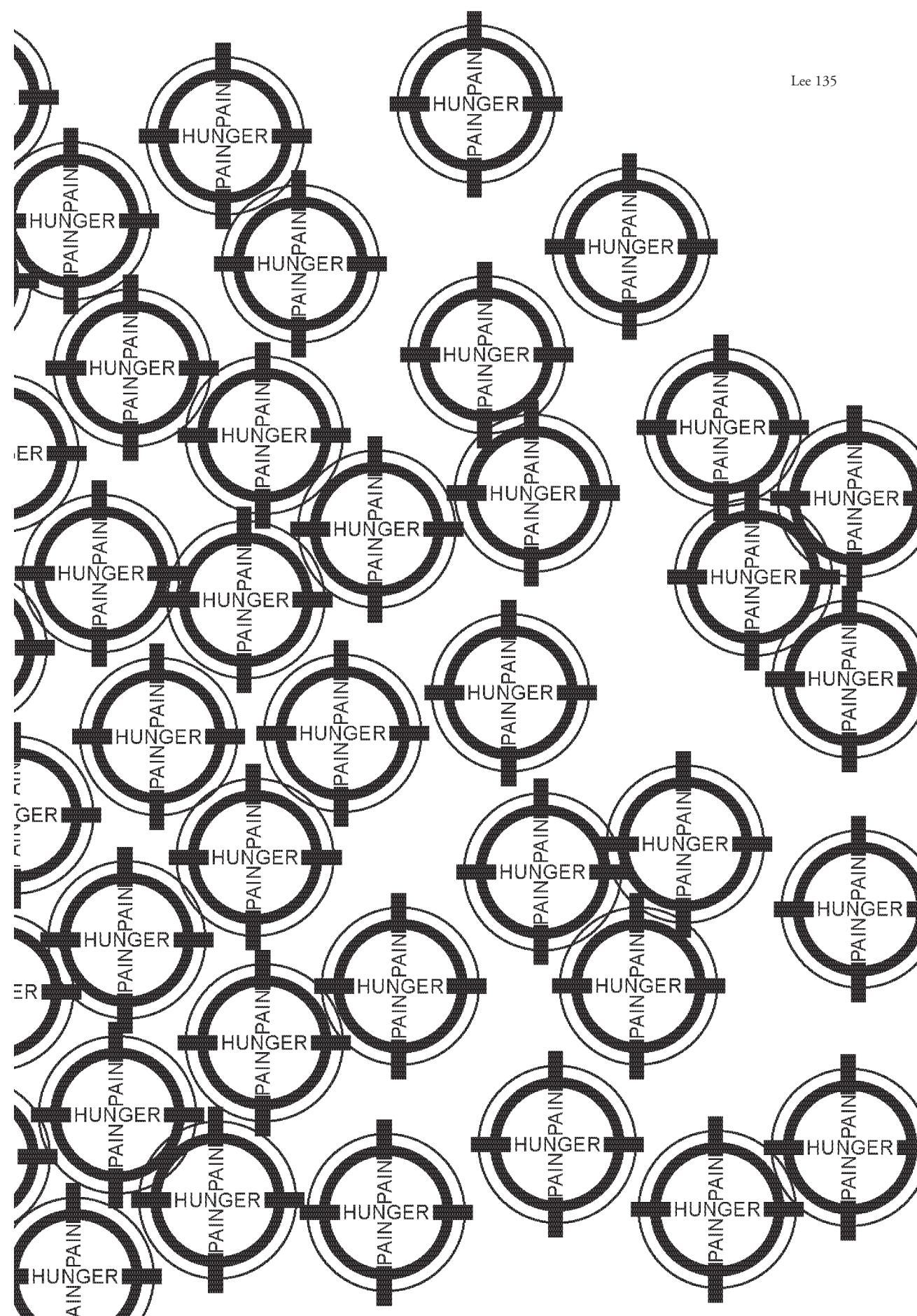
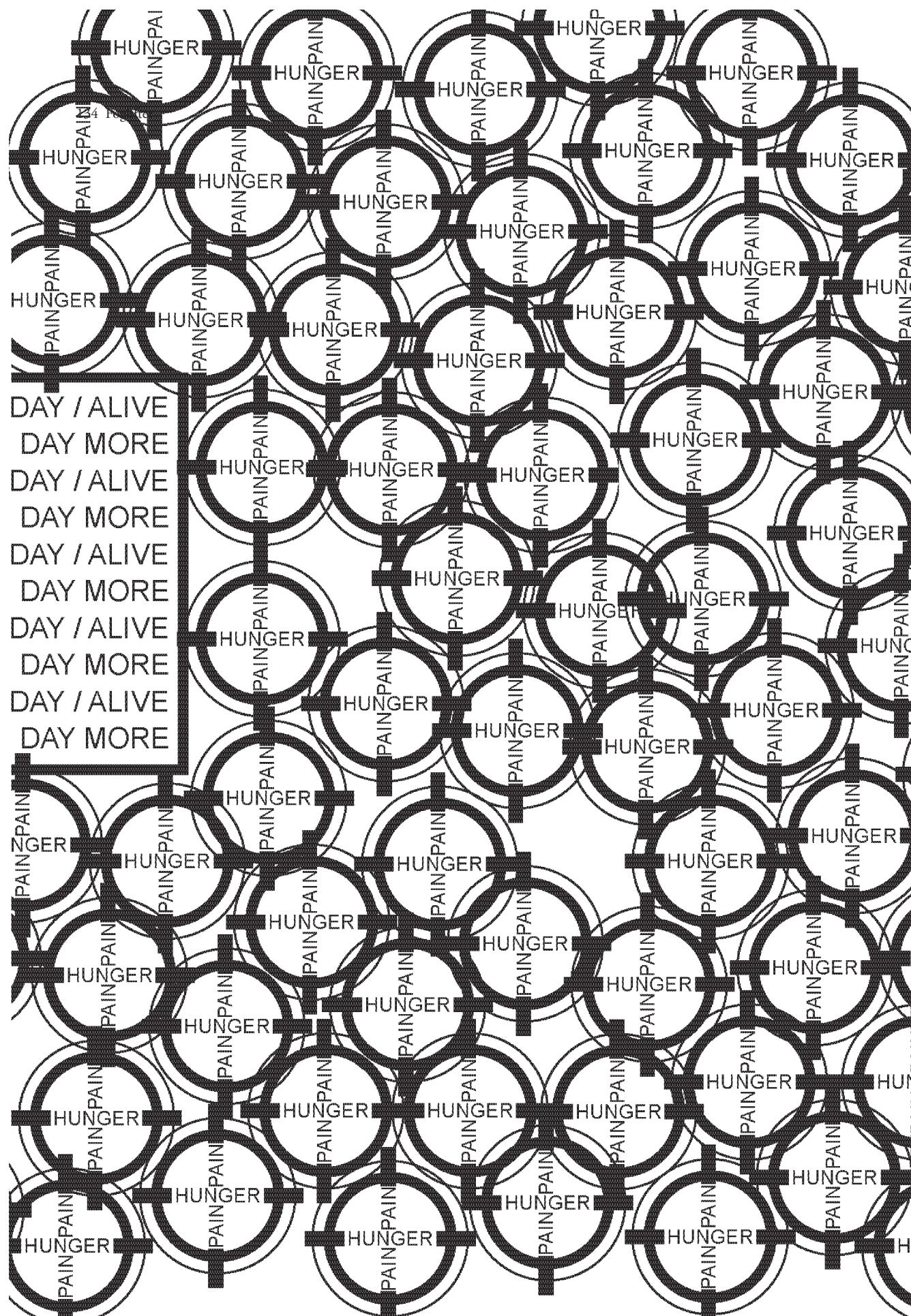
You could ask me,  
*Die. Die again. Again.*

& I, against all I know of death—*die. Die again.*

DANIEL W.K. LEE

## Flour Massacre





DANIEL W.K. LEE

## Palestinian



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Lio Abendan** (any pronouns) writes speculative fiction. Their work is forthcoming in *Coffin Bell*. You can find them at @lioabendan (on Instagram & X) or curled up in the corner of your nearest library.

**Isaiah Yonah Back-Gaal** (he/they) and **Kurt David** (he/him) are queer bosom buddies based on the east coast. Their collaborative work is published or forthcoming in *Foglifter*, *New Delta Review*, *poetry.onl*, and elsewhere. For more, visit kurt-david.com and isaiahbackgaal.com. @krtdvdwrtr and @isaiahbackgaal

**amalee bea** (she/they) is a Blackqueer writer, artist, and convenor of communal spaces based in Oakland, California (Ohlone Land). Their written work spans experimental poetry, nonfiction, science fiction, and prose. Her practice also includes painting, installation, and conceptual work. A dispatch from other worlds/timelines/dreamscapes, Amalee's writing often relies on sensuality, metaphor, and symbol rather than logic to make meaning—highlighting the instability, limits, and potentialities of language for liberation, healing, and knowledge. Their poetry has been published in *The Ana* magazine and they were selected as a 2023 writer-in-residence for RADAR Productions' Show Us Your Spines Residency.

**Ella Deitz** is a poet, writer, and multidisciplinary teaching artist based in Chicago with roots in Madison, Wisconsin. She was a First Wave Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she graduated with a bachelor's degree in Creative Writing and Gender and Women's Studies. Ella spends her time in Chicago indulging in dreamy poems and teaching writing, art, and sex education.

**Maya Denkmire** is currently studying creative writing at Oberlin College. She lives in Portland, Maine.

**sienna fereshteh** (they/them) is a multiracial, Iranian-American artist based in the South Bay Area. They believe that their fundamental role as a poet is to RESIST the insidious violence of erasure, to pay witness to humanity in its struggle for collective liberation—such that our love may be remembered as much as our grief, our pleasure as much as our suffering, and our desire as much as our death. IG: @siennafereshteh

**Jordan E. Franklin** (she/her) hails from Brooklyn, NY. She received her MFA from Stony Brook Southampton and is a doctoral candidate at Binghamton University. She is the author of the poetry collection, *when the signals come home* (Switchback Books), and the chapbook, *boys in the electric age* (Tolsun Books).

**Dante Fuoco** is a queer performer, writer, and educator living in Brooklyn, NY. The creator of two full-length solo shows, Dante has poetry published/forthcoming in *DIAGRAM*, *Poets.org*, *No, Dear*, *MAYDAY*, and other places. Dante holds an MFA in creative writing from Virginia Tech.

**Brandon Gastinell** is a Los Angeles-based artist born in 1993 in Sacramento, CA. His work, primarily in oil pastels, explores the human form with vibrant colors and bold strokes, deeply influenced by his late father's experiences. Brandon's current collection focuses on black male ballerinas, capturing moments of vulnerability and introspection, drawing directly from his personal experiences

**Anne Gerard** lives in Las Vegas, where she is pursuing an MFA. Born in Detroit, and raised in the midwest, she misses the Great Lakes every day.

**Javeria Hasnain** is a poet, translator, and educator from Karachi. She is the author of *SIN* (Chestnut Review, 2024). Her work has appeared in numerous journals, including *Pleiades*, *Poet Lore*, *Brazenhead Review*, and *Isele*, among others. She is currently a Fulbright scholar and an MFA Poetry candidate at The New School, NY.

**Addison Hoggard** (he/him) is a writer and teacher from the rural inner banks of North Carolina. He is currently an MFA candidate at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

**Raphael (Jenkins)** prefers to go by Ralph, he feels it suits him better and he's heard every Ninja Turtle joke ever uttered. He's a native of Detroit whose work is forthcoming or has been featured on his momma's fridge, his close friends' inboxes, *Muzzle Magazine*, *Indiana Review*, *Colorado Review*, and elsewhere.

**Mickie Kennedy** is a gay writer who resides in Baltimore County, Maryland. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *POETRY*, *The Threepenny Review*, *The Southern Review*, *The Sun*, and elsewhere. His first book of poetry *Worth Burning* will be published by Black Lawrence Press in February 2026. Follow him on Twitter/X @MickiePoet or his website mickiekennedy.com.

**Charlotte Joyce Kidd** likes nectarines, swimming pools, Seinfeld, and puzzles of any kind. She feels most alive when she writes, and yet must invent myriad little tricks to make herself do so. Her short stories have been published in *The Ex-Puritan* and *Broken Pencil* magazine. She is working on a novel with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts. In her spare time, she is a librarian at the Toronto Public Library and a reader for *The Chestnut Review*. You can follow her writing, reading, and life @charjoycek on Instagram.

**Kei Vough Korede** writes from Nigeria. He is handsome and sad but that's ohkk. Reach him on twitter @theDilatedSoul

**Daniel W.K. Lee** (李華強) is a third-generation refugee, queer, Cantonese American born in Kuching, Malaysia. His debut collection of poetry, *Anatomy of Want*, was published by Queer-Mojo/Rebel Satori Press. He lives in New Orleans with his whippet, Camden. Free Palestine! He can be reached via web at danielwklee.com; Instagram/Threads: @strongplum / X: @danielsaudade / Facebook: @danielwkl / TikTok: @danielwklee

**Seth Creeper** is a queer poet. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Waxwing*, *Poet Lore*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Denver Quarterly*, and *Salamander*. He holds an M.S. in Special Education from Pace University and B.A. in Creative Writing and Fashion Journalism from San Francisco State University. He is a candidate in the Low Residency MFA in Creative Writing Program at Randolph College. He teaches drop in and virtual workshops for Brooklyn Poets. He can be found on X and Instagram @sethwleeper, or at www.sethwleeper.com.

**Lauren Levin** is a poet and mixed-genre writer, author of *Nightwork* (Golias Books), *Justice Piece // Transmission* (Timeless, Infinite Light), and *The Braid* (Krupskaya). With Eric Snead, they edited *Honey Mine* by Camille Roy (Nightboat Books). Other work from their current manuscript *Reversi* appears in the chapbook *Dear Em*, recently published by Eyelet Books.

**Nathan Alling Long** grew up in rural Appalachia, worked for several years on a queer commune in Tennessee, and now lives in Philadelphia. Their work appears on NPR and in various journals, including *Tin House*, *Master's Review*, *Electric Lit*, and *Witness*. *The Origin of Doubt*, their collection of fifty short fictions, was a 2019 Lambda Award finalist.

Nathan can be found at <https://blogs.stockton.edu/longn/>

**Eduardo Martínez-Leyva** was born in El Paso, TX to Mexican immigrants. His work has appeared in *Poetry Magazine*, *The Boston Review*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Best New Poets*, and elsewhere. His debut poetry collection, *Cowboy Park*, won the 2024 Felix Pollak Prize for Poetry and is forthcoming from the University of Wisconsin Press.  
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**Mitch Monroy** is a trans Guatemalan poet and multimedia fine artist. Their works are featured in *Polyglot Magazine*, *Sundress Transmasc Anthology*, *Parrish Art Museum*, and *Foglifter*. They are a Tin House Scholar 2023 and an organizer for FRUTAS. They are working on a collection called *God's Gay Mouth*. They can be found at @mitch\_monroy on Instagram.

**Eden Nobile** (he/they) is a trans writer originally from the Connecticut river valley, pursuing an MFA in poetry at St. Mary's College of California. Their writing life is highly influenced by

ecology, possibly the long-term effects of watching Animal Planet as a youth. Nobile is a Risk Press Fellow and currently works at the St. Mary's Library. IG: @eden.nobelium

**Ugochukwu Damian Okpara** is a Nigerian writer and poet. He is the author of the poetry collection, *In Gorgeous Display* (Fordham University Press, Sept 2023). A 2023 Lambda Literary fellow and an alumnus of Chimamanda Adichie's Purple Hibiscus Trust Creative Writing Workshop, his work appears or is forthcoming in *Poetry*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *The Greensboro Review*, among other places. Find more information here: [ugochukwudamian.com](http://ugochukwudamian.com)

**Reggie Edmonds-Vasquez** (they/them) is a poet, educator, and cultural curator from Richmond CA. Their work has been published with *Foglifter*, *Rigorous Magazine*, and others. Currently, they can be found as the Program Director for Rich Oak Events and as a 2024 poet-in-residence at the Museum of the African Diaspora.

**V. Rodrigo** is a lesbian writer from Valencia, Venezuela. She is currently studying at University Wisconsin-Madison.

**Edward Salem** is the author of the poetry collection *Monk Fruit* (Nightboat Books, 2025). His writing is forthcoming or has appeared in *Granta*, *The New York Review of Books*, *Poetry*, *BOMB*, and elsewhere. He is the founding co-director of City of Asylum/Detroit.

**Sam Saxton** is a writer, producer, potter and queer. Their fiction has appeared in journals including *The Rumen*, *Ambit*, and *The Phare*. They're currently studying the MA in Prose Fiction at the University of East Anglia, where they're working on *Binaries*, a literary take on the Choose Your Own Adventure books.

**Chris Schmicker** (he/him) is a writer based between New York City and Honolulu, where he was born and raised. His fiction excavates contemporary Hawai'i—its people, place and promises. He graduated with a B.A. from Yale University. Website: [chrisschmicker.com](http://chrisschmicker.com) Instagram handle: @cschmicker

**Starlight Shamsi** practices interdimensional storytelling for liberation. Born along the waterways in the Central Valley, they dance with Palestinian dabke group Al Juthoor, perform drag throughout the Bay Area, and facilitate rhythms of resistance with their creative kin in House of Uranus. They come from homelands in the stars, Yemen, and Ardh Canaan. Find their work online on IG @youcandoithabibi and [www.youtube.com/@houseofuranus7](http://www.youtube.com/@houseofuranus7)

**Toby Sharpe** is a queer writer from London, UK. Toby is a graduate of the University of British Columbia's MFA in Creative Writing—you can find Toby's writing in *Geist*, *Hey Alma*, and *filling station*, or on instagram @tesharpe.

**Adam Spiegelman** is a writer based in NY. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming from *Grand Journal*, *The Evergreen Review*, and *Rejection Letters*, among others. Find him on Instagram @goaskadam or twitter @rim\_morrison

**Gianna Starble** (they/she) is currently receiving their MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Idaho. Outside of writing, Gianna helps organize the Pop-Up Prose reading series and performs drag with Tabikat productions in Moscow, Idaho. You can learn more about them at [giannastarble.com](http://giannastarble.com)

**Liam Strong** (they/them) is a queer neurodivergent crippler punk writer and photographer who owns two Squishmallows, three Buddhas, a VHS of *Cats The Musical*, and somewhere between four and eight jean jackets. They are the author of the chapbook *Everyone's Left the Hometown Show* (Bottlecap Press, 2023). Find them on Instagram/Twitter: @beanbie666. <https://linktr.ee/liamstrong666>

**Grayson Thompson** (he/him) is a Black, Jamaican-American, queer transgender cowboy poet who moonlights as a therapist. A mouthful, Grayson is Foglifter Press' 2024 Start A Riot! Chapbook Prize Winner with *SAND BODIED FLORIDA BOY* (forthcoming 2025) and Winner of Write Bloody's 2024 Jack McCarthy Book Prize for his full-length collection (forthcoming 2025). Personal site: [graysonlthompson.com](http://graysonlthompson.com) IG: @graysonwritespoems

**Steffan Triplett** is the author of the hybrid memoir *Bad Forecast* (Essay Press) and the essay chapbook *Constraints* (New Michigan Press). He is the Managing Director of the Center for African American Poetry and Poetics and a Teaching Assistant Professor at the University of Pittsburgh. He's received fellowships and support from Cave Canem, Outpost, Lambda Literary, Callaloo, Blue Mountain Center, and Advancing Black Arts Pittsburgh. You can read more of his work at [steffantriplett.com](http://steffantriplett.com).

**Topaz Winters** is the Singaporean-American author of *So, Stranger* (Button Poetry 2022) and *Portrait of My Body as a Crime I'm Still Committing* (Button Poetry 2019 & 2024). She lives between New York & Singapore with a white dog named Hachii & a black cat named Volta. You can find her online at [topazwinters.com](http://topazwinters.com).



