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Cactus Heart

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Table of Contents

Mutations in the Digital Desert: Mojave Subsequence	
Ren Adams	6
A Hillside in Connecticut	Kelsey Gray 7
Notes on a Lemon-Scented Closet	Adriana Gonzalez 9
River burial	Marva Zohar 13
To Unlearn	Joshua Allen Aiken 15
A Texas Clinic	Amanda Kimmerly 17
A Slim Notion of a Smile	Matthew Kabik 18
How to Make Love to a Mermaid	Brittany Kerfoot 23
Dress Up	Sanh Brian Tran 25
Rage	Carleigh Takemoto 28
On Choosing Audacity	Jaclyn Renee Harte 30
I've always been the girl in the wrong	Carly Joy Miller 58
Punching Dead Highways	Tammy Lynne Stoner 59
Horoscopes	Jessica Cogar 68
Featured Artist: Vintage Collection	Lis Anna-Langston 70
Sisters, creators.	Shinjini Dey 76
Heads or Tails, Motherfucker	Karen Fischer 77
Artwork	Jean A. Kingsley 80
My Father Said He'd Teach Me Knots	Gail C. DiMaggio 82
Starfish	Skaidrite Stelzer 84
Scraggly Nails	Kathleen Glassburn 85
Two for the 8 o'clock show	Hannah Trees 99
A Blossoming Flower of Womanhood, or, How I've Experienced Love	
Laura McGehee	101
I Always Live with Chicks Who Drive	Amy Carlberg 106
Georgia O'Keefe Hitches a Ride to Abiquiu	
Susan J. Erickson	108
Aunt L	Christina Clark 109
Whatever You Can Spare	Thomas Kearnes 111
Lady in Blue	Clinton Van Inman 131
Bios	132
Acknowledgments	138

Editor's Note

Happy Winter, happy holidays, happy cold weather!

(I'd say more, but I'm a harried retail employee, and well, those of you who've worked retail know what this month is like...)

Best, and most, and thankyouthankyouthankyou for supporting this teeny-tiny indie (we adore you!),

Sara



Mutations in the Digital Desert: Mojave Subsequence | Ren Adams

Kelsey Gray

A Hillside in Connecticut

It was a kindness. There was no other who could do it. The nurses and doctors talked about palliative care, were honor-bound behind this terrible waiting, seven years passed. No change in brain function. Her husband probably thought about it, caught under the dark web right after the birth, when she was still in shock to discover her baby would never be normal. She had found it inconceivable to think of any other choice but to try. Now it was inevitable. He could never have done it, men never did. In Sparta the women were the ones who left their weak infants to die on the hillside.

Better this quiet moment: a pillow, trees in the window, the faint hint of a breeze teasing the edges of the curtains. Better this way than in the hospital, with machines and beeping and that terrible bleached efficiency of the professionals. Better here, his

pillowcase with the monkeys, with the stuffed dog by his side that he had never followed with his eyes, or grabbed at with a small fist. She tucked it under his arm. Pressed the monkeys to his face. He didn't struggle. It was a kindness.

Adriana Gonzalez

Notes on a Lemon-Scented Closet

There are parakeets kissing outside your window in a makeshift cage and I'm not quite sure if birds do kiss but the wind is blowing and the wind chimes are shaking and the birds are touching beaks.

We exchange few words on a Sunday.

I think you left the heat here.

You tell me you like protein. I stand over your sink and toss potatoes around in my hands. I stand over your sink and I rub over the skin and I let the peel remain because you like protein.

I asked for your sweater. It is too warm to wear any sweater, or a coat, or a flannel sheet. But I asked for a sweater because we sat outside and sitting outside always makes me want to cover my arms.

Your sweater smelled like lemon. Not like a pie, or an ice cream, or lemon zest, even. Just lemon.

I don't suppose you know about cicadas—their tendency to swarm, the way they sound electric.

I assume you would attempt to spell cicada s-i-c-k-a-d-a, because that's how I first spelled it when a Midwestern friend told me that the broken, buzzing power lines were in fact large, bulbous insects.

We worked all day in the heat, thumbing at the ground, picking weeds by the roots.

This summer has been about sifting, swimming, transplanting. About the awareness of air, the discomfort of sleeping alone, the satisfaction of riding a bike.

This is about how lemon is my favorite scent.

I stand over moving soil, tiny creatures folding and refolding before they retreat to bluer depths. I stand over moving soil on Sundays.

How do I properly convey this invasion? One of the limbs, of the veins?

I position myself in the kitchen so that our elbows do not touch when we cut cucumbers.

Your knives are not sharp.

You are not left-handed, and still, we are in each other's way when we tend to the vegetables.

An invasion of a lemon-scented closet means I find that for whatever reason, your hangers are on the floor. Your shoes have no laces. Your hats smell of sweat. I'm tangling with the foliage that suspends from your ceiling.

An invasion of the veins means exactly that.

I have never seen a live cicada. Once, I saw a smashed brown bug by the washing machine in my basement. I thought it to resemble a potato bug. It might have been a cicada.

I fear our organs match for the wrong reasons. That when I press on your ribcage, it contracts because your frame slides under sheets, not because my hands revive you—not because they shock you into beating.

I take too kindly to fiction. I imagine all too often.

It is hotter to sleep alone in the humidity than it is to sleep with you in the heat.

It's hard to find a good spot when it's so hot out. The air conditioning doesn't reach my room and so I open the window, move my bed closer to the wall so that I may be relieved of a Midwestern summer.

You told me our palms matched and I envisioned smaller palms on our faces, tiny toes we kissed with our lips.

This lemon consumes me and I imagine children who are blonde against hills that are brown, beside a house that is green.

How unfortunate is it to know a cicada will abandon its shell? That boughs cannot keep it from splashing on the cement? That the females cannot sing?

How unfortunate is it that you live in the heat? That you slice aloe in dusty boots whereas I admire veins in maple leaves?

How do I convey this invasion without appearing love-stricken, blood-tainted, young, muse-shaken?

If the babies are blonde, or brunette, they will be as they are meant to be. Their palms will be rounded, or squared, and maybe they will sit beside green hills, and not brown ones. But they will be as they are, and fiction will not strike them.

I imagine all too often. I take notes on your closet and I position myself in the kitchen so that our elbows do not touch.

You may never know how to spell cicada.

Marva Zohar

River burial

I did not know
you were in me, one day
(in a bathroom stool
in a middle school)
you fell out of my body
like a star.

Your body
was transparent and blue
like the outermost layer of atmosphere,
almost no separation
from the infinite dark space.

I had no garden in that city so
I took you to a frozen river named Charles.
His skin was transparent and blue
I waited for movement as small as breath
but the river laid still in his bed
and you never took even one.
It was the first time I ever saw
a frozen body of waters.

With a stick I poked a hole
and placed you in the liquid
layer where the flow kept on,
watching you taken away
to the kingdom under the Ice.

*

Years later I stood
on the banks of a female river;
the mother Ganga,
when from upstream,
dressed in white,
you returned to me
in the body of an old
man, you had been drifting
for several days, your face
was rotten. I was amazed,
not that you had come back
but how much you had grown
and how little you had changed.

Joshua Allen Aiken

To Unlearn

you were a boy much like me
who learned in attics and door frames
and learned everything else in the shower
learned warmth and sudden cold
water on your scalp
water on your chest

you were a boy much like me
we both told our families hot breathed
we bristle volcano words told them
lava spilling love we call it
big heart bleed for you we call it
make red hot needle pain stop we call it
we name our love acupuncture
we call it hurt and hot

you were a boy much like me
we both told our families
and ran like lost dogs
you run fast, muscle, torso, pull, kick,
get far, get safe, get go

i run in circles trying to get out of this
stuck skin

you were a boy much braver
you were a boy who kissed
 a boy
you were a boy who told his family and didn't run away
you were a boy who fell in love and probably ran at
some point, but fell in love regardless.

you were a boy much braver than me say in the ice age
 who loved a love
more than my love and i want that love i want that love
from wherever you got it.

Amanda Kimmerly

A Texas Clinic

they stuck me in a test tube while i was sleeping,
me and my unborn fetus, 33-day-old slime—
“or, girl,” they said, they said the doctor would be
here any week, they said i didn’t have to make
another appointment in Arkansas, they said
i could read a brochure on the procedure; it
was my right, after all, to have such vacant
dreams; they’d do this for me, they said
but not the easy way, not with the pill, not over
their dead body, like it was a collective; they said i’d have
to leave my body behind now; I no longer owned myself, they said,
or at least, be kind and cut out the uterus, they said they could
grow this thing without me.

Matthew Kabik

A Slim Notion of a Smile

The first week turns out to be exactly what Glen expects: the flowers wilting by Thursday, phone calls drifting to everyday chatter too soon. It's a comfort. The expectation is a comfort, not the loss.

She stays with Glen for the first week, and it's her horribly familiar voice that wakes him sometime near ten. She doesn't go past the doorframe, his bedroom being something like a sanctuary or a tomb, now.

"I've made breakfast if you're hungry," she says, before asking if he is awake or any other nonsense phrase like it.

"I am, thanks. I'll be there in a second."

The lab was kind enough to give him a month off to come to terms with what life would become, the emptiness of it, he supposed. Still, his mind wonders over the science of the world.

He analyzes his emotions like cell cultures and categorizes by genus: sadness, acceptance, guilt. He isn't sure how a month is supposed to clarify anything, but he is thankful for the time.

Glen sits at the dinner table. She brings him eggs and a cut orange. The wave of memory hits. She smiles at Glen, turning into the kitchen to do dishes. He looks at the curve of her hips and knows what they look like naked—not from experience, but from reference. She is like a painting he's seen a print of everyday: completely familiar but absolutely unknown.



His marriage to Marie was exceedingly happy. Foolishly happy, even. Everything which occurred outside of their love for each other seemed inconsequential. Glen's success at the lab, her success as a dancer, all of it was nothing compared to lying in each other's arms or walking the aisles of a grocery store.

In the discussions before she died, they tried to understand what life would be like without her. Glen was horribly afraid of making her feel guilty for dying, for leaving. It made the conversations tense and false, Marie knew what he was trying to avoid. She'd hold his hands with the one not full of tubes, she'd smile with the strength she had for the day and tell him to be happier. He told her memories without making it sound like she

was already gone. Every moment with her in the last two months seemed like a melodramatic play without the humor of over-acting.

She visited in the hospital, too. A firm-bodied, warm-cheeked ghost of Marie. Glen didn't pay much attention to her then, half out of the distraction caused by losing his wife, half from the hatred he felt towards her sickless beauty. If she felt any sort of reticence from his coolness, she never expressed it. Each visit ended with her hugging Glen and asking him to call if anything should happen, if anything was needed.

When Marie stopped breathing, the slim notion of a smile hanging on her lips, she was the first person he called. She picked up immediately, saying Glen's name.

"I need you here," he said, this being enough for her to understand what happened. Glen still didn't understand why he put it that way.



She sits across from him after finishing the dishes and stares. Glen takes his time looking back, but when he does her eyes make his heart push against his chest. He didn't notice it before.

"That looks nice on you. That was one of her favorite dresses."

“What do you miss most?”

Glen doesn’t know how to answer, or what she wants in the answer, more accurately. Is she asking because she wants him to start opening up, or because she does? It must be hard to look after him, a baby who needs to shave. Is she trying to determine how deep he is inside himself? How long she’ll need to linger?

“I miss having her next to me when I sleep. That is what I miss most,” he says, realizing how selfish it sounds. Glen opens that categorization and fills it with phrases he’s used in the past.

She seems to accept this answer, nodding and standing to clear his plate. Glen holds her by the hand as she reaches for his glass and thanks her. She smiles, telling him she’s heading out for the day. She’ll be back tonight to make dinner. He plans to find wine and fall asleep drunk, but Glen doesn’t say it aloud.



He wakes up in the night still drunk, but no longer alone. Glen’s hand found its way to a breast—his head into thick, dark hair. It smells just like Marie’s and he thinks it a dream until he remembers she’s been taking showers at the house.

He tries to remain still, breathing in the memory and comfort he thought impossible. Everything reminds Glen of her, the feeling of her body in his hand, the way she cradles herself, it’s exact.

Glen categorizes his emotions: thankfulness, confusion, attraction, selfishness. He saves the moments she's giving into cultures: to be grown, emphasized and used for when she leaves his bed.

Before morning Glen becomes aware she isn't asleep, and probably never was. She betrays herself with the calm shaking that comes with tears, but he doesn't move his hand from her chest or his body from hers.

"I don't want you to stay here anymore," Glen says quietly.

"I know."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I don't know. I thought you wanted this. I thought you missed it."

"You aren't Marie."

"I thought—"

"You aren't her."

Glen doesn't move as she gets up, and only turns to face the other wall when he hears the front door open and close. He knows the empty side of the bed now smells like Marie again, now holds some warmth in it. He wants to lay over it and breathe it all in. He wants to make the warmth last.

Brittany Kerfoot

How to Make Love to a Mermaid

1. Find a mermaid. You may have been told that they swim the depths of the Aegean or wash up on the shores of Tahiti, but these are lies. She will surface only at night, in a storm, after the first clap of thunder.
2. Gain her trust. Read her poetry; compliment her seaweed hair or her operatic voice or her divine beauty; remember she is a woman.
3. Wait.
4. Ask her about her day. Remember, she is still a woman.
5. Seduce her. You may have been told that mermaids are sirens, but this is a lie. They are shy like stray cats.
6. Lead her to land. You cannot trick her by stealing her voice and hiding it in a clam shell; you cannot bribe her with your special human kiss.
7. Wrap her glinting gold tail, smooth like snakeskin, in dampened cloths and watch it split, divide, part like the Red Sea.
8. Lay her down. Not on the sand or in a dune or atop a beach towel. In a bed, like a woman.
9. Let yourself in. Then let yourself be taken.
10. Sleep.

11. Awaken to find nothing but the faint smell of salt.
12. Google: “unrequited love”; buy a boat; search for her; track weather patterns and water densities and become a coastal storm chaser; dream of her—of fishermen and divers and passionate sharks forcing apart her scales and—; wake up with a fever and a brick where your heart used to be; refuse to give up; do not meet anyone else; grow old; keep searching; die.

Dress Up



Dress Up, No. 10



Dress Up, No. 8



Dress Up, No. 7

Carleigh Takemoto

Rage

After Diane Arbus's photograph

“Child with Toy Hand Grenade in Central Park” (1962)

Little boy, you make a fist with your left hand
as though you are a raptor gripping a mangled,
screaming rabbit in your talons. In your right fist,
that grenade looks so real, so poised to explode

and you are looking right at me, daring to pull
the pin and destroy us both. When I was four,
my mother took me to a psychologist because
she thought I hated her, because I would scream

at the top of my lungs for hours when my fingers
shriveled in the bath, because I wore all of my clothes
inside-out, because I told her often that I was ugly
as though it were a fact of nature, like gravity

and death. My mother believed I could explode
all on my own, erupt one day in my car seat
or at the dining room table, insides spilling
over the backseat of the car or on the kitchen tile.

I can't for the life of me tell you how it happens,
little boy, how we can feel such rage when the earth
shows its open palms to us and the sunlight breaks
so perfectly through the trees in Central Park.

Jaclyn Renee Harte

On Choosing Audacity

I tore off my clothes, I danced on my shoes.
I ripped my skin open and then I broke
through.

“Break It Up,” Patti Smith

Human beings do not go hand in hand the
whole stretch of the way. There is a virgin
forest in each; a snowfield where even the
print of birds’ feet is unknown.

“On Being Ill,” Virginia Woolf

1.

I was walking past two drag queens who were sharing a bottle of vodka in mid-afternoon in Montmartre when I realized that the audacity to be ourselves no matter time space body or place is an audacity that I crave. “Hey honey,” one queen whispered as I passed and that queen was a queen indeed. The chipped blue nail polish. That teased blonde wig. Her pink chenille shrug. I

wanted to run my fingers up the runs in those fishnets and weep into the matted fur of her faux leopard jacket.

It's just that in my life I have carried many secrets.

My first night in Montmartre I was swept off my feet by a Moroccan man who showed me Sacré-Coeur. Every woman should be looked at like that in the old bright bohemian lights of those winding streets. The kind of streets that leave you unsure if the music you hear is within or without.

My first night in Montmartre a Parisian man asked me to sit down and have a glass of wine with him and I said, "Give me five minutes," went to the liquor store, bought the cheapest bottle of champagne on the shelf, came back, and told him that I would sit with him, but I wouldn't drink his wine. He drank mine instead. When the bottle was empty he brought out another and told me that my hands were magic. So I twisted the top and the champagne bottle burst open, splashing the walls and accumulating in a puddle at our feet. When I said I had to go he told me that Paris wasn't necessarily safe for a woman by herself.

My first night in Montmartre I had a glass of wine with a Russian model named Natalia, though she only drank sparkling

water. She asked me, “How many days you going to be in Paris?”

“Five.”

“Oh, zen you will fall in love.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Whenever I am in Paris for five days, I always fall in love.”

But it wasn’t until I woke up the next day and saw a message on my phone from a loved one that said that I’d be on my own—that there would be no secret weekend in Florence, no tired reunion in Dublin as we’d planned—that I realized that a week of free time alone in Paris could become more complicated than I had imagined.

I’d spent the week before in Ireland, lying—coveting clipped together moments, separate from the group; the sweet smirks in early mornings, averted eyes hidden behind coffee cups; creating justifications for midnight walks along the ocean; keeping it all private, even from myself. “How does this end...how does this end...how does this end?” we’d said. And when she walked away I took her hand. She turned around, furious. Like a harpy, furious. And she kissed me on wooden chairs in an empty pool room.

Have you ever watched yourself get in over your head?

So when I woke up in Montmartre, alone more now than ever, certainly more alone than I was yesterday, I wondered what it would mean to be brave enough to brave this time on my own. But it was as if I became paralyzed without the protection of my secret. It had given me an identity to take on in Paris—lover waiting for a desperate reunion. But without that to look forward to I suddenly became: woman-with-poor-French-who-likes-wine? Tall-blond-who-stops-for-dogs-crying-in-front-of-the-Louvre? Scoundrel-spurned? When she left me, she truly left me with myself—the problem, though, was that I was relatively unsure of just who that self was.

When we are given the burden of a secret, particularly in our youth, our subsequent relationship to secrets seems to take a strange turn. But, please, don't let me generalize you. What I should say is that my relationship to secrets took a strange turn after I was asked to keep the secrets of my parents. After I realized that there would be little I could ever do that would shock them. Long after I realized that leading one life was exhausting enough, and leading two while keeping each apart from the other became improbable. And more so, impractical.

When I was ten I began to self-medicate—to distill the burden of secrecy? To actively choose moments of oblivion

rather than succumb to them unwillingly? Maybe I just needed a night's sleep. I started with over-the-counter sleeping pills which I took more and more until a friend at a sleepover caught me with six in my hand and volunteered that if I'd just put them down, she'd stay up all night with me if I couldn't sleep; her mom was addicted to various narcotics. If anything, her kindness taught me that I would just have to get better at hiding.

It took about fifteen years until I began to get tired of that routine (routine alternated with: pot, wine, gin, pot, pot, gin, gin, gin, withdrawal, no more gin, pills, whiskey, whiskey, pills, whiskey, scotch). And it was about that time that I walked past those drag queens—so many of their secrets on the surface, the colors of audacity pinned to their streetwalking uniforms like Girl Scout badges waving brighter than a pride flag. I longed for the authenticity that was the clinching accessory to their artifice. Indeed, as I walked those spindling streets of Montmartre, it was as if I had been running a long time, and all of a sudden I had caught up with myself. And I realized rather quickly that when you are left where you have never been, it takes more than a plane ride to get you back to where you need to be.

2.

“Please don’t do this,” I pleaded.

“Get outside.”

“Please, I don’t want to do this. I don’t know where she is.”

My father grabbed my arm and threw me out the door of our apartment.

“Where does he live?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know. I don’t know what you want.”

When the secrets we carry are not our own it can be worrisome to figure out what to do with them.

I followed my father down the path we took when we took walks with my mom. In between the cracks of the pavement I saw glimpses of another universe, small jets of light shooting up from the uneven slabs of pavement. I always imagined that if you lifted up the right square, you could find the ocean. Or you would see trees, growing right from where your foot was stepping into an endless sky on the other side. My mom used to read to me from a book that was the shape of an apple tree. You could lift up the apples on the front cover to reveal a hidden picture. That is what I believed our world to be. That someone bigger and stronger was reading a bigger book, and we were the hidden pictures beneath an apple. I winced as my red-faced father stamped heavily down the old path.

“He lives down here?”

I gave up. “Yes.”

“Which one is it?”

“The one with the ivy.” I pointed my ten-year-old hand towards the familiar old door. Now, I’d be confident in saying that I will spend the rest of my life trying to understand how my small hand, that small gesture, could cause such a catastrophe, could unleash such terror.

“I want you to see this.”

“Let’s go home.”

But he was already gone. And so, for that matter, was home. My father climbed the mound of ivy that sheltered the corner house in swift, agile footsteps. He began banging loudly on the door until a tall man with a long beard and shining blue eyes stepped outside. Gene looked straight past my dad and into my eyes. He was good to me, and I liked sneaking around with my mom to go and see him. Not in the beginning, naturally, but he had eased his way into my good graces. Once he let me ride in a crane at the town dump where he worked. He took me to pick old bottles out of the mounds of dirt. He gave me his two pet chinchillas to keep as my own. Gene talked to me about a greenhouse he wanted to build as an addition to his new home, a place we could work in together, a place where a chameleon,

perhaps my heart's greatest desire at that time, might feel right at home if we took good care of him. He told me I didn't have to call him dad.

When Gene opened his door and saw me, hiding in my father's shadow, I knew that he understood that I had sold him out. And it only took that one moment for my father to throw Gene down into the ivy. He continued to hit him until he was done; Gene did not try to hit him back. When my dad stood up from the ground he paused a moment to look at me before he ran off.

Would that I had waded through the ivy, knelt beside Gene's bloody face, put my hand on his broken ribs. Would that I had taken his hand and told him that I wished I could call him dad.

But instead I ran home and called for an ambulance. I told the operator Gene's address, and that I hadn't seen what happened, but it looked like someone was pretty hurt.

One day not so long afterward, my mom and I got in a car with Gene, right in the middle of fifth grade, and we drove to his mother's house for an indefinite stay. (Were his ribs still broken on the drive? Face swollen? Had he forgiven me?) Gene's mother was nice to me—she did things like brush my hair and

make me soup. I accepted, without very much hesitation, the assemblage of this new family.

My mom and I came back from Gene's mother's house with divorce papers for my dad to sign; but he didn't sign them. And so we moved back in with him. My mom made many promises to me then. She told me I could stop locking myself in my closet when I heard my dad's car pulling into the driveway. That I could read in my room instead of sitting in the laundry room downstairs. We even spackled the knife holes on their bedroom door. I believe our amnesty lasted several days before things began again as they were.

One afternoon back when we were still on the lam, Gene's mother took me with her to walk around some local garage sales. I, interested in gaining a grandmother, had tried to humor her. But as the day progressed and my interest dwindled, I began to wander around on my own. It was during this time that I saw a dove in a cage sitting on someone's front lawn. It was white, though its cage was yellow. It was sitting alone, though this had been a day of wading through so much clutter. Through all of that brokenness, it sang such a beautiful song. A woman walked over towards me, picked up the dove's cage and handed it to me.

“You take good care of her,” was all she said before walking away.

After we moved back home with my father, the dove came with me, and it was her song and her song only that helped me to fall asleep at night. I had come home with this berth of beauty and hung her cage inside the cracking walls of our apartment. One night the dove got sick and her song changed. Her cooing became mournful and for hours I sat next to her cage and listened to her dying. Gene was the only one who would know how to fix her, who would know how to save that song. My mom went so far as to suggest it, but my dad would not allow that.

Later in the evening my dove died.

3.

In my dream I am staring at my younger self, who is trying unsuccessfully to fall asleep on the trundle of a daybed I shared with my mom until I was ten years old. We only had a three-room apartment at the time and my mother would not sleep in the same room as my father—there was logistically no place else for her to go.

I curl up with my younger dream self and embrace her. I put my arm around her stomach, but the gesture of mother is unfamiliar and therefore

awkward when I try it. She is happy to see me, and I am happy that I have caught her. It's just that, I want so much to console her. I cry. She does not.

"But weren't you scared?" I ask.

Silence.

More of my tears. "Oh, but weren't you scared?"

4.

A couple of days before my eighteenth birthday I went to a peace rally in Central Park to help save Darfur. I'd never experienced quite such fervor and devotion; it was our cathedral. In the waning sun of the defiantly radiant dog days of September, thousands of bodies crowded together in the symphonic jubilation of their own mightiness. Rag-tags of dashikis, jeans as frayed as sobriety, spinning beads in quiet, clandestine circles of smoke—all of the splendor of the human form: bodies stretched out in the grass, kids holding hands, faces painted and peace signs blazing.

It is a wonder how alone you can feel when you are surrounded by so many people.

Something happened for me in the isolation that I felt in that crowd. Something that convinced me that the numbness that I'd been feeling, which felt like ice freezing the space behind my knees and in between my shoulder blades, which had prevented

me from shedding a tear for months, which weighed so heavy inside, was all there was that was left.

When I got home, I wanted some proof that I was still alive; recent evidence of such had left me unconvinced. So I tried to dig out the veins in my left arm. Just with my fingers. Just so I could feel. Anything. Everything.

I don't imagine I got very far, though the details are rather blurred. I can say with confidence that I woke up with a large scab in the middle of my left arm, just below my wrist. I can say with confidence that I'd felt something after all. I can say, with confidence, that I rolled up a bandana someone had given out at the rally and tied it around my wound. Not dead and still relatively unconvinced that I was alive—I rallied in silence and braved the next day.

5.

In my dream I swim leagues and leagues and leagues down through murky water. I can see through one funnel of light, which illuminates a crow's nest of an abyss—litter and seaweed and ruins we'd given up on, surrendered completely. Barnacles, evidence of lost aggression. Passion under siege under fathoms. At the bottom I see that a girl is drowning.

I swim close to her and take her face in my hands. Her long hair and white dress prevent me from seeing, momentarily. For a moment she is

Ophelia until I press my face to hers and realize that I am looking into my own eyes.

Suddenly she becomes a ruin through which I swim. A massive structure of emptied space. I search and search and search for the heart. For a pulse to clutch. She is insurmountable and ever-present. She is small in this abyss and I can't gauge what it would take to save her.

When I wake up I am holding my breath, knuckles white, clutching the edge of a blanket I pull over my head.

6.

When I boarded the Greyhound bus from Penn Station, the only seat left open was in the very back, next to a small girl eating curried something out of a bag with a plastic spoon. She told me her name was Zarinah. Her mother, as I later learned, had chosen to sit with her younger sister, and her father had chosen to use the four-hour trip to Baltimore as quality bonding time with his son. Neither of the two seemed too concerned that their daughter was scared of bus rides.

I took the window seat.

She asked me if I was scared too.

“No,” I reassured her. “Bus rides are the best.”

Soon I noticed that a man sitting across from us was smiling. He was quite handsome and his smile was warm, but I very

quickly cast the thought from my mind: hung-over, and holding my breath that Zarinah would remember to throw up in the aisle rather than towards me if she got bus sick, I was really in no condition to return a smile with any sort of confidence. And as I scanned back through my morning, remembering how I grabbed a dress that I hoped would look appropriate to wear to a wedding and doubly hoped that I had remembered to pack my toothbrush, I began to wish desperately that I had remembered to bring Advil. I took out an old copy of *Wings of the Dove* and began reading. I had to hold the spine tightly as I turned each yellowed page, as some of them had detached.

When we reached the bus stop in Maryland, I had a vision of a very beautiful woman, in a very revealing dress, waiting for the smiling bus-stranger. He left the bus before me, as I had to wake Zarinah up and assure her that we had safely arrived. I walked into the bathroom of the rest stop and washed my face with pink hand soap in the sink, casually trying to gargle some of the dirty rest-stop water. When I walked out to look for a cup of coffee, I bumped into someone.

“Sorry,” I said, and kept walking.

“Hi.” I felt a hand touch my arm and looked up, disconcerted.

Apparently there had been no woman, no revealing dress waiting for the bus-stranger—Mizrof, as he introduced himself as. I laughed at my own misfortune, misfortune that smelled an awful lot like pink hand-soap.

“What you doing here?” he asked in an accent that I would later learn was half Russian, half Portuguese. Perhaps communicating through cave paintings would have been slightly easier for us, but I have always been interested in people with interesting voices.

I told him I was meeting a friend to go to a wedding.

He told me he was meeting some friends here because, he said, “Many Russians live in Baltimore.”

I met Mizrof again when we were both back in New York. I had never fully realized what a sensory experience walking through Times Square could be. My heart was actually racing. I felt as though every person who crossed our path had the potential to be a dancer or a demon, a fairy tale or a nightmare. I began to wonder about the potential people can hold when you have no words to understand them with. When a man dressed in bright yellow asked Mizrof if he would like to purchase two tickets to a comedy show, Mizrof looked at me questioningly; I merely waved my hand at the man in the bright yellow, smiled,

and continued walking. For all he knew, neither of us could speak English.

“What is your word for this?” Mizrof asked, pointing at the night sky.

I felt like we were Greeks, slowly creating myths to explain our worlds to each other.

“That is the sky.”

“No, that is небо.”

I lost track of the blocks we walked, the people hurrying by, the absent presence of my past.

“And this?” he asked, as he put my hand on his heart.

But it is never completely at bay. In an opportune moment, a street vendor handed me a balloon, and I diverted his question. “How about this?”

He merely shook his head no.

I was saddened. “You don’t have balloons in Russia?”

Mizrof laughed as I had not yet heard him laugh. “Yes, but word is,” he put both of his hands out in front of him, holding an imaginary Russian word, and moved them apart, “too big for you.”

When we found ourselves in front of a bar we went inside. Apparently “gin” and “whiskey” are both parts of a universal language and our two uncommon languages gave way to genuine

laughter. But rather suddenly, all at once, the reverie simply ended. Mizrof took both of my hands in his and became very serious, “Sometimes...I drink too much.”

I looked into his eyes and knew I had nothing very much to lose.

“Me too.”

7.

Not too long ago, I was walking out of a train station, about to enter that passage which leads from the dark tunnel to the beautiful sun that was waiting outside when I looked up and saw a very dear friend. But when I drew closer to him I realized that although the man who stood in front of me was indeed this dear friend, he was at least thirty years older than he should be. It was like I had caught him in another time. But he was dressed exactly how Johnny should be dressed in thirty years. He walked just like Johnny, his hair fell just like Johnny's does; he was like the clock in Julius Caesar—a measured image ticking in a world that is not yet its own. And I knew then that the two of us would never be again as we were the last time we had seen each other, that that very face that I have been looking at for so many years would continue to change at each train stop, with each passage, with every chance encounter. And how blessed, I thought, would I be to be able to see that. I imagined meeting Johnny, with his aged face covered in lines, smiling at the end of the tunnel. How blessed, I thought, would I be to

be able to match his age with my own, take his hand when mine is covered in spots, and let him brush the grey hair off of my face.

8.

I was having brunch at a drag bar on Lexington where they serve unlimited mimosas and sing show tunes on Sunday mornings when a queen put her arm around me, put a drink on the table and said, “Girl we are going to get you DRUNK,” and I said, “Good.” A friend tells me that I always get free drinks at that bar anyway because I always tell the girls just how beautiful I think they are. There is a charm to the color of the drinks that they bring—nothing short of electric blue or neon orange, sometimes at the same time—and I’m nearly certain the ice has traces of glitter in it.

I remember the first time I went there and a friend and I sat down at the bar. My friend didn’t want to order a drink because she thought it was going to be too expensive. She was in New York with me for a week, visiting from England. She said: “I’m sorry it’s just that we’ve had a really long day...I’m here visiting from...”

“Bitch, I don’t want to know your life story,” a 6’ 10” queen wearing a neon pink unitard said from behind the bar.

My friend's mouth was agape but I was enthralled. I said I wanted something with gin in it and she said, "Oh honey, you've come to the right place."

There's this one queen who works there who calls herself Blackie-O. She does a wig-throwing eye-crossing booty-bouncing rendition of Jennifer Hudson in *Dreamgirls*. Once, after her show, a friend and I grabbed Blackie and begged for a photo. With Blackie's arms wrapped around each of us, my friend held the camera extended as far as his arm could go and pointed it towards us. I turned and kissed Blackie's cheek, sweet stubble poking through layers of *face*, and I remember that she whispered *Thank you*.

9.

I am dreaming though I am wide awake and I see the face of a woman who is peering back at me.

She has a long, gray braid, which stretches down her body, past her waist. She has a sort of working, bleached denim shirt on over a long dress, and a broad-brimmed sunhat (Was it white? Was it straw?). She reaches a lithe hand, covered in turquoise rings, out towards me and pulls back a handful of sunflower stalks and smirks. Voices call her back in the ethereal frames of this dream and she lets the sunflower stalks snap back before she leaves.

I could not describe what I was feeling save that it felt like my heart was glowing. I wondered who she was. Why she had graced me. Why she had smirked.

Later that night, in one of those regular hours of unsleep, I closed my eyes and tried to remember all of the different features of her smirk, all of the lines of her face, and those long hands that had pushed through the flowers. But it was her eyes that made me know her; it was her eyes that made me realize that I was looking into my own eyes. No wonder she smirked. Her, so easy in her flowers. Me, so naïve to her cunning. Her, so courageous to reveal herself. Me, completely unaware of the chasms she must have breached to let me see those lines of that face, of our face.

I cannot say with any confidence what it means to catch yourself in another time. But I can tell you that because I have seen her hands I know that she makes it. And that is good enough for me.

10.

There is a blues club that has music every single night of the year on the second floor of a building all the way down Bleeker Street. It is lit by both a dim candle on each table and mild yellow lights on the stage—sometimes it's even hard to see the seat right in front of you. There are so many kinds of scotch served there.

After my car broke down. After I had to leave my apartment and return home. After I told the man I used to love that because I love him, I will never see him again. After scheduling a radical surgery. My dog died and I went to this blues club to try to grieve.

When I was a child I was often warned against “saying.”

Despite my mother’s myth of the foster home that might await me if I spoke about our home life, one time I gave it a shot. I told my first-grade teacher that I tried to give my mom a kiss goodnight because she had the flu and didn’t feel well and my dad said he was going to punch me in the face if I went anywhere near her. All of a sudden a woman started coming to our first-grade class each week and asked for a “friend” to go for a walk with her. Three guesses who that friend was. It turns out she was a school counselor, and my teacher had called her because she was worried about me. We went for walks each week and I remember that sometimes she let me walk outside the border where the school grounds ended and for that I was thankful.

This counselor befriended my mom. And my mom told her what it was like living with my dad and the counselor wanted to help us leave. But at the last minute my mom said this counselor

would have no idea how to be a single mother, and neither did she. I don't know what she said to prevent her from calling Child Protective Services.

So I adapted. I hid toys in an old hatbox and put them in my closet so I would have something to do when I hid in there. I learned to lie still at night so as not to wake my mom up, not to let her know I couldn't find sleep as hard as I tried. Didn't ask any questions. And put on a good face when friends came over. So did my parents most of the time.

Part of keeping secrets means that you never let anyone see you sweat. If I cried, I would have given myself away—perhaps even to that foster home my mom always warned me about. By the time I got to that peace rally in Central Park, I'd been convinced that my tear ducts were blocked. I'd stopped responding entirely, and if I felt a response happening to the weight of carrying the secrets that I have carried for so long, I knew what to take to block it.

I can say with confidence that I've fucked it, driven it, smoked it, hidden from it, snorted it, faced it, and then fallen all over again. But I can't say that I had ever tried to grieve it.

Part of keeping secrets means that we keep them alive. We feel them coursing through us and they numb what they touch—

but they don't always numb so much as they steel. We can't mourn the thing that traps us if we are still trapped by it.

Part of keeping secrets must mean letting them go.

So, let's try it. Can I tell you a secret? Could you take two?

When my mother was seven months pregnant my father drove her somewhere, I don't know where, to have an illegal abortion. I have wondered why I made it and that son did not.

If you tell me the stove is hot, the second you look away I will lay my hand on it.

I learned what sex was when I was seven years old from a picture in a book about ladybugs.

Once, I was nearly arrested in the middle of winter, sitting in a grey mustang with the top down and the leather seats filling up with snowflakes.

Once, I was nearly arrested while dressed like Stevie Nicks.

Once, I got out of a ticket because I'd inadvertently driven home topless.

I have trouble with monogamy.

When my mom was a young girl she used to rollerblade around town at night, by herself. After her psychotic break she filled an entire room with Victorian toys and board games to reclaim, I think, a youth that she lost, a youth that maybe she never had. I mourn the mother gliding through town at night; sometimes I can't look at the woman who clutches those old games.

I see myself in both and am terrified of what might be...of what might already be.

Sometimes at night I realize that I can't undo any of this.

Do you feel better? I think I do. Because I have this hunch that it might just be in the saying of the thing that springs us from the trap of it.

*Just lay down...*the blues musician instructed as he held a cup of tea spiked with Dewar's and pressed his mouth gently against the microphone. *Lay down till dawn...*

In that dim room, the grief and joy of the music shook my bones and rattled around inside of me until it left me bare. Is that what grief is? A submission that turns into a celebration that persists despite it all? I cried that night in the dark of that club, in that public space, for things I have never cried for before. For

things I've only ever run from before. For the very things which have seemed to appear before me every time I have shut the lights, but I could never confront.

That night, I pinned my secrets to the dark wooden walls of the club—you don't leave shit like that behind, but, please, let me give this to you: You do not have to carry that. You do *not* have to carry that with you *all* the time.

11.

When I was seventeen years old the first thing I would do when I got my paycheck from the yogurt shop was to go to my computer and look up Greyhound bus fares from New Jersey to wherever my paycheck could take me. Sometimes it was Texas, sometimes it was California. But I didn't care. I've always wanted to see how far I could get. Because where I wanted to go was Away. Away from my mind. Away from my skin. Away from my past. Adrienne Rich once wrote that when she wanted "fox," she wanted "the whole history of fox." I'd never wanted to give my whole history to anyone.

Years later, alone and exposed in Paris, I decided to go through the motions of tourism until I figured out what or who I was supposed to be. It is not without a bit of wonder that I tell

you that I ended up spending a day in Pere Lachaise cemetery. I brought peacock feathers to Oscar Wilde's tomb. I wept at the foot of Proust's grave. My legs got splattered with cemetery mud as I walked through the labyrinthine path to see the tomb of Heloise and Abelard. When you are confronted with such an eternity, you begin to see that it is not so much the definition of yourself that matters—it's what you do with the self you got.

As I was walking away from Heloise and Abelard I saw a young, tall, tie-dyed, bearded man walking toward Jim Morrison's grave. I had averted Morrison's grave in favor of walking back to say a couple more things I had forgotten to tell Oscar Wilde, but there we were. He stopped walking, looked at me and bowed. I'll admit to you now that I was wearing a lot of tie-dye myself. Work boots. An army jacket. A canvas backpack. Messy bleached hair. Of course he assumed that I, like him, was on a pilgrimage to see Morrison.

The first thing I thought was: *I have to start dressing better.*

The second thing I thought was that the wordless salutation between two pilgrims, no matter where their journey began or will steer them—no matter complication congregation celebration commiseration conflagration or motivation—that that choice to honor the people we meet along the way, though they are complicated ways and people indeed, is a beautiful

thing, certainly; is happiness, certainly. In the Hindu tradition, people bow to each other to honor the god they believe lives in each person, in each body. And that gesture of honoring the body, though we know it may be broken, though we know we meet it only in passing, though we can't know where it will go or from where it has come, is an audacious gesture indeed. It was as if in the simple act of *seeing* me, this pilgrim had seen right through me.

I bowed back.

I want to tell you that it was just like that Russian model said—that I spent five days in Paris and fell in love with myself or fell in love with that tie-dyed pilgrim. But I can't tell you that. Because that is not what happened.

What I can tell you is this: If you have ever ridden the subway back and forth because you prefer motion but had nowhere to be. If you have ever breakfasted on vodka. If you have ever felt that you wanted to be filled to the point of drowning, and then emptied and filled again, then revived by the same breath. If you have ever held onto a railing when the train passes, just to stop yourself from moving forward. If you have ever made a wild turn while driving just to feel your heart accelerate. If you have ever abandoned your body but your mind wouldn't let go. If you

have ever mourned the wildness that you worked so hard to give up. If you have ever woken up alone in Paris. And if you have ever been unsure that that is blood pumping through your arms. You might think it's all turned numb. It hasn't.

Carly Joy Miller

I've always been the girl in the wrong

clothes for spring, yet I understand that my body
is a gift. I've not withered away. When my mother slaps
my thighs to circulate the water in the blood,
the bruises still purple. I let blood work
itself small again. I want to dig deep enough
to know I'm not the only one suffering.
Last week I hunted the blond boys who hunted
a doe in mist. We all saw the mother gnawed
to bone in upturned soil. I let out a dry cry.
Only the worms could hear me.
I've been that low.

Tammy Lynne Stoner

Punching Dead Highways

The day started the way the other days had, with Cedar heading over to meet Auntie Nanette for lunch. Auntie Nanette and Cedar ate lunch together at least three times a week since Nanette had flown back from Paris to take care of Cedar and her sister, Sanford. *The teenage orphans.*

Sanford never trusted Auntie Nanette. She videotaped her and read her mail and kept journals logging where Auntie Nanette went and when. At first Cedar thought her sister, who was clearly unhinged, was crazy—but turns out she had been on to something. Auntie Nanette worked the system—trading her social security money and her prescription anxiety pills for little baggies of dope. Cedar wondered how her mother would feel knowing this—if she looked down and saw the mess that started after her death. If she blamed herself.

Cedar and Nanette ate lunch on white, flat plates that were almost square—quite a dinnerware statement for the late 1980s, especially in Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania, home of plaid couches and Princess Di plate collections. Mechanicsburg—where there was one Jewish family and one black family. Both mothers had nose jobs. The black boy went to Cedar’s high school, two grades above. During a pep rally, the principal—a hemorrhoid named Mr. Kostelack—asked him to sink one from the foul line. True, the kid was tall and black but he didn’t play basketball. The kid tried and missed *three times*, finally crowning off his humiliation by passing the ball to the hemorrhoid and motioning that he give it a go. The hemorrhoid shot and made it. Such was life in Mechanicsburg.



Today’s menu: Lamb chops sprinkled with parsley, which, according to Nanette, allowed her to drink as much whiskey as she wanted. The parsley fortifies my liver, she said—though Cedar knew it wasn’t just the whiskey she was fortifying against, it was the heroin.

Cedar stared down at the last piece of lamb, wondering where all his blood had gone. All the veins. Why don’t strings of veins run through the meat?

Nanette smiled. “The mutton chops are topped with Swiss cheese.” She licked something off her finger. “Like cheese, *everything* stinks as it begins to age. But with age also comes *wisdom*. And there is indeed a wisdom—a non-verbal wisdom—to cheese. And with cheese we politely ignore the stink—in fact, we grow to love it. I wish people felt the same way toward the elderly.” Auntie Nanette sighed.

Cedar smiled and brushed a few limp strands of brown hair from her forehead. “Auntie Nanette, you’re only fifty-three—hardly elderly.”

“You’re kind.”

Dean Martin oozed from the long rectangular console in the living space.

Cedar ate the lamb before it got too cold. It tasted like grass and beef stew. Auntie Nanette talked about the Strawberry Festival that was coming to the Fairgrounds next month. It was always her favorite time of year, Strawberry Time.

They finished their lunch.

“You, sit,” Nanette said. “Sit. I’ll clear the rest.”

She grabbed their plates and walked into the kitchen. Cedar turned and waved at the pink-checkered teddy bear on Nanette’s bookshelf. The teddy bear had been her sister Sanford’s gift to

their Auntie, complete with a small video camera tucked into its head. It constantly videotaped Nanette from its eye sockets.

Nanette returned, but without the usual tray of follow-up tea. Instead, she clapped her hands on her thighs—a deadened slap into softness. “Sorry, Cedar,” she said. “No tea today. It’s late, time for me to take my afternoon walk, maybe a nap, maybe a bath—who knows! The world is mine,” she smiled—with Cedar knowing she was lying.

“All right,” Cedar said, pushing herself up from the chair. “Thanks for the meat.”

Nanette hugged her at the door. A deep, warm hug that felt a little sweaty.

Cedar squinted into the bright outdoors and said she’d see Auntie again tomorrow. Same time, same place, different lunch.

She walked back toward the main house, stepping one foot at a time on the claw-print stepping stones that were always dotted with bird shit and her sister Sanford’s cigarette butts. Bugs died in the corners of her mouth.

She opened the metal screen door of the two-story, main house that had been their mother’s before the cancer ate her up like a match. Quietly, Cedar walked up the red-carpeted stairs to Sanford’s bedroom. Sanford opened the door before her sister knocked.

“Do come in,” she said. “And thanks for the wave to the camera—nice to know you’re thinking of me.”

Sanford’s room stunk, as usual. All around were piles of damp, yellowing T-shirts, stacks of old books, and the heat from her surveillance equipment—two VCRs, a TV, several video cameras, a four-track. She held her joint off to the side and pointed out a new set of night goggles on her unmade bed, adding to her collection of spy cams, tape players, walkie-talkies, and nanny-cams.

Sanford was a younger version of Cedar, both standing like two teenage palm trees—just under six feet with shaggy, dirty-blond hair. Their similarity annoyed Cedar.

Sanford sucked in another pipeline of smoke then slid her duct-taped desk forward and dropped the bag of orange blossom behind it. Cedar looked over her bookshelf at the coils of wires, scratched mirrors, and tube socks. It overflowed with spent videotapes.

“Sanford, I’m not sure why you’re still spying on Auntie—”

Without hesitating, Sanford threw a plastic penholder at the wall near Cedar’s head, adding another pockmark. “You’re not sure because you have no *vision*, Ce-dar.”

There was never any use questioning Sanford. Once at dinner, Cedar’d asked her why Sanford felt she had the right to

dictate the vegetable of the night *every night*, and sometime after she'd gone to sleep Sanford had snuck into her room and cut all the hair off one side of her head.

It was always the goddamn Sanford Show, especially since their mother had died. That, Cedar thought, is the reason I let her do all this shit. Which I guess really means I'm a coward.

The phone rang: *Auntie Nanette*.

Shit.

Sanford shifted her hips and applauded merrily as she popped Nanette on speakerphone. She voodoo'd the tail of her joint on a safety pin while Nanette and Cedar talked.

Auntie Nanette was panicked. "Cedar?"

"Yeah, listen, I'm just about ready to—"

"Oh, Cedar, I am so sorry but please come back here right away!"

The phone clicked dead.

Sanford, ecstatic now, checked the TV to make sure her videotapes were still rolling. "Remember," she snapped at her sister. "*Don't block the fucking shot.*"

Cedar nodded and left, tired of these weird games they played but not sure how to stop them without incurring her sister's wrath. Their mother—and several bottles of pills—were the only things that could control that crazy bitch.



Cedar didn't knock this time. When she stepped into the small, clean guesthouse, it felt as if she were standing inside a wire that could jump alive with voltage at any moment. Nanette paced back and forth on the impeccable beige carpet. The inside of her arms were pimpled with red misfirings.

"Cedar, baby, I hate to do this. I really hate to do this. Ask this. But I have no choice. Ah, shit."

Nanette's headscarf was tied around her arm, squeezing fat out the ends. There was a crooked spoon on her cherry coffee table—just like she'd seen on Sanford's videos, only clear and in full color. Careless circles of sulfur dotted the wood.

"I cooked up my last bit before tomorrow—since there hadn't been enough for a decent damn line," Nanette moaned, "and now I wasted half of it punching dead highways."

Her hand shook as she held out her syringe to Cedar.

"Here's the last bit," she said.

Nanette unzipped and dropped her black stirrup pants, turned around, and instructed her niece on how to hit a vein behind her knees. Don't shoot until you see blood, she repeated. Not until you're sure. Then slowly, steadily push in the plunger.

Someone had once asked Cedar what one thing she would choose to change about herself if she could. She didn't choose wealth or manageable hair, or musical talents or intellectual brilliance or compassion. No, she chose to rid her body of all visible veins. Cedar fucking hated veins. No reason, really. They just grossed her out. She dreamed about them wrapping around her internal organs like worms, choking off her supply of nutrients. She hated them.

But that afternoon Cedar didn't feel queasy. Didn't watch as the room shrunk in on both sides and her stomach pulled itself up like a potato bug sprayed with poison. No, that afternoon she saw it as a brave duty: Insert said tip into said blue line.

Cedar tapped the syringe and held it upright while she examined the back of Auntie's knee with clinical vision, ignoring the flaking skin and chicken tendons. She stretched the skin, testing the strength of the vein the way the nurses do, slapping it around a bit. Cedar told Nanette to stand still while she choked her weak thigh muscle.

Auntie Nanette stood there, as bare as humanity gets, looking to her niece for help, when—as Sanford had pointed out every day since Nanette arrived—*they* should be able to look to *her* for help. Yet standing there with the syringe, Cedar realized that this

is exactly what she needed to start getting over the death and the insanity and the control of Sanford in her life.

“Hold your hand where I have mine now,” she told Auntie Nanette.

Then Cedar leaned forward and popped the needle in on the first goddamn try. After a thin band of red taffy leaked into the poison, she depressed the plunger. Tension eased as the tube emptied into her Auntie Nanette’s vein.

“Thank you,” Nanette whispered.

“No,” Cedar said. “Thank you.”



At the very moment, Cedar knew that Sanford would probably be tearing out the *last half* of the book Cedar was reading. The book Cedar told her was incredible. The book she couldn’t wait to finish.

Sanford would be ripping out each page, violently scattering the pieces on her sister’s bed and floor, shoving bits into the radiator and into the mouth of her sickly Venus Fly Trap. She was doing this because what Sanford saw when Cedar saw Auntie Nanette’s blood, was Cedar’s ass blocking the entire fucking shot.

Jessica Cogar

Horoscopes

ARIES: Try to find yourself this month, buried in moss and candle wax. Continue etching designs into bars of soap and watering dead flowers. Call your mother; she misses you.

TAURUS: Begin to collect rainwater; the reason for doing so will become apparent near the end of the month. You will encounter barriers when communicating: every time you open your mouth to speak, a moth will escape from your throat.

GEMINI: Stalks of foxglove will begin growing in your garden and while your first instinct will be to uproot them, let them be. The letters you sent your brother will find their way back to your mailbox, return-to-sender.

CANCER: Consider altering your idea of the perfect mate, perhaps to include dentists or soothsayers. Reciting the Psalms may serve to inoculate you against insomnia.

LEO: As you make your way through this month, chronicle all of your shortcomings. Bottle the scent of your father leaving;

you will want it for later. Like peas, swallow your grandmother's pearls one by one.

VIRGO: Try (and fail) to find God in ribbons of water on the asphalt. You will grow to enjoy the way television static fills the silence.

LIBRA: Spend less time pulling snakeskins from artificial tree branches and more time etching grayscale masks into thick paper. Overcome your greatest fear by keeping a beehive in the coat closet.

SCORPIO: Derive your strength this month from lemon wedges dusted with sugar. Remember that you cut your hair for a reason.

SAGITTARIUS: While they are still alive, do not be afraid to use your hands. In order to remove toxicity this month, throw away your collection of dead words.

CAPRICORN: Tomorrow, you will find a swallowtail butterfly folded against the grill of your car. If you are looking for a sign this month, this is not it.

PISCES: If your lover drops you hints to pay better attention to her emotional needs, ignore it. Look to the phases of the moon for guidance instead.

AQUARIUS: Drip dandelion sap into the mouths of your children. Apologize to your daughter for drinking too much. Look for meaning in the wet eyes of your own reflection.

Lis Anna-Langston

Vintage Collection

Photographs for the “Vintage Collection” evolved out of a series shoots I did in North Carolina. I was particularly interested in photographing at night and using the available light to influence and capture the subject without artificially lighting it myself. I was also interested in using the available natural light to create high contrast as is the case in the photo of the girl in the window. Using the settings on my camera to manipulate film grain was of great interest. All of these photos originated on 35mm film, mostly Ilford ISO 100. The color film is Fuji Reala. For Valentine’s Day my husband bought me a Smartphone Film Scanner, cause nothing says love like new photography equipment. Fascinated by this intersection of old technology and new technology I started scanning my negatives. The vintage look is the result. It reminds me of the old Hollywood negatives we sometimes still see today. For me it is a gorgeous, intriguing style so I created a line from the original experiment.











girlwithcameraphotography.com

Shinjini Dey

Sisters, creators.

Five years ago you kicked a snake
coiled around a branch,
running away when its colors exploded
in a tongue, dark room
red.

I was struck, blind flash
brain freeze
glue guns instead of flashlights,
becoming decoupage
on a concrete block.

I must have known then,
how you create
ignite,
your spine feeling the detonation
how I stand affixed
burning in wonder.

Karen Fischer

Heads or Tails, Motherfucker

Where I come from, Motherfucker was used as a lodge in punctuation, a breath between words and the flipside of my dime. The word was passed down onto my tongue by my older brother David. He is the entire body of the word.

“Mu’fuckin cop tryna tell me what to do.”

“AHHHHHH MOTHERFUCKER! GET OUT OF THE WAY!” (Swerve.)

“And he was like, ‘Go and get a job at mothafuckin.....’ Shit, what was it, mothafuckin....”

The word would roll out of me too back then, whenever I steeped in rage or just wanted to show the place I came from. I treated Motherfucker as a switch, a switch to be turned on or to topple on to. And like any switch, I was easy to flip.

Heads-side up, I read as Nag Champa and memorized Robert Frost poems and reggae and the side of me that spoke from words wrapped like ribbon around the best things I knew. I loved, and still love, with a fierce breed of rosy moss. It hugs in unlikely places.

The tails-side of my dime is where Motherfucker played on a loop. I read as Marlboro Skyline smoke trapped in my hair and clothes, Coors Light sweat and hangovers and four a.m. depression walks through winding cobblestone streets in downtown Annapolis when I would spin, spin, spin.

Motherfucker was a side I could flip my dime to with no thought, no fear, no indication of where and why it came to me. Some days, I woke in confusion and stared into the collages of smiling shiny photographs and torn Matisyahu posters in my bedroom. I wondered how two very different flips of character, my character, could exist in one being. The dime always toppled to one side or another—I could never balance.

I inherited this infection of word from David. He is thoroughly Newport 100s and grim reaper tattoos and a false front tooth and stretch marks splayed on his beer gut and Motherfucker is lessened to Mo'fugga when he starts drinking because his entire dime sways, sways, sways.

Motherfucker made him get in his car that night. He swayed as he stomped his foot on the gas and blasted down Route 50 into DC at 100 mph. The word gave him the confidence that *No, not today*. On the highway to DC I cowered in his front seat rolling the word over and over and over back down my throat. I gulped it away. If he was going to die, I had to be with him.

I could have dodged imprinting the word in myself, dodged our world of spins together. But how can you leave the ones you love alone when they are trying to silence the word in themselves?

If I still smoked, I'd bare my teeth. Stomp out my Skyline. Light another. Flip a coin to figure out what to give up.

"I'm Motherfucking haunted."

Jean A. Kingsley

Artwork

Tattooing technology is based on the design
of the doorbell; quick poking action

injects ink into skin driven by
an electric circuit. Modern

tattoo artists work with a number
of ink-jet devices, each reserved

for different colors. In prison,
tattooing machines are banned. Inmates

build their own using guitar strings
and a tape deck motor.

My mother's tattoo,

etched under her right collarbone, so
the oncology techs would know exactly

where to put the plexi-glass shield,
was even more primitive. A rectangle

of indistinct dashes she called her *artwork*.
Never mind that every day

I had to put heavy ointment on the skin
around the artwork—skin that ceased

to look like skin—skin that became
more and more shell-like—hardening

and blackening with each treatment into
dark birds that cannot fly.

Gail C. DiMaggio

My Father Said He'd Teach Me Knots

His big hands held a white cord.
First, an anchor knot, he said,
and it twisted. *Now cat shank*.
And a whirlwind appeared
tame in his hand.

He'd come in cold through the door
wearing khaki, and sharp, gold stars.
Slapped me for looking in his bureau drawer.
To make a blood knot, he said,
you gotta be sure the two sides look
exactly the same. I tied it. Wrong. Again.

Every night,
my mother untangled my braids, tugged
the hanks till my scalp throbbed.
I am not trying to hurt you.
She was not trying to hurt me.

*A knot has to bind things, hold them
in their place, and when he gripped
my wrist, the power to fasten
sizzled in his fingertips. Our shoes posed
toe to toe—steel-tipped boots, scuffed oxfords—
his hands, tough with calluses. Not like that. Under
and tuck it. He made me see
where the knot went wrong. Racking bend*

and thief knot. Pull it tight. Now tighter.
I stole his fishing line
and made a snarl like an inky scramble.
You did this on purpose.
His mouth set thin.
Daddy.
I prayed, *Daddy.*
And his grease stained fingers jerked
at the knot. At my arm.

Skaidrite Stelzer

Starfish

“You will live in the desert without rain.”
The prediction of the turbaned man
who confronts me on the beach,
Far Rockaway. He says he is a poet,
will write for coins,
anything you offer is fine.
“You will dry up, your branches lose sap.”
He tells me harsh fortunes,
refusing to bloom without money.
I look at the slow foaming waters,
thin upon the sand.
See starfish glitter there,
growing new limbs.

Kathleen Glassburn

Scraggly Nails

For six months my father, my brother, and I had been living in a cramped two-bedroom apartment near Northwest Electrical Engineering, the Seattle company that Dad had purchased the previous year. Even though he and Mom had been staunch supporters of John F. Kennedy, and as such brought Tim and me to several Democratic fundraisers, Dad failed to vote that November.

It was now January, and I'd returned to my sixth-grade class, still "the new girl," after the most dismal of Christmases, with a wilted poinsettia plant as our only decoration.

Dad came back to the apartment one night at 5:00 instead of his usual 8:00 or 9:00.

I'd made Kraft macaroni and cheese with sliced-up hot dogs for dinner.

He shrugged out of his damp-from-the-rain overcoat, and ignoring my meal, said, “We’re going to have a visitor next week...she’s really special to me.” This was the most excitement I’d heard in his voice since Mom got sick.

“*She?*” My older brother, Tim, with an abundance of girlfriends during his partying high school days, had told me, “Dad’ll marry again before too long, Kelly.” With our father’s announcement, Tim narrowed his eyes, I’m sure considering whether Dad had already met a woman to replace our mother.

My chest tightened as I fought back an urge to gnaw at my fingernails—a new habit.

Dad used to bring spicy-smelling pink carnations to Mom before their occasional “date.” I’d see her poring over a newspaper at the kitchen table, trying to decide what movie she wanted to see after they went to their favorite Italian restaurant. Later, I’d hear hushed giggles coming through their bedroom door. The next day, no matter how tired he was from work at his very own company, Dad would be right there next to Mom at my horseback-riding lessons, intensely watching me and Bo. Later, they’d give me pointers from what they’d seen.

“Mrs. O’Donnell is from Toronto—the widow of an old professor of mine,” Dad filled us in. “I lived with them for a while, saving money to come to the States. She took care of my

laundry, fed me, gave me advice. I liked her a whole lot better than him.”

Once, when I was about nine, while hauling my saddle past his office alcove, I knocked over Dad’s blue glass desk lamp. I watched that beautiful lamp as it shattered into a million pieces.

With a hurt tone, nothing like his normal measured voice, Dad said, “Mrs. O’Donnell gave me that.”

Later, Mom told me, “Something special of your father’s got ruined, and he doesn’t care about treasures the way you and I do.” She gave me a big hug, and continued, “I know you feel terrible. We’ll look for something nice to replace it.”

“She’s going to be in Vancouver visiting family,” Dad now went on. “Wants to see me and meet you two.”

“To stay overnight?” No one had come to visit us in this apartment.

“She’ll take the train to Seattle and I’ll pick her up, then bring her back to the station next morning.”

I figured Tim would be around for dinner, and then either meet up with his current honey or hang out in the bedroom he and Dad shared, watching their television. I planned to retreat to my own bedroom, but I was worried.

“Let’s make something fancy,” Dad said. “From one of Mom’s recipes.”

“Maybe we should bring in food.” Tim mopped up the last of his orange cheese sauce with a piece of bread and popped his remaining hot-dog coin into his mouth.

“You’re right. How about The Bells’ pot roast?” We ordered food from this nearby café more nights than not. “Can you set a nice table, Kelly?”

This wouldn’t be easy since Mom’s china and crystal and silver had been sold, along with most everything else, in order to pay medical bills. “Sure, Dad.” Then, trying to act casual, I said, “Where will she sleep?”

“Plenty of room in your bed.”

Dad and Tim slept in my old twins, and I’d been given my parents’ set with its queen. Dad had said, “I can buy you new furniture if this bothers you.”

The way he said it, with a catch in his voice, I knew there wasn’t an extra penny to cover the cost. “It’ll be okay.”

“You can have our television for your own,” he added, as if offering this prize would make it easier. When I wasn’t reading, I would watch any old program—even *Lawrence Welk*. So far, no friend from my new school had come for a spend-over. The way I felt all the time, like I didn’t have the energy to crack a smile, acted the opposite of a magnet, pushing away anyone who tried to know me.

“You’re going to like Mrs. O’Donnell. No one has ever been so kind to me...except, of course, your mother.” His face brightened in a forgotten way. This was the first time he’d said anything about Mom since the funeral service. Dad had met her while she was living with an aunt, her only living relative, soon after he arrived in Seattle. He used to joke about how a fine beauty like her, personal secretary to the president of Northwest Electrical Engineering, took pity on a Newfie far away from home.

Dreading Mrs. O’Donnell’s visit, I thought about going to stay at a friend’s house in Woodinville, even though there’d been no contact with any of those old friends since our move. That way, she could have my bedroom to herself. But Dad had said Mrs. O’Donnell wanted to meet us. Besides, at the last 4-H meetings I attended, the mothers hovered over me as they passed out cookies, acting like if I just got enough sugar, everything in my life would be fantastic. I didn’t want to go through that kind of attention again.

Pondering what to do about the troubling sleep arrangement, I momentarily considered using the front-room sofa, and she could have my bed, until I remembered we didn’t have a sofa anymore. Dad’s desk, with the replacement lamp—a pale imitation of the original—bookshelves, and an office chair, took

up most of the room. A couple of tattered upholstered chairs filled the corner.

Our Woodinville house's new owners had expressed delight at buying most of the furnishings as well as Mom's knickknacks. They raved about her garden and the five acres where even our German shepherd Max, the cats, and my pony Bo Jangles were to remain.

Dad had told me, "You've outgrown Bo anyhow. We'll find a stable where you can ride a real horse." So far, this hadn't happened.

"How old is she?" I imagined Mrs. O'Donnell being a witch with hairs sprouting from the mole on her nose.

"About sixty when I lived with them. Must be over eighty. Amazing. A woman that age coming all the way from Toronto."

During her cancer, before she went to the hospital for good, Mom had stayed home in the very bed that later became mine. What if Mrs. O'Donnell died in her sleep? With me alongside of her?

That night, I stared at the ceiling, which I did every other night, this time wondering where else I could go during her visit. The clock said 1:30 when I scooped up my pillow and blanket. Passing Dad and Tim's room, I stopped and listened to their duet of snores. Once in the bathroom, I wrapped the blanket

around my shivering body and hugged the pillow close to my chest. I could curl, snail-like, in the tub, even if the shower curtain did smell of mildew. Then I thought, what if she needs to come in here? Don't old people go to the toilet a lot at night? At least my grandma and grandpa did.

I stumbled into the front room, with stains from previous tenants on its carpet. Could I camp out beneath the kitchen table? When I was little, I'd made a tent and crept beneath it and read to my teddy bear with Mom's flashlight. On all fours, ignoring crusty spots, I crawled under the table, rolled up in my blanket, and bunched my pillow into a mound. Every time I shifted, my knees bumped against a wooden leg. After about half an hour, I fumbled my way out and looked around.

Neither of the upholstered chairs looked comfortable, but if I pushed them together, edge to edge, they formed a cot of sorts. Satisfied that this was the best solution, I bundled up in my blanket and snuggled into a ball, trying it out for size. Not bad. I decided to sneak off here when she visited, and leave a sleeping Mrs. O'Donnell all to herself.

For the next few evenings, Dad talked about her, saying things like: "She helped many students who found themselves short of cash," and "Didn't have any children of her own," and "She took me to the airport...told me that I was doing exactly

the right thing moving to the States and taking a position with Northwest.”

Dad’s family still lived “around the bay” in Newfoundland. When Mom was alive, we traveled back there every few years, but none of those relatives, and there were many, had ever been anywhere except St. John’s, and couldn’t figure out why Dad had left. Not one of them reminded me of him. I baked sugar cookies and decorated them with Grandma, and would tag along with Grandpa, checking in on all his buddies, me chewing on a piece of his Juicy Fruit gum while they sipped their brews.

At this time, I didn’t know when we’d ever go to Newfoundland again.



This woman, with fine lines that barely showed on her sculpted face, had sparkling silver strands woven through butter-yellow hair. Aquamarine eyes, like Mom’s birthstone ring, were emphasized by golden skin, the kind that looks lightly tanned year-round.

She held out a hand to me. It felt small and delicate in my own. As she drew away, I noticed a slight scrape. Her fingernails were oval and painted pale petal pink.

“The Christmas-card photos didn’t do justice to your good-looking children, Carl.” She smiled at me. “You must take after your mother, with that thick, dark hair and those big brown eyes.”

During the presidential campaign, I’d wondered if Mom, whose cheeks no longer flushed with pleasure but rather were sunken and pale, had been as lovely as pregnant Jackie when she was expecting me.

Mrs. O’Donnell turned to Tim. “You’re so much like your father at this age. Every bit as tall.”

Tim showed more interest in her than I would have expected, uncharacteristically cutting a phone conversation short. During our meal, he asked many questions about the professor, and finally said, “I want to be an engineer.” This was news to me. Hanging out with his girlfriend-of-the-moment seemed to be all he ever thought about. Dad also registered surprise, sitting straighter in his chair and focusing on my brother.

Continuing with the memories, Mrs. O’Donnell said to Dad, “You were always a favorite of George’s.”

“I never realized that.” Dad shifted his attention to her.

“He was a hard one to know—like many engineers, so immersed in his work that he seldom showed his feelings. Still, he often praised you as the best student he’d seen in years.”

By dessert, which was raspberry sherbet, Mrs. O'Donnell said, "How about you, Kelly, what are your interests?"

"Reading, I guess."

"What do you like to read?"

"Anything to do with horses."

"I used to ride. Have you ever had one of your own?"

"A pony. He's at home."

"Maybe someday you'll have another."

"Maybe..."

"What about your 4-H? It was mentioned often in Christmas letters."

"I don't participate anymore."

She paused, maybe not knowing what else to say, then turned back to Dad and Tim.

This was fine with me. Picking at my scraggly nails, I waited until enough time had passed so that I could go to my room. As it turned out, Tim stayed with them, asking more questions about engineering. I left my door open, so Mrs. O'Donnell wouldn't have to knock, and thought about watching my television, but decided to read *My Friend Flicka* for about the fifth time instead.

Upon hearing them make goodnight sounds, I shut my light off and turned toward the wall, wanting her to find me "asleep"

when she crawled in. I dozed a bit while she used the bathroom, yet the minute my mattress moved with weight from her body, I became alert, like Bo when he sniffed something new in the air.

“Are you awake?” she whispered.

I didn’t say a thing, keeping my eyes tightly closed, but smelling her faintly sweet night cream. She rolled away from me, and after a short while her breath came evenly. I hoped it wouldn’t stop before my escape. She might be different from the witch I’d envisioned; still, she was ancient. Up close, her neck sagged into deep lines, and her hands that had felt so delicate, despite the well-groomed nails and polish, looked twisted and lumpy, like claws.

Several long minutes passed while I waited to make sure she was sound asleep before I quietly stole out to the front room.

The chairs-made-into-a-cot proved to be less than adequate. As I thrashed around, they slid apart, dumping my rear on the floor. I stood three times to shove them back together. Eventually, I sat up in one chair, chewing at my nails and picturing our old house, imagining someone else sleeping in my room, fretting about my pets getting attached to the new kids. My mind was so busy reliving a gallop with Bo, Max running along next to us, happily barking, that I didn’t hear her come in.

“Hard night?”

Huddled there with my eyes wide open, I couldn't pretend.
"Can't sleep."

"Would you like some cocoa?"

At least we had milk and Hershey's syrup in the refrigerator.
"That'd taste good."

We sat together at the table with only Dad's desk lamp on for illumination, drinking our cocoa, talking about my new school.

"Have you made any friends?"

"Nope."

"Sometimes it takes a while."

"There are some nice girls...it's me."

"When I was your age, my mother got sick."

"Did she die?"

"Not right away, but she endured so much pain it was as if she'd left me."

I didn't know anyone else who had lost a mother. "My mom was sick for all of fifth grade," I said. "One day she drove me to a 4-H meeting and everything seemed normal, and the next day she didn't even look like herself."

"Everything about my mother changed too." The desk lamp flickered. "She became this wasted-away person with hollow eyes and shrunken skin."

“I didn’t want to be in the same room with her.” I’d never said anything like this to anyone.

“It was hard to kiss her cheek. There was a smell—like a soggy, forgotten garden—the smell of death, I’ve come to realize. At the end, her hands continually smoothed the silky top of a blanket. I wanted to say ‘Be still!’ And then she was.”

“How long did it take for you to quit feeling bad?”

“I still mourn for her, but I quit feeling ashamed. I was a child and I’d never been around anyone who died.”

We sipped our cocoa for several quiet moments.

“I miss her so much...the way she used to be.” It felt sad, but also good, to say it.

Mrs. O’Donnell reached out and took my hand. In a minute or so, she started to examine my messed-up fingernails. “Tomorrow, I’m going to give you a manicure, and I’ll leave my polish here.” Her aquamarine eyes glistened as she went on. “It’s late. Please come to your room. I promise...I won’t die tonight.”

“How’d you know?”

“I would’ve felt exactly the same way.”



She rubbed my back with her twisted, lumpy hands, and for the first time since we’d moved to this apartment, the bed didn’t

seem haunted. Soon my body relaxed, my breathing evened, and I drifted off.

Hannah Trees

Two for the 8 o'clock show

The single-screen movie theater
had been showing the same
PG flick for two weeks,
but we went every night,
sat in the back left corner,
you and your butterfingers,
me and my almond joys,
our teeth all sugared up.
One night you bought
a popcorn bucket for us both,
and our hands touched in it
and I didn't move
for a whole long minute.
I licked my salty lips.
You withdrew your empty hand.
That was the winter of '06,
too cold and snowy and bleak
to do anything but take off
our deep woolen layers
in that cinematic dark,
breathe softly, and

let the frost melt
from our rubber-soled shoes.
We were barely 16
and knew exactly what we were doing.

Laura McGehee

A Blossoming Flower of Womanhood, or, How I've Experienced Love

I'm twelve years old and I'm a blossoming flower of womanhood. Well, if by "blossoming flower," you mean "feeling weird about starting to wear a bra because I've only ever been friends with boys and I'm not exactly sure how a bra works; also I thought I got my period the other night and although it was a false alarm, it unsettled me a lot."

I'm twelve years old and I've conquered my first dance—if by "dance," you mean "that section of the swim team banquet where they put on music for half an hour and I'm sweating so much that the hand-me-down sundress clings to every part of my body and I kind of smell bad, but I dance with Mitchell Binecki anyways and hope he doesn't notice."

I'm twelve years old and I'm in love, if by "love" you mean the gripping fear of feeling absolutely nothing when you know you should probably be feeling absolutely everything.

I stand at the pool's bike rack with Mitchell Binecki, ready to ride my Razr Scooter home. I'm currently in the period of adolescence in which I realize that becoming a woman means leaving my Ryan Sheckler-brand skateboard at home, even though it's the only combination transportation and sport I've ever really been passionate about. Razr scooters are more gender neutral, so in the grand scheme of things, it's a sacrifice I have to make. Mine is red, so that helps.

As we prepare to part ways, Mitchell looks at me and smiles his brace-less smile. That's important—Mitchell is two years older and has beautifully white, glistening teeth that sharply contrast with his mid-summer tan. He smiles again and I smile back, but without teeth, because my braces make me self-conscious.

As I fumble around for the best way to place my hands on or around or near him, Mitchell fumbles around with his words, finally stuttering—

"I love you."

I feel nothing and think nothing and yet my mind is clear and I know exactly what to do next. My hands settle in a nice pat on the back and I say—

“Thank you.”

I’m twenty years old and I’m less of a blossoming flower, more of a hydrangea that grew partially in the shade and had to twist to adapt to grow in the sun, so it has those weird brown spots that arguably add character.

I’m twenty years old and I’ve grown into refined tastes—if by refined tastes you mean red wine over white and dark chocolate over milk.

I’m twenty years old and I’m in love, if by love you mean wanting to be with someone always and thinking that everything they do is great and wanting to share every experience you’ve ever had and ever will have with them and defining your life as before this person, and after this person.

We lie together on the dilapidated thrift-store couch in the kind of comfortable darkness that comes at two in the morning when the show ends and you don’t start another one—not because you want to go to bed, but because you just want to be awake with each other as long as possible.

This time, when I hear “I think I love you,” I don’t really hear it. Not in the figurative sense, but in the like “I don’t have good hearing because of my years of ear infections from swimming” sense. We’re both facing towards the television, which is perfect for television watching but far less perfect for important-things-hearing. I say—

“What?”

“I think I love you.”

This time I don’t really hear it again—not in the literal sense but in the like “I can’t really register this because my brain needs to work through this and maybe that’s not actually what she said so maybe I should ask her to say it again?”

“What?”

“I think I love you.”

And now things have followed the rule of three, which is more of a thought in retrospect and not a thought in the moment because in the moment I can’t really think about anything and all I can do is smell the vaguely floral yet somehow earthy scent of her hair and realize that I never really smell anything but I always smell her. I don’t know what love is but also I’ve kind of always known it, at least since I met her, which is more of a thought in retrospect and not a thought in the moment because right now my brain doesn’t work like that. I

could never reach that same empty clarity that plagued my passionless, Mitchell Benecki—esque relationships, and I would never want to—which is less of a thought in the moment and more of just something I know.

I can't really think but I can smell her hair and I can feel her body against mine and I can't really see because it's dark and my vision is sub-par but I can see enough to know.

I respond—

“I think I love you too.”

Amy Carlberg

I Always Live with Chicks Who Drive

Their keys are spread
on the table, like genitals

waiting to be fucked
on a hard surface. Their keys

are lobed, loaded. They flower
out from their metal ring.

They sulk, splayed. Wait
to be used, or simply

toyed with. One imagines
they gasp, threaded

through one girl or another's
finger. Their keys lie

pointed like stingers. One senses
their weight. Their latent getaways.

The sounds they yank
from bigger, more powerful machines.

Susan J. Erickson

Georgia O'Keeffe Hitches a Ride to Abiquiu

After a 1944 photo by Maria Chabot

As if I were Charles Lindbergh setting off for Paris, Maurice gives me his leather helmet. I tuck in my hair, push goggles, his too, to the top of my head and roll up my jeans. I throw one leg over the Harley-Davidson Knucklehead. Maurice says it is important to call the motorcycle by its full and correct name because a machine, this one at least, has a soul and can exact revenge if slighted. My hands bracket Maurice's slim hips. He tromps on the start pedal. We're off.

fast as dust devils
against the landscape of his back
my smile a mesa

Christina Clark

Aunt L

Slumps at the kitchen table,
her palms pressed flat
like a collapsed prayer, her eyes
baptized in the TV's glare.
Before her, a half-empty
bottle of pinot noir, a bowl
full of butts and ashes. She flicks
her cigarette, watches commercial moms
praise miracle stain removers. She rubs
her yellow teeth, her tender gums,
recalls her girlhood
in pieces—the sweaty August grass
a stranger left her in, dirt caked
into the lines of her hands, her cries
wrung dry, her skirt's
ripped hem. Weeks later, those first
flutter-kicks of morning sickness,
Sunday's confession, her father's
fist through the kitchen cabinet.

In the convent, she grew

accustomed to the rituals of hand-washing
dishes, scrubbing the stain and stink
out of orphan's bedding, her face
waxed in each tile's gleam. How round
and heavy the mound of her belly,
how bright the blood on the sheets, her daughter's
screams that April morning. How quickly
those first vowels faded
down the hallway, forever

silenced. Aunt L
pours herself another glass, lets wine
splash the rim. A red droplet
expands over white linen
like the puckered mouth
of an infant.

Thomas Kearnes

Whatever You Can Spare

I never stand outside the store for long. At least, it never seems long after the first kind stranger presses a five or a wad of singles into my hand. The sky is fat with rainclouds. So far, though, no rain. I pray for enough time. It is the least the Lord owes me.

Tyson flicks his gaze, and I catch his eyes in the rearview mirror—the same pale, unsettling green I see every day while brushing my teeth. Tyson’s eyes, just like his father’s. Whenever my grandson takes me to the store, I try to imagine Leon looking back at me, needing his mother, but I could never kid myself. It’s Tyson, my only grandbaby, and he needs things.

“Did you remember the sign?” Tyson asks Adele. She rides beside him.

“Jesus, you expect me to take care of everything?”

“That was your sole responsibility.”

Adele leans over the seat, the bump in her belly hard and proud below her small breasts, and rummages through the clothes and fast-food wrappers heaped beside me. “Mema, where’d you put the damn sign?”

“Honey, it’s in the trunk,” I say, my voice trembling. It wouldn’t do any good if they flew off the handle and turned around. It hasn’t been nearly long enough. “That’s what you asked me to do, wasn’t it?”

“No, I told you to—”

“Baby,” Tyson cut in. “What does it matter?”

Adele sinks back into her seat. “She got the old, pathetic part down, don’t she?” She lights a cigarette and blows out a quivering cloud.

Actually, neither of them asked me to put the sign back there. On purpose, I left it in the hall. My stunt won me a string of profanities from Adele and silent disappointment from my grandson, his neck tense and stringy. I needed an excuse to check the iron one last time. I always forget whether I’ve left it on. I also checked to make sure neither had moved my bulging tortoise-skin suitcase from inside the car’s trunk. I can’t afford any mistakes. That house is my universe—Tyson, Adele and me.

“Don’t talk that way to Mema,” Tyson says. “You show her respect.”

“I’ll show her respect when we get the damn money.”

Tyson shoots Adele a warning glare. The store, it was her idea when she came to live with us. She thought I was asleep. Baby, she whispered, we just need enough for gas. I promise she won’t mind. You know she loves you. She’ll make money real quick. Listening, I felt the true measurement of old age: helplessness.

It’s our exit. My withered hand clenches the armrest as we enter the feeder road. The large, impervious Wal-Mart squats behind a sprawling parking lot. People hurry and stop, conceding to those faster. Sunlight glints off the cars pattering through the lot. I glance into the sky, and notice the clouds darkening. I pray to the Almighty that the rain wait just a little while. I need more time. We crawl through the lot.

The vendor hawking homemade crosses is gone today, Adele announces. Better yet, no police cruisers lurking at the far corners of the lot. “You’ll get thirty bucks in no time, Mema,” she says, her voice airy like cotton candy.

Tyson drives solemnly toward the handicap spaces. Dark curly hair from his mullet tumbles down his neck. He worries

that he and Adele might attract attention, parked in a space meant for cripples but never leaving the car.

“We’ll keep an eye on you, Mema,” he told me the first time I asked the world for its pocket change and compassion. Tears falling down my face and Adele refusing me a tissue because I’d make more money unkempt, Tyson assured me that Adele would never make money as fast. “If she could, I’d force her ass out in a second,” he said. I pretended to believe him.

I rush from the backseat when Tyson parks. Of course, he has the keys, but I brought a spare that I keep underneath the Kleenex box in my room. I unlock the trunk as silently as I can. When Adele hops out, hand over her belly as if a cantaloupe swelled beneath her blouse, I say feebly that she shouldn’t trouble herself, a girl in her condition. I’d get the sign myself.

“You wouldn’t have to if you’d listened to me the first time,” she says.

“Honey, this is so hard on me. I just want—”

She rolls her eyes and slaps the hood. “You didn’t live eighty years by being a big baby.”

“Adele,” Tyson calls. “What have I told you about respect.”

“I have to pee,” she answers.

“Be quick about it.” Tyson lights an unfiltered cigarette. Leon couldn’t get enough of those, said it was like fireworks

tumbling down his throat. Sometimes late at night, while Tyson and Adele sleep, I sneak one myself. “I don’t want Mema out too long in this damp cold.”

“Hello? Pregnant woman here!”

He shakes his head, turning his back on her. He smiles, and I see my late husband’s smile and Leon’s smile and the smiles of all the boys yet to be born. I smile back and promise I’ll do my best. He embraces me and apologizes for this happening. He truly believes he has no choice. “We’re not budgeted for a second tank of gas,” he says. “Adele thinks the car runs on magic beans.”

His compassionate reverie stops cold. “Mema, what are you doing? Don’t let anyone see that here!” His voice is harsh and scratchy, urging me to hide it. “Adele’s coming back.”

I peek at the large-lettered word—it’s the closest thing to gospel in our house. It reads HOMELESS. My face falls. Tyson awkwardly glances about the lot, eyes so bleary that he surely can’t see much. Carefully, he takes the sign from me.

“Don’t do the whole dog-and-pony show, Mema. Not today.”

“Your father would be so proud of you,” I say.

Tyson tosses the HOMELESS sign in the backseat. I think about my suitcase snug in the trunk, my whole life condensed

down to a single bag. I didn't like all this tomfoolery, but every family has secrets, secrets in every house, festering in every room. I have another secret: last night I tucked almost two hundred dollars inside my brassier before packing it. I learned early that Tyson and Adele didn't pay close attention to how much I made each time I begged.

A minivan passes the entrance, revealing Adele in its wake. She sips a large Coke and tosses back her two-toned kinky hair as if the whole world's watching. She's too many weeks along to wear shorts that tight, and those flip-flops don't give her any arch support. In the beginning, I encouraged her to act more appropriately, like a young lady, but it became clear that the house on 1249 Windfall Avenue, my house, belongs to me in name only. I'm always close but forever ignored. Adele treats it like her home and treats me like a sideshow attraction that knows how to iron and wash clothes. She insists on plug-in air fresheners in every outlet. The home I shared fifty-seven years with my late husband smells like the mall.

"They serving soda pop in the ladies' room?" Tyson sneers. Adele shoots her bad finger high and proud. I look forward to my job—I suppose you could call begging a job—starting if it means escaping Tyson and Adele's latest spat.

Over the months, I learned things. First, stand in front of the entrance, not the exit. Most shoppers leave the store as broke as any beggar. Never count on church groups, they're full of misers. They might offer you a meal or a night at a shelter but never cash. Also, don't beg at night. Most importantly, be sweet and fragile like snow; no one gives to jackasses. Finally, I learned no encounter will thrill and shame you as fiercely as the first.



I was terrified but not about getting caught. Even before Tyson assured me it wouldn't happen, I knew no one complains about little old ladies asking for change. They'd pity me, they'd protect me—here, ma'am, take everything I have. We hadn't made a sign yet, that came later. I'd simply walk up with my hand out. It sounds so simple, no wonder it's a crime.

Foolishly, we first went begging at night. It was sticky and still, a typical July evening. I wore a paisley blouse and slacks. Again, we didn't know any better.

After I left Tyson and Adele in the car, I wandered along the storefront, avoiding the smokers inside a verandah at the Gardening department, afraid they knew. I can't recall my own encounters with beggars in the city. To me, those dirty and desperate people seem vaguely menacing, reminders that God

may forsake anyone at any time. I understand why most, including myself, avoid them. Having no idea how to approach, I inched toward somebody but backed away the moment he noticed.

I heard Tyson's voice in my head: *You gotta do this, Mema, or Adele's cell phone gets shut off.* Finally, I saw a stout middle-aged woman with large breasts and a pained expression. Her oversized T-shirt read, *This Lady Don't Need Luck.* I thought a miserable person would be more giving than a happy one. During these months, I've been proven right more often than not. The woman, though, lurched forward as if I was a copperhead hidden in tall grass. Unable to comprehend her disgust (*I had a home, a car, a family—I was just like her!*), I dumbly kept after her into the parking lot.

I didn't see the SUV until the driver blared his horn. I staggered, crudely dancing, not recognizing the sound or whether it was meant for me. The vehicle whipped around, followed by others, their drivers impatient, honking like I was a stray dog. I called out for Tyson, I even called out for Adele—no one came. I stopped drifting when an olive green Honda pulled up beside me.

“You poor woman, do you know where you are?”

He was a nice-looking man, a *clean* man, a type of man that Tyson will never become. His pinstriped suit was the color of blueberries, and his tie was a rich, deep red. He didn't seem to be wearing his clothes so much as they wore him.

"Are you here with someone?" he asked.

"Please, sir," I said. "Whatever you can spare."

He frowned a bit and his eyes grew soft. "Do you have a home?"

My mouth open, I twisted my neck and pretended to look at the asphalt. I hadn't thought that far ahead. Tyson never said there'd be questions.

"Here, ma'am," he said, some bills folded crisply between two fingers. In the movies, it's the way men offer strippers money. "There's a cheap motel less than a mile down the road. Just be sure to lock the door."

I can't recall what went through my mind after the man spoke. Desperation is a tongue easy to learn. As I fanned the bills in my hand, two twenties and a five, my breath caught and I felt Grace had dropped upon me from the sky followed by the welcome numbness I always associate with eating too much chocolate. I kept staring at the money.

"Ma'am? Do you need a ride?"

I was startled but didn't look up. Whatever it was we did, I thought it was over. I don't think I remembered to thank him. With just one donation, I was more than halfway toward covering Adele's debt. I still wonder if that clean man in the blueberry suit remembers me.



I'm doing well enough. Hopefully, Adele hasn't figured out I'm not being vigilant like those other times when I knew the faster I reached the total, the sooner I'd be home. A little girl with long, loose pigtails and a red floppy hat offers me a cherry sucker. Embarrassed, her mother jams a few dollars into my hand. Two Army enlistees ask what I'll do for fifty bucks then zip inside before I blush. Another child, a boy, stops his parents, their cart full of fertilizer, and asks them why I look sad. I manage to get through.

The older man tearing off his tan overcoat, however, has something more extravagant in mind for me. "My beautiful siren," he says, whipping the overcoat around my shoulders like a cape. "I will not let you stand in this horrible weather and beg like a dog." His name is Ferdinand and his skin is a deep bronze, darker in his face's folds. Starchy gray hairs sprout from his temples like weeds. He speaks like I'm a dishwasher being

showcased on a game show. He's what my late sister would call a fancy man, a confirmed bachelor.

"Sir, you're too kind. I can't take this."

He pulls the lapels together, wrapping me tight. Over his shoulder, I spy Tyson and Adele kissing deep while parked in the handicap slot. I remember when watching young people kiss made me smile.

Ferdinand slaps his meaty hands against my cheeks. "Madame, I will cook you a meal. I have several bedrooms to your liking. When I come to this country, they tell me this time of year is for family. Madame, I will be your family."

I'm trying to step back from his embrace, but he is strong and determined. Other customers might be watching. Should I call for help? I can't afford to make a scene. If I don't return with Tyson and Adele to the house, it'll ruin everything. Finally, I yank myself free and he halts, stunned at my ingratitude. I've made things worse.

"Sir, thank you so much for the coat. You're very kind, but I can't go with you."

Instead of arguing like I expected, his eyebrows jump and he abruptly flits into the lot. I turn to see what spooked him and nearly collide with a potbellied man wearing a Wal-Mart smock and nametag. He's barely thirty, but his hair and mustache are

trimmed with such precision, I wonder how proudly he told his wife (his kind always has a wife) about making management.

“Ma’am, unless you need medical assistance, I need you to come with me.” His hand is raised, cupped. Will he grab my arm if I resist? I follow, risking one last glance at the car before we enter the store. They’re still kissing. Every time, Tyson promises to watch over me. Every time, when I look at their car, I hope I’ll find those green eyes that have watched me grow old, watched from one man’s face, then another and finally another.

He hustles me through the front, along the line of storefronts most Wal-Marts host: nail salon, hairdresser, optometrist and more. When we pass the bank, I notice a homemade poster with shaky lettering stuck above a large cardboard box. The sign reads, *Help Our Employees Who Can’t Afford Thanksgiving*. That makes no sense to me. If you have a job, you can afford food. That’s why people work, after all. If Tyson could break his bad luck, we’d be eating better than Hamburger Helper every night.

“Sir,” I ask. “Why not just pay your people enough so they can eat?”

He whips open a narrow door. “Please, ma’am, I have other responsibilities waiting.”

A tight staircase lifts from the floor.

His office could be anyone's office. Even the personal touches tell me nothing. Ferdinand's coat carries his whole history, it seems, embedded in the wool. The photo of the homely woman and sole-eyed son on his desk could be anyone's wife and child. I pull the coat around me. There's no heat. I don't see windows, either. No wonder I always feel sad after shopping here.

He insists I call him Jimmy. He never tells me his last name or official title. No one's calling the police, he assures me, switching to that damn patronizing tone everyone uses when you reach your expiration date. They're concerned about me. Employees remember me, they have me on videotape. A few of the customers threatened to call some agency. I'm panicking like a trapeze acrobat reaching out to find no waiting bar. I wonder once again whether I left the iron on.

"You didn't drive here, did you, Missus...?"

"Call me Mema. I love the sound of that name."

Jimmy chuckles and I feel sick. "Do you have any identification?"

"No... I don't drive anymore so who knows where it is? Maybe I left it—"

"At home? You live close to here?"

I blink, my eyelids sticking. I'm not used to rooms without windows. It tickles me that, despite my slip, this manager is so concerned about my welfare but his workers are starving and surrounded by food. I clear my throat. Do they know about Tyson? Are he and Adele on tape acting like horny ferrets while dignity slips from my bones?

"Sir," I say, bracing myself to stand. Jimmy rushes to assist me but I won't have it. "I'm afraid there's been a mistake. You know, my own family has passed on."

"Even your children?"

"All part of God's plan, I suppose."

"What about those other times we've seen you?"

"Young man, I can't answer why this person or that person saw one thing or another." As I inch toward the door, Jimmy makes no move to stop me. "I hope you don't make a habit of hassling little old ladies..."

Jimmy's eyes snap wide and he gulps. "Not at all, ma'am. Should I help you out?"

"You should give your workers some sandwiches. Thank you for your concern."

"Ma'am!" he cries, rushing toward me, his fist jammed in his pocket, rummaging. He offers me a hundred dollar bill, wadded up in his open hand. I must truly seem out to pasture for such

generosity. If you pretend you're helpless long enough, you forget that it's an act, and even when you try to explain yourself, prove your worth, it doesn't matter. People would rather throw a couple of bucks at you and be done with it. If no one needs help, the whole world falls out of balance. Victims are essential. Without them, there'd be no heroes.

I take the cash and smile, call him Jimmy. I wish him a happy Thanksgiving. He reaches above my head and pops open the door. It sticks to the frame; there's a soft crack. "Ma'am," he says. I don't bother to look back. "Please don't return to this Wal-Mart. Next time, we will call the authorities." I hesitate on the steps. All he sees are my slumped shoulders, ruined shoes and the wispy home perm Adele insisted she'd been doing since junior high.

In a brisk wind, I hustle across the lot to the car. Tyson shoves off Adele and wipes his hand across his mouth.

"Where the hell have you been, Gladys?" she snaps, maneuvering a breast back into her brassiere. It's so rare I hear my Christian name, I've begun to think of Gladys as a wholly different woman, one who would never do what I've done.

"Sweetheart, I've told you. Call me Mema."

"We have to get home, Mema," Tyson said. "I bowl tonight. Gotta get my shoes."

I gingerly open the back door and slide in. The HOMELESS sign glares up at me. We back out and leave the lot. I should thank Tyson for letting me leave the sign, Adele snarls. He takes care of your scrawny ass, she says. She whips around and bends over the seat, staring blankly at me like I have something she needs and I'm stupid for not knowing it.

"Babe," Tyson says. "We'll handle it at home."

I ask how long we've been gone. Tyson says maybe an hour, but Adele thinks it's been longer. I gaze into the sky. It never did manage to rain. God is gracious, God is good. Cruising down the interstate, Tyson and Adele squabble about which flavor of Hamburger Helper we'll eat. I'm expected to cook, of course, and I'm not invited to bowl. Adele mutters that if I have any ideas, I should spit them out. I sigh, rest my head against the window and tell her to surprise me.

Adele notices the smoke after our first left into the neighborhood. We're still four blocks away from Windfall Lane. Alarmed, Tyson wonders whether it's a house fire. Adele isn't worried, there's not enough smoke. The rising clouds thicken, however, the closer we come to home.

"Holy shit, baby, I think it's our street!" Adele screams for him to hurry.

“Mema, stay back there! Don’t get out of the car!” We’re still moving.

“Don’t worry about me. I’m fine.”

My elation bubbles like champagne as we speed down Windfall, and my dear grandson and his tramp fiancée confront total disaster. The house at 1249 Windfall, the house in which I’ve spent over sixty years of my life, is burning.

I *knew* I’d left the iron on. I left it on and face-down atop a pile of newspapers.



It seems so long ago, but Tyson was already in high school when Leon burned his wife to death inside their home. He waited till Tyson was away. I wonder if my grandson has ever accorded that fact its true weight. He called me from the back of that honky-tonk where he met the woman he later killed. He’d caught her after she lost her balance dancing on a pool table. He said he needed me to take his boy. Tyson needs you now, Mama, he said. Of course, I promised I’d do whatever I could for as long as I could. It was easier to say yes back then because my husband hadn’t departed. Just don’t get overwhelmed, he said. You promise me, Mama? You promise you’ll look after yourself?

I heard sirens in the background. I told him to stop with the nonsense. Leon knows my family is my universe.



Tyson jumps the curve and bolts from the car. One crew is already fighting the fire, water spraying while the men shout instructions to each another. Tyson tries to pull one aside but they shrug him off as casually as they might their own kids. My grandson pushes his palms against his temples, teeth gritted. It's like he's watching the moments before a terrible wreck, the doomed vehicles charging toward one another. He's forgotten about Adele and me.

"Why is our house burning, Mema?" Adele whimpers. "This isn't supposed to happen."

She's left the car but remains on the curb, absently rubbing her belly and gazing dumbstruck at all she believed was hers turning black and crisp. I'm surprised she isn't crying. I'm standing only a few feet beside her and while she keeps addressing me, she won't look at me; the fire's allure is too powerful. She babbles and jerks her head from side to side. She keeps saying my name, but I can't follow what she means.

I know something that might help.

I slip off my tan overcoat from the fancy man and wrap it around Adele's delicate shoulders. She pulls it around herself without noticing it. I tell her she might catch cold standing out here wearing next to nothing. She nods and then I reach into the backseat and grab the HOMELESS sign. I hand it to her. I don't want to, I truly don't, but she might need it now and I certainly have no use for it. She takes the sign like someone passed her popcorn at a movie.

"Check the pocket," I tell her. "There's something for you and Tyson."

Adele does nothing, her lips moving but no sound coming out. Finally, I dip into the coat pocket myself and pull out the hundred. I tell her there's a cheap motel by the interstate, but she'd best lock the door. It's not a great neighborhood.

While Tyson sinks to his knees and sobs, I open the trunk and haul out my suitcase. The force of its weight nearly sends me toppling to the ground. Carrying your whole life in one bag isn't easy—every life is heavy but you can't leave it behind. I hobble a bit as I begin down the sidewalk, away from Adele and Tyson, away from what used to be my home. It's chilly, the wind penetrating to my bones. I think about that luxurious tan overcoat but shake loose the notion. Adele needs it more than me.

When my husband first drove me out to that house, decades and decades ago, he wouldn't tell me which house was ours. I had to guess. He laughed and laughed when I guessed wrong. Can't you find your own way home, he'd say and laugh. I never guessed 1249 Windfall Avenue. I guessed the one to the left and the one to the right, but not that one. I loved watching those green eyes twinkle as he teased.

I don't know if he'd understand why I did what I did. He's not here to ask.

I'm getting tired. This block is longer than it seems from inside the car. I need to rest but I refuse to sit on that filthy curb. Maybe that nice lady pruning her roses will give me a glass of water. Her house looks so pretty. You can tell a good deal about a woman by how well she keeps her home.



Lady in Blue | Clinton Van Inman

Bios

A Southern California native, **Ren Adams'** cross-disciplinary work emphasizes connections between old and new media, using printmaking, painting, video art and digital objects as points of conceptual crossover. She investigates landscape as a site of active exchange, blurring time, space and televisual language. Adams has a BFA in Studio Art from the University of New Mexico and an MFA in Visual Arts candidate at Lesley University College of Art and Design. She has participated in a number of national exhibitions, exchanges and collaborative projects and has published work in a variety of forms. Adams frequently gives lectures, artist talks and workshops.

Joshua Allen Aiken is a poet and playwright from St. Louis, Missouri. He is an alumnus of WU-SLAM, Washington University in St. Louis' slam poetry team, with whom he took 2nd place at college nationals and coached several top national teams. His work has also appeared or is forthcoming in publications such as *Spire*, *HEArt Online*, and *The Undergrad Review*. He is currently studying for his Masters in History and acclimating to torrential rain at the University of Oxford.

Lis Anna-Langston is the recipient of many awards including; a 2013/2011 Pushcart nominee, 2014 Amazon Breakthrough Novel Semi-finalist, a five time WorldFest winner, FadeIn, Telluride IndieFest winner, Helene Wurlitzer Grant recipient, Chesterfield Film Project Finalist, New Century Writers winner and a finalist in the prestigious William Faulkner Competition. Her short films, screenplays, and novels have all been nominated and subsequently won awards including Best Novel and Best Short Film. She was awarded a quarter-finalist in the International Screenplay Awards, semi-finalist in the Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting, a quarter finalist in the Writers Network screenplay competition and First Place in The American Accolades Screenwriting Competition. She is the Second Place Winner of the Thomas Wolfe Fiction Award, the Fourth Place New Century Writers Short Fiction Winner and Second Place Winner Best Dramatic Short Tupelo Film Festival, First Place winner of the 11th Annual Poet Hunt Award, a three time Accolade Film Competition winner including a Best in Show and Award of Excellence

winner, a Screenplay Festival winner and a Bronze & Silver Remi winner at Worldfest. Her fiction has been published in *Word Riot*, *The Blotter*, *Petigru Review*, *Hot Metal Press*, *The Smoking Poet*, *Eclectic Flash Literary Journal*, *Paper Skin Glass Bones*, *491 Magazine*, *Fiction Fix*, *The Monarch Review*, *5x5 Literary Magazine*, *Red Booth Review*, *Hint Fiction Anthology*, *Chamber Four Literary Magazine*, *Emyrs Journal*, *Literary Laundry*, *Barely South Review*, *Flash Fiction Offensive*, *Flashquake Literary Journal*, *Steel Toe Review*, *Empty Sink Publishing*, *Per Contra*, *Storyacious*, *Gravel Literary*, and *The MacGuffin Literary Review*. You can learn more about her at: www.lisannalangston.com & www.girlwithcameraphotography.com.

Amy Carlberg is an MFA candidate in poetry at Sarah Lawrence College from Toronto. She has previously appeared in *Baldhip Magazine*, *The Squawk Back*, *Sound Lit Mag*, and will soon appear in *The Boiler Journal*. She is easily distracted but lovable. She is tall but has a short fuse. She's new at this.

Christina Clark is a teaching assistant and MFA candidate in poetry at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington. Among other publications, her poems have previously appeared or are forthcoming in *Main Street Rag*, *Green Briar Review*, *The Poet's Billow*, and *Off the Coast*.

Jessica Cogar is an almost-done undergrad at Ohio Northern University, where she currently serves as poetry editor of *Polaris Literary Magazine*. She likes breakfast food, list-making, and vining houseplants. Her poetry is featured in *Skin to Skin*, *The Boiler*, and *Polaris*.

Shinjini Dey grew up in the mountains, drinking black tea from coffee mugs and contemplating the nomadic nature of human life. You could often find her outside classrooms reading fantasy, science fiction and poetry, sowing the seeds of a future existential crisis. Her work has appeared in *Under The Radar Magazine*, *The Calcutta Chronicles* and a few other independent zines. She is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in English Literature from Jadavpur University. Armed with her non-stick fry pan and tomes of literature she lives all by herself in a two-bedroom apartment in Kolkata, India.

Gail C. DiMaggio spent decades helping her husband, a jazz trombonist, pursue his music in a world where no artist ever gives up a day gig. Refusing to become discouraged, she writes about the life of an ordinary woman because for this she has all necessary credentials. And besides, as a

friend recently told her, “What else have you got to do?” Tired of living on a beautiful alien planet, she has recently returned from FL to her home world of New England. She has most recently been recently published in *Crack the Spine* and *Antiphon*.

In the process of completing a manuscript of poems in women’s voices **Susan J. Erickson** has assumed the persona of Lucy Audubon, Frida Kahlo, Georgia O’Keeffe and others. Her poems appear in *2River View*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Museum of Americana*, *The Fourth River*, *Hamilton Stone Review*, *Naugatuck River Review*, *Literal Latte* and in anthologies including *Malala: Poems for Malala Yousafzai*. Susan lives in Bellingham, Washington, where she helped establish the Sue C. Boynton Poetry Walk and Contest.

Karen Fischer is a student studying Creative Nonfiction at Columbia College Chicago. Her work is forthcoming in *The South Loop Review* and *The Midway Journal*. In her free time she practices yoga, reads an endless book list, and works hard at trying to be a better human being.

Kathleen Glassburn earned an MFA from Antioch University, Los Angeles. She lives in Seattle with her husband, three dogs, a cat, and a 45-year-old turtle. For fun she plays the piano and rides her horse. She has been published in many journals, including *Amarillo Bay*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Cadillac Cicatrix*, *Cairn*, *Crucible*, *Epiphany Magazine*, *Lullwater Review*, *Marco Polo Quarterly*, *Rio Grande Review*, *RiverSedge*, *SLAB*, *The Talon Mag*, *Wild Violet*, *The Writer’s Workshop Review*. Her story, “Picnics,” was a finalist in Glimmer Train’s Best Start contest. She is managing editor of *The Writer’s Workshop Review* (www.thewritersworkshopreview.net). For further information and links to some of her published stories, please see her website: www.kathleenglassburn.com

Adriana Gonzalez is currently studying Creative Nonfiction at Columbia College Chicago, where she teaches first-year writing and is an assistant editor for *Hotel Amerika*. Her work has appeared in *Hippocampus*, *Bohemian Pupil Press*, *Label Me Latin*, and is forthcoming in *Weave Magazine*. Adriana hails from Corona, California, and lives in Chicago.

Kelsey Gray was born and raised in New Jersey. She currently resides in Texas.

Jaclyn Harte is a doctoral candidate in American Literature at Drew University, where she also teaches writing. She is at work on a dissertation that explores themes of safety in the longer fiction of Willa Cather. Jaclyn's work has appeared in *The Journal of Vaishnava Studies* and *under the gum tree*. She is studying Tibetan Buddhism, minds a horde of stray cats, and is thankful for nights you can see the stars clearly.

Matthew Kabik's work has appeared in *Pithead Chapel*, *Little Fiction*, *Wyvern Lit*, and *WhiskeyPaper*, among others. He earned his MFA from Arcadia University and lives in Lancaster, PA. Follow him on Twitter @mlkabik or visit his website for a complete list of publications: www.matchstickcircus.com

Thomas Kearnes holds an MA in Screenwriting from the University of Texas at Austin. He recently won the 2014 Cardinal Sins Fiction Contest. His fiction has appeared in *Necessary Fiction*, *Litro*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Night Train*, *The Ampersand Review*, *PANK*, *Word Riot*, *Eclectica*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Johnny America*, *Five Quarterly*, *wigleaf*, *Storyglossia*, *Sundog Lit*, *A cappella Zoo*, *Spork*, *The Pedestal*, *Digital Americana Magazine* and elsewhere. His work has also appeared in several LGBT venues. He is studying to become a drug dependency counselor. He lives near Houston.

Brittany Kerfoot is currently an MFA candidate in fiction at George Mason University, where she also teaches English Composition, Literature, and Creative Writing. She resides in Washington, DC, with her fiancé, four cats, and one dog.

Amanda Kimmerly writes poems, edits novels, and coaches writers to become creatively conscious. Her poetry and fiction appear in *Storychord*, *Pear Noir!*, *Full of Crom*, *Arsenic Lobster*, with works forthcoming in *MadHat Lit* and *R.k.v.r.y.* She works from home in Austin, Texas, blogging for YouEarnedIt and her own site for writers, PolishedPearCreative.com.

Jean A. Kingsley earned an MFA in Creative Writing from Pacific Lutheran University. She is the recipient of the 1995 Academy of American Poets Prize, a finalist for "Discovery"/*The Nation* and The Constance Saltonstall Foundation of the Arts Fellowship. Her poems have appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *River Oak Review*, *American Literary Review*, *Excursus Literary Arts Journal*, *Eclipse*, and *Poetry Lore*, among others. She recently won a poetry book award for *Traceries* from ABZ Press, selected by C. D. Wright

and is a recent reviewer for the *Antioch Review*. She has recently been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Laura McGehee is a writer and filmmaker in her senior year at Northwestern University, currently on the verge of having to pay back those student loans that seemed like a good idea at the time. Laura writes and makes movies about things that may or may not have happened to her, in a maddening pursuit to understand people. So far, she only understands cats, but even they occasionally mystify her.

Carly Joy Miller is a SoCal native through and through. She is the assistant managing editor for the *Los Angeles Review*, a contributing editor for *Poetry International*, and a founding editor of Locked Horn Press. She is also the co-curator of the reading series, The Breweryard. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Third Coast*, *Vinyl*, *Linebreak*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, and elsewhere.

Skaidrite Stelzer was born in Berchtesgaden, Germany and grew up as a displaced person in Kalamazoo, Michigan. She enjoys all the animals of the world, including humans, and loves to teach writing in new and experimental ways at The University of Toledo. She encounters a fresh world every day.

Tammy Lynne Stoner has been published in *The Portland Review*, *Folio*, and *Literary Orphans*, and others. In the past, she was a roadie for Willie Nelson, a biscuit maker, a medical experimentee, and the Fiction Editor of *Gertrude Press*. A one-time loser for a Million Writers Award, she did, however, win a fellowship to Kenya from the Summer Lit Seminars and attended Tin House twice. Tammy now lives in Portland, OR, where she eats entirely too much panna cota. See: TammyLynneStoner.com

Carleigh Takemoto lives and works in Fresno, California.

Sanh Brian Tran was the first person in his immigrant Vietnamese family to join the ranks of the white-collar worker but promptly broke his first-generation parents' hearts by quitting his attorney profession to become a self-taught photographer. Influenced by his background, he explores themes of identity and class through fashion and taste culture. Tran moved from San Francisco, California, to a small town in central Pennsylvania,

upon which he turned the camera on himself to explore and examine what it means to be non-White and gay in rural America.

Hannah Trees is a philosophy graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin. Before moving to Texas, she held various teaching positions in both New York State and France. She is a graduate of Carleton College, where she majored in social and religious philosophy, minored in French, and wrote a lot of bad poetry. Her creative work can be found on her blog, *Becoming Lyrical*, as well as in issues of *Belleville Park Pages*, *Bare Hands Poetry*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Cloud City Press*. She tweets @hctrees.

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