

2023 | INTERIORS & INTIMACIES



THE  
VASSAR  
REVIEW

VASSAR | REVIEW

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*Vassar Review* is a not-for-profit enterprise.

### About

The *Vassar Review* is an international, multidisciplinary literary arts journal that fosters working relationships between faculty, students, and artists in order to engage its annual theme with care and reflective insight. The journal is a revival of the former literary arts magazine published by the faculty and students of Vassar College. The VR entered the literary scene in 1927 shaped by a small circle of students, including Elizabeth Bishop and Muriel Rukeyser. Today, the journal is international in scope and multidisciplinary in nature, across both a print and digital interface. Each academic year culminates with a printed publication and a digital supplement.

### Mission

The *Vassar Review* aims to reconsider the traditions that have defined many publications and structures, those that are not open to all, open to interpretation, or open to change, and unfold them into a collaborative journal that believes the artist's voice and methods of expression are essential to our daily lives. Artistically & intimately, we aim to cultivate an international community that holds at its core purposeful expression, visions of things to come, and a revision of what has already been experienced.

### Submissions

Submissions are accepted each fall. Simultaneous submissions are accepted. We consider all artistic and literary forms, including painting, photography, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, scripts, and screenplays, but also forms that often prove difficult to present, such as new media art, spoken-word poetry and performances, hypertext fiction, and others. Please visit [vassar-review.vassarspaces.net](http://vassar-review.vassarspaces.net) for full submission guidelines.

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*"I believe I know the only cure, which is to make one's center of life inside of one's self, not selfishly or excludingly, but with a kind of unassailable serenity—to decorate one's inner house so richly that one is content there, glad to welcome anyone who wants to come and stay, but happy all the same when one is inevitably alone."*

Edith Wharton  
Letter to Mary Berenson

*"Constructing different worlds for different identities makes me more aware of the nature of engagement and of intimacy, and where they occur."*

David Adjaye  
Living Spaces

Dear Reader,

In the process of compiling the eighth edition of the *Vassar Review*, we have found the willingness of others to share, to give, to entrust. With our Creative Director, Alex Pham, we began this project intrigued by the intimacy that can be found between the structure of a creation and its architect. How is the construction of creative work an intimate act? How do our intimacies inhabit our interiors?

We were drawn to the many possibilities of interiors and intimacies. We sought meditations on and explorations of the interior, of spaces constructed within the world and within ourselves that house and foster closeness. The interior is intrinsically the realm of both the private and the cherished. Our interiors are our intimacies. We wondered then, what can be realized by letting visitors into these private spaces and works?

As is the nature of this delicate edition, we had many people rescind their accepted submissions as we approached the date of publication. The works ultimately proved themselves too revealing. The private continues to resist exposure; however, our contributors welcomed this possibility.

While engaging with the work, we saw interiors and intimacies as direct confrontations with the vulnerability and precarity that comes with existence. We explore how this intimacy can be many things: violent, false, nurturing, delightful. In reading this journal, we hope you experience an array of creative acts that engage directly with the most intimate moments of personhood. We hope you emerge with joy, humor, hope, and the realization of shared openness.

Let us reclaim the interior, and the creative and personal intimacies that flourish within it.

We would like to thank our staff, contributors, advisory board, and especially our readers for their continued support of the journal.

Appreciatively,

Anna and Violet  
Editors-in-Chief





Charlotte Eta Mumm, *möbliertes Portrait*, h, 2013

# FLORA'S TIME

*Flora Field*

Flora doesn't know how to be.  
Of particular issue is her mind  
will not join her body in slowness

or the hours will not disappear  
and will not stay or the writing  
is not light and is no longer

concerned with image. Flora is not interested in the fact  
that now everyone has stopped enough to consider time.  
Flora does not think about Flora for a few days

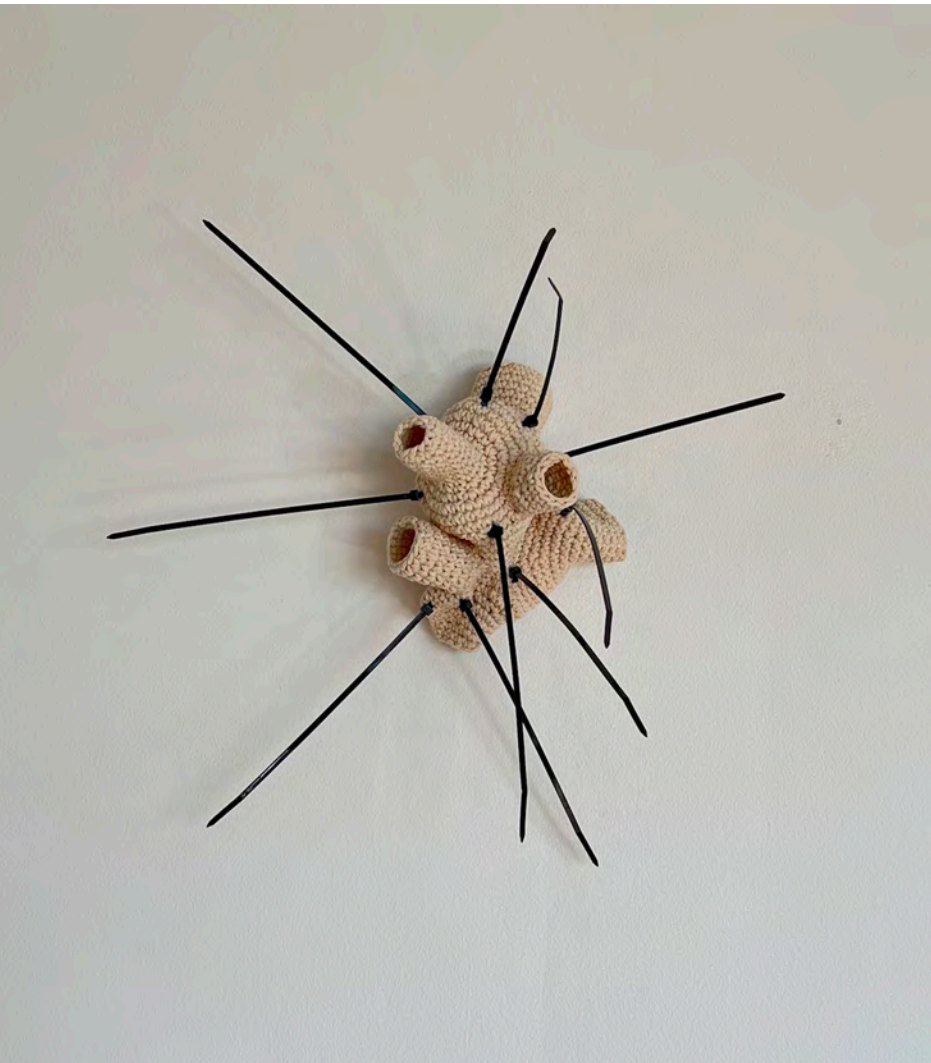
and it is so peaceful without her.  
Flora does not write anymore just writes  
*the little things she's been writing.*

If Flora is lying down on the grass  
presses her back down and says please  
tries very hard and says please

then the earth might bring her inside.  
Inside the earth the words will be objects  
and those objects will be Flora's.

She will change the sheets and find river sand from summer  
beneath the pink and white gingham duvet and when the bed  
is stripped feathers will float like Flora all around the room.





# OTHER PEOPLE ARE MUSSELS OR CLAMS\*

*Alexandra Banach*

Sometimes when Claudia is on the horse, the rocking is like sex. The horse is large and gray with white eyelashes. When Claudia places her palm on the broad space between his eyes, he closes them and ducks his head. This is the way that he is polite.

The barn is the first job Claudia has ever had after lawnmowing, and it is off the books. She is fifteen, palming the cash and rushing home to stash it in a vase in her closet. The responsibilities at the barn include scooping grain pellets from plastic bags inside a large wooden trunk and then delivering the allotted amount to each horse. The walls of the stalls are planks of worn wood. The pellets are measured out in old cool whip containers. The hungry horses kick the barriers till the planks shake. Silver shoes loud when they stamp impatiently, wire tails flickering like a violence.

Her boss is named Sue. Sue hires Claudia in July, when her sister gets sick. On Claudia's first day at the job, Sue picks out the stalls the entire time she speaks. She is a small woman with a pitchfork who can't keep still.

That first day, the smell of manure is unbearable. It is baked into the concrete floors of the aisles. Claudia fights, over and over, the urge to pull her shirt over her nose.

Claudia takes to the work, its quiet rhythms and ease. The way she can ride her bike to the barn and listen to the rats scraping in the overhead hayloft while she fills water buckets. She likes the way that horses drink; the gulps are visible bulges moving up the length of their necks. The softness of the hair at the part where the horses' skull meets its neck—sometimes silver, sometimes copper, sometimes black-blue.

Sue begins to let Claudia ride the horses who are still green, says her youthfulness makes her more resilient when she is thrown off. Her bones are not so brittle yet.

The gray horse is named Calvin, and he is not the sort of creature Claudia could have anticipated loving. But it comes over her slowly, when she is guiding him by the leather lead rope to the field, and his shoulder bumps into hers. When she releases him in the pasture, she slips the worn leather of his halter over his soft ears, and he yanks his head straight up to test the new limits of his freedom. Sometimes he runs a lap around the field before returning to stand next to her, his withers lining up with her head, arching his neck to look back at her. He nuzzles the pockets of her jeans with the softness of his upper lip. She laughs and pushes him away.

"Greedy, greedy, greedy," she mumbles and shakes her head. Her hair has no gray yet; it is still bright, brilliant brown.

Whenever she runs into Sue that summer, Sue starts to tell Claudia about her sick sister. Her sister has a tumor the size of an unborn baby on her stomach. When Claudia enters the barn, Sue rests her pitchfork against the plank walls in order to demonstrate the ways that the tumor has grown. She motions around her own stomach. Sue's sister refuses to go the doctor.

"Yesterday, I finally convinced her to take a single Tylenol. It was a good day," Sue tells Claudia while she works.

"Is she in pain?" Claudia asks.

"Oh, all the time," Sue responds over her shoulder while she shovels manure.

The manure hangs in the air and soaks into Claudia's skin. She begins to shower for an hour at a time each day. She showers until her mother screams at her for wasting all the hot water. She pictures the horse dirt rejoining the earth through the well in their backyard.

---

\* Title from "Age" by Kay Ryan

In September, school starts up again. Sue's sister now has trouble moving around at all. Sue's sister establishes a system with her next-door neighbor.

"Yeah, so when she falls and can't get back up..." Sue starts.

The system involves Sue's sister on the ground scrabbling around for whatever instrument is nearest—a fire poker or a shoe or a cast iron pan—and banging until the neighbor hears. Then the neighbor calls Sue, and Sue goes to pick her sister up.

The first day of school, Sue tells Claudia that the tumor started growing from just the front of her sister and then extended to the sides. She said she hoped her sister would start to take more than Tylenol soon.

The smell no longer bothers Claudia; she finds she can breathe easier at the barn than most other places. You can get used to just about anything.

Claudia begins to throw herself into school. For the first time, she is in Advanced English where the teacher, Mr. Legore, assigns books about girls at parties and boys at war. She likes all of them and reads them late at night when she is not invited to the football game or to the movies. She reads in her bed to the dull roar of cars whipping around the racetrack on the edge of town.

She begins to stay after class to talk about symbolic baptisms and the lack of female authors on the syllabus. Mr. Legore takes her ribbing in stride and sends her emails to expand upon her points.

When she writes him to ask for clarification about an assignment, he responds:

*No, use something else. I'd suggest sex, violence, weather, season, vampirism, communion, or maybe illness/heart disease for that story.*

She complies.

After school, she rides her bike to the barn. She works with Calvin until his stride is even, and she grips the hair at the base of his neck to keep herself upright. The worn leather of the saddle presses between her legs. The straps of the stirrups rub raw spots on the inside of her shins. After, she peels off her jeans, and spots of skin come with them. Her hymen tears one day, and brown blood stains the denim.

Sue says of her sister, "The tumor is starting to leak out everywhere."

Claudia doesn't know what this means but doesn't ask for clarification. She imagines that tumor outside the body is white and grey and soft.

The weather begins to turn as Claudia starts a unit in gym class where they are required to swim. Many of the girls strip entirely naked in the locker room, and their bodies are newly soft and round in places. Claudia shivers while she changes in a stall, cramped between the toilet and the clanging door. The chlorine burns the whites of her eyes into red.

Most nights, Claudia dreams the same dream. She goes in public wearing her long lost retainers. She can only speak with a horrible, pronounced lisp that warps her speech beyond recognition. When she tries and tries to take them out and hold them in the secret palm of her hand or slide them into the tight pocket of her jeans, her one crooked bottom tooth comes out with it. It looks like a denture bite plate instead of a reminder of braces. She tongues the gum hole over and over until she wakes up.

Mr. Legore offers extra-credit hours after school near the end of the semester. Claudia attends with her hair still wet from the gym swim. In the classroom, a surprise: a baby. His son is one-year old. Mr. Legore passes the boy to her. He is tow-headed. She doesn't know how to hold a baby, and so she holds the thing by its armpits above her lap. He kicks the air needlessly.

"It's better if you fit him into the crook of your arm," Mr. Legore instructs, acting out the shape with his own arms. He turns to rifle through his desk drawer. She avoids looking at the baby's weird white face. He straightens and hands her a book with a young girl convulsing on her stomach on its cover.

"As an apology for not including more women on the syllabus."

She begins to read it at home, and each story is about a young girl whose life is irreparably ruined by an affair with an older married man. After the third such story, she takes the volume and hides it in the far corner of her closet near the cash vase and a glass jar where she keeps her fallen baby teeth.

As it gets colder, the barn work becomes harder, the air nipping her face on the bike ride, the ground frozen beneath her toes as she leads each horse to the field. The leather lead rope stings her raw hands when the horses yank their heads. Each horse skittish on the walk to the field with the cold nipping their sides. Her long showers now an unthawing regimen.

One day after school, she is stranded. She is not supposed to work today so she didn't bring her bike, instead hitching a ride with her reluctant brother. He was supposed to drop her home later, but Claudia took too long after the last bell. When she arrived in the lot, he had already sped off. Claudia's mother always called her a chronic futzer.

Claudia's brother works at a dog kennel two towns over where he uses a green snaking hose to power wash each kennel between uses. This is a good job for him because he doesn't have to encounter other people. There is no Sue equivalent. The small dogs quake at him.

Hours will pass before he can return to fetch Claudia.

She sits on the floor of the sophomore hallway, curling up against the row of red lockers, and traces the treads in the carpet with her fingernails. Underneath each nail is a fine line of dirt.

When Mr. Legore emerges from his classroom, he sees Claudia. He spins quickly to lock his door from the outside. Inside, the rows of desks quiver in the darkness.

He wears his nylon laptop bag slung across his chest. He hasn't loosened his tie, and even after all this, his white shirt still looks crisp and sharp.

He makes his way over to stand above her. His head blocks the overhead light. He is haloed in yellow when Claudia looks up at him. His face: a circle of shadow.

He uses one of his leather dress shoes to nudge Claudia's boot.

"You stranded?" he asks. It is funny to Claudia when he doesn't speak in full sentences.

"Looks like it," she responds, turning to gaze down the empty green hall.

"Can I offer you a ride?" he asks.

"So formal," she needles. "But yeah, please."

She clamors up from the floor, gathering her purple backpack with the broken zipper.

When she rises, she is reminded of the way Mr. Legore never stands close to her even when they are speaking after school or in the minutes between classes. Claudia is taller than him by a couple of inches. This is fiercely apparent right now, at this hour, in this proximity.

Mr. Legore walks fast to his small, squat car in the teacher parking lot.

Inside, his passenger seat is covered in fabric. Claudia is awkward when she angles her body into the car. She is sitting there kicking herself for this.

The car smells faintly of stale coffee and ketchup. She wishes it smelled of cigarette smoke. If it did, Claudia would know a secret of his. She would let the secret sit like a rock between them.

"We've got to wait for it to warm up," Mr. Legore says, rubbing his hands together in the frigid air. His knuckles are dry. It's gotten cold all of the sudden, the leaves and stalks drying up and dying overnight.

Claudia moves her heavy backpack from her lap to her feet. She refuses to don a winter coat. She is too young and proud for that kind of need. She touches the car's air vents with the flat of her hands to see if the warmth has begun.

"Are you liking the story about Lilith?" Mr. Legore asks as his arm rests on the center console. Claudia wonders if his wife's blush is inside, and a small, round mirror that she uses to reapply before church and school board meetings. Peach or berry or plum.

"I like it so much. I like how she talks about clothes," Claudia responds in a gush. The story in question: a woman spinning drunk at an apartment party looking for three men to kiss.

"Yes, well, as we spoke about in class, the stated quest is really central. It becomes a Goldilocks story," Mr. Legore assumes his teaching voice. He drums the fingers of his right hand on the gear shift. Claudia wills him not to drive. She thinks of her mother furious at home about her brother's lateness.

Claudia feels Mr. Legore watching her in profile. She stares at the velvet of the seat. She outlines a stain with her nail. She scratches at it. Both of her parents' cars have leather seats. When you spill something, the leather doesn't remember.

“Were you in Advanced English when you were in school?” she asks him. Claudia is rubbing her hands back and forth on the velvet like she is drying her palms. But she is not prone to clamminess.

“No, no, I played hockey.” His voice lowers, “and I was stupid about girls.”

Claudia has only ever kissed two people in her life, and one was a complete stranger. That happened to her in a crowd at a concert two towns over. The second was a boy named Crawford at one of the three parties her classmates had invited her to before they learned better. At those parties, Claudia tended to drink too much, too quickly, and then vomit into her mouth, her cupped hand, or the kitchen sink.

When Mr. Legore kisses her, his face is all stubble. He is the smartest person Claudia knows.

She opens her mouth, immediately, almost all the way.

Mr. Legore huffs a laugh and coaxes her agape mouth shut with his hand.

Claudia’s own hands don’t lift from the felt. Her whole body is bright red: shame and something else.

“Let’s get you home,” Mr. Legore says, pulling back.

In front of her parent’s house, Claudia tells him not to pull into the long, sauntering driveway, explaining that she has to retrieve the mail anyway.

He says, as she is crawling out quick, “I am excited to hear your thoughts on Atonement.”

He says, “I think you of all my students could really benefit from reading ahead.”

She can’t stop thinking about the squirm of his alien-like baby in her hands, the lightness of that body and its gravity all at once.

“I will try,” Claudia responds before moving to get out. Her fingers shaky on the door which she covers by slamming it shut. Everything inside her a pit now.

She is vibrating with wrongness.

Inside her parents’ house, she showers long, hard, and hot. She watches the door steam up. Her nails scratch at her own back. She sits on the tiled floor until the pattern imprints itself on her bare body. She considers cutting herself. She knows all the girls in school are doing it. The brazen ones do it on their arms and then wrap patterned scarves around their wrists. It becomes a statement

of some sort. The other practice involves sticking to your hips and inner thighs, the pink puckering lines only visible when the girls are changing for gym class. Claudia doesn’t have many (any) friends who are girls so she doesn’t know the exact techniques. In the locker room, it seems like most girls just use razor blades in the shower and let the blood clean itself in the drain. It seems like it might not hurt that bad.

Claudia once overheard a short, dark-haired girl say, “God, whenever my mom leaves a knife on a cutting board, my palms get itchy just looking at it.”

Claudia lifts her body from the tiled floor of the shower and slides the bar of soap everywhere. She gets out. She curls her body tight in the mustiness of her sheets, wet hair soaking the pillowcase. Hours of television play out in the reflection of her face. She keeps her computer close as possible so all she has to do is turn her head slightly to see the screen.

After that day, Claudia stops doing her homework. She refuses to read the assigned books, arriving late and leaving early to every class, not just Mr. Legore’s. He emails her a link to a poem about a girl who eats her own legs off.

She sees Sue less and less but spends a lot of time with Calvin, not riding, just brushing him in small and big circles. She makes his coat glisten. He nibbles on her arm and leaves a mark. She is angry, at first, but then doesn’t mind. She is used to these small pains, by now.

When she gets home from the barn one day, her mother reminds her of how she was an inexplicable child. She tells Claudia a story of her childhood. Once, Claudia went into the upstairs bathroom of her parents’ house alone. She plugged the drain and turned on both the hot and cold water full stop. The water was so loud. Claudia left the bathroom and closed the door behind her. Her mother only realized something was amiss when she felt a fat drop of water on her forehead in the dining room. She looked skyward to a big growing wet spot on the ceiling. Her anger with Claudia was enormous. She didn’t hit her, but she came close.

Claudia’s mother says, “I don’t think I will ever understand the way that you are.”

Her brother is with the dogs. He misses this story.

All of the sudden, a horrible thing happens. It is a night that Claudia will later scratch off of her memories, allowing her mind to skip over it when she glances over her shoulder at what came before. This is how she will let it not ruin her life. This is how she will protect the kernel of herself. There will be blacked out swatches of terror, and this will be one of them:

The horse is on the ground when she gets there. His body—both an angel and a skeleton—luminous in the blue night.

Deb called to say she was with her sister, her sister who did not have much time left, and *Could you please check on the horses in the field tonight? The neighbors said they heard something. You are welcome to stay the night in the house.*

Claudia bikes over in the snap cold of dark, passing the abandoned housing development, the siding on the unfinished houses flapping quietly in the air.

At the farm, Calvin, that thing she can barely bear to love, lays in the grass.

Tossing the bike sideways on the gravel parking lot, Claudia strides out to where his body gleams in the night. Calvin's leg beside him sticks out, long and spindly, at an unnatural angle. She looks at and away from its irregular shape. She goes over to the fence that is just three planks of wood, grips on to the top one, bends and heaves. Her dinner is bright pink coming up in the night.

In the farmhouse, hand feeling the wall for the light switch, Claudia locates the phone and dials Deb's cell.

"Deb, Deb, it's Calvin."

Deb's sister moans in the background while Claudia describes Calvin's white ruptured body laying splayed.

"I wish I could tear myself away, but I can't," Deb says. She recites the vet's number, and Claudia copies it down on the back of her hand. The numbers bleed together. Deb tells Claudia to make it as quick and painless as possible.

"Hey, I'm sorry, I know he is your favorite."

Claudia hangs up.

Her hands shake as she dials the vet's number. He picks up and tells her he is birthing a foal two towns over. He says it is a complicated birth because the foal is turned all the way around. The baby is at risk of coming out feet first. He says he won't be able to come for many hours.

Back in the field, the whites of Calvin's eyes are beating.

Claudia lifts his heaving, snarling head onto her lap. She lets him press into her lower half. She lets him be weighty and alive.

She whispers, "Bubba, bubba, listen to me." She runs her hand over his forehead, down over his flared eye, makes his papery eyelid close beneath her palm.

"Shhh, shh, I am scared all the time. Just like you, okay?"

She picks up his mass of a head and places it on the grass again. She returns to the house. She paces the kitchen before dialing Mr. Legore. He is groggy when he picks up.

"Why are you calling right now? You're going to wake the baby?"

"I—I'm sorry," Claudia's voice is clogged with tears.

"Spit it out, then," he grumbles. "Why are you calling?"

"I need your help," she whispers. "Do you have a gun?"

"Yeah," his voice softens.

"I need you to bring it to me. You know the housing development off Main? The abandoned one? I need you to come to the farm that is beyond it."

She explains about the horse and its brokenness.

He hangs up.

In the silence before he arrives, Claudia walks a ring around Calvin's prone form with her feet. She makes a ritual this way. She tries to remember the prayers that she learned in Sunday School.

She only remembers part of a line: "Deliver us from evil."

She says this under her breath over and over until the words mean nothing.

As his small teacher car pulls into the lot, Claudia has a flash worry that this call is fulfilling a perverse fantasy of his where he gets to be the man with the gun who steps in. But Claudia never imagined herself into a situation where she would need a man with a gun. She guesses it is one of those needs that isn't real until it is, and then it is unreal again, like the dark secret clump of hair that fills her shower drain. Underneath and so invisible.

When he arrives, his whole body is a thrum of red. He is moving out of his car and leaning down into the backseat, drawing out the rifle, awkward. Claudia knows nothing about guns. She doesn't know if this one will do

the job well. Calvin is jostling below her, snorting, and the night smells like cold fright. Claudia is sticky with scaredness.

Mr. Legore makes his way across the field holding the gun at his side, and Claudia sees that he is wearing a winter coat over pajama pants. The pants are red, plaid, and flannel, and Claudia almost snorts because they are incredibly ugly. She is taken out of it for a minute.

But then he is just barely glancing at her, saying, "What do we have here?" and rubbing his hand down Calvin's neck that is silver like godliness in the blue of the dark.

Claudia doesn't quite want him to touch Calvin; she knows this is the best way.

She says, "Are you a good shot?"

"I hunt deer every season, and they're fast when they want to be."

She kisses Calvin on that wide expanse right between his eyes, she has to get onto her hands and knees to do it. She almost has to lie on the dirt next to him.

She stands, backs up, and watches while Mr. Legore cocks the gun. It is thin like a slit.

But then she has to turn her head before the noise happens, and then she doesn't even hear the shot, just feels it in her bones. She doesn't look. The noises of Calvin's agitation end.

She hears Mr. Legore lower the gun and fidget with the safety.

He approaches her turned body and places his free hand on her back.

"Do you need some company tonight?" he asks, his voice low. The gun is somewhere behind her.

"No, not tonight, thank you."

She turns and runs to the house; fast, fast, fast. Her legs whipping past each other, she's not in flannel pants, she's a girl running in her jeans.

Inside, Deb says, "Thank you," on the line.

Inside, the vet says, "I will come with the trailer to pick up the body."

Claudia locks all the doors and listens for the engine of Mr. Legore's car. She climbs the carpeted stairs to the second floor. She locates Deb's shower which is actually a claw-footed bathtub. Deb keeps a radio by the sink, and when Claudia turns it on, a woman is singing about blindness. Her voice: a simmering.

Claudia begins to rock on her feet while undressing, peeling off the tight jeans and moving her arms like branches around her trembling body.

She dances, badly, with her eyes half-closed. She cries, a bit.

She turns the water on and gets in when there is just one inch at the bottom. She lets the water rise around her. She wonders what will leak out of her when she dies. When she cries hard, it is silent; she makes her mouth a firm line so no sound escapes. Her shaking shoulders make ridges in the surface of the water.

Outside, she hears the rain begin. She thinks *this is good*.

There will be no pool of blood in the morning. The field will be washed clean.



Heidi Brueckner  
Waiting to Wait, 2022





# UMBRA

*Tianyu Yi*

at the sperm bank i thought of motherhood  
and nothing more. in the waiting room  
i dreamt of life at my own bosom,  
of dew in decades to come.

in the collection room  
i revived the memory of the total eclipse  
i drove down to watch  
the last year of my boyhood.

midday:  
streetlights flicker against rushing dusk;  
the sun closes its primal mouth;  
we creatures shriek at the cosmos until —

silence  
crowning.

my mothering in the universe began in a house of a million fathers.

asleep in the night, craters  
formed me. moonlight  
carved my valley,  
laying the sun to rest.

# PUBERPHONIA

*Tianyu Yi*

The crocotta mimes human speech  
to find its lonely meal. By morning  
the audibly monstrous are hunted.  
I am searching for a lover or surgeon  
to open my throat. For lightning  
to fill my eager mouth  
atop a thunder-struck hill. I thought  
thunder-struck a mistake of a word  
until the first time a stranger heard me  
and recoiled. The voice is a cave  
I failed to chisel. Lover, listen  
to mine and you'll hear  
I'm an approximate woman.  
Surgeon, I want my next voice  
to be forgivable.  
The body is a little flute  
I used to play. It cracked  
& I quieted. Into  
manhood. Its  
falsetto note. Now  
I. It's okay. Don't  
need to sing  
anymore.



Cati Bestard, *Shadows #1*, 2017; *Corners #1*, 2018



# MAKE MEANING WITH WHAT REMAINS

*Shelby Wardlaw*

Nikolai Rubov owned the only butcher shop in town, which was a shame because it meant that everyone had to interact with him at some point during the week. True, one could always go to the ShopRite off the highway, but the meat there looked depressed, languishing in styrofoam trays while the cuts at Rubov's bled fresh and bright.

Nikolai Rubov's bad temper was well known to everyone in the area. Sometimes, when driving in traffic, he would honk his horn and shout Russian epithets out his window, his cabbage-colored face trembling with rage. What set him off was always some sort of waste: of time, of energy, of the useful fatty organs encased inside animal carcasses.

*Какая тара, he'd say. What a waste.*

After his wife died, Nikolai pared his life down to the essentials: home, business, daughter. His home was small and compact, a stern suburban rectangle with a trim front lawn. His shop, Rubov's Butcher and Meats, was located in a prominent spot on the town square. And his daughter Anya was twelve years old.

Anya was a sickly, wide-eyed girl whose wispy blonde hair clung to her scalp out of pity. She'd inherited her father's obsession with detail. However, in the second generation, Rubov's frugality inverted like a philosophical photonegative: Anya cherished excess. She venerated the invaluable, fawned over flourishes. During classes at her middle school, Anya noticed only the insignificant particulars: her teacher's caked-on orange lipstick; the rings of wood trapped inside her desk; the way the sunlight illuminated half of the boy's head sitting in front of her, as if he were about to be lobotomized by a beam of brilliance. She watched the grass on the schoolhouse lawn bend beneath the winds of an oncoming storm, blades flashing green bellies towards the sky. To Anya, the world was made up of innumerable, unknowable pieces, and she delighted to think that she was one of them.

After dropping Anya off at school, Nikolai Rubov would drive to work. He'd calculated the best route from driveway to doorstep, taking into account the number of red lights he would encounter and the complexity of various intersections. He had memorized optimal

routes to nearly every place in the county, and he always had a second itinerary in mind, just in case there were blockages. Rubov despised blockages, those inefficiencies of time and space. For years he refused to leave his small, familiar corner of upstate New York, worried that in foreign places he would run into wasteful traffic patterns. When everything operated correctly, Rubov arrived at his shop exactly seventeen minutes after leaving his house. On these seventeen-minute days, Rubov drove with gleeful precision, his station wagon slicing through the streets as surely as his knife slid fat from the bone.

Rubov took great pleasure in butchering. Each new carcass was a parcel of useful parts that had yet to reach its full potential under his knife. Sometimes the townspeople would hear him singing in the back of his shop, slapping carcasses on his worktable and humming inscrutable Soviet standards to himself in a smooth baritone. For Rubov, meat carving was not just efficient: it was proof that everything once hidden could be brought to light, that what at first seemed obscure had only to be dissected to be understood, and that this understanding was the means to happiness.

And so Rubov carved, sliced, and picked apart. He was always foisting leftovers onto his customers and throwing in bodily organs for free. "And for you: special. I give you two gizzards. Wonderful, perfect in stews," he'd say, tossing the bloody bits onto a piece of white paper. Rubov was proud of his ability to find the right animal part for each customer. "Ah, I see. You are a hoof man. Yes, yes, I can tell," and he would squint and bring a finger to his lips as if pondering the mysteries of the human soul.

As soon as they left the shop, the customers would throw the unwanted parts into a back alley where a colony of feral cats had taken up residence. Of course, the townspeople were careful not to let Rubov see them disposing of his gifts. The butcher was famous for banning people from his shop. Once he banned the mayor for allowing a New York City bike race to pass through the town square. On the day of the bike race, Rubov's commute from driveway to doorstep took thirty-eight minutes. When the mayor came in for his weekly order of brisket, Rubov raged at him: "Why you let this happen, hm? Why? The mayor supposed to protect the people, not throw them to the dogs! But now, these bikers, they

come in, they bike for no reason, they are like locusts, eating up our streets!"

Of course, Rubov forgot about his ban after a month or so. When the mayor sheepishly returned to the shop several weeks later, he found his brisket waiting for him.

\*

Sometime in September, the townspeople began to notice strange changes in the Rubovs. One Monday morning a customer approached the butcher's shop to find it locked and shuttered. A homemade sign taped to the glass read simply: AWAY. Rubov's Butcher and Meats had been open every day except Sunday for as long as anyone could remember. But Anya didn't show up to school that day either, and no one knew where they had gone.

Rubov reopened his shop a few days later without explanation and with a preoccupied look on his face. A few of the regulars got away without extra hooves and gizzards. In October, the butcher's shop closed for a week, and Anya was again taken out of school. The Rubovs must have returned at night because their car reappeared suddenly in the driveway, tired and haggard-looking, as if it had battled many blockages.

The strangest change of all began after Nikolai and Anya returned from out of town: the Rubov house started to smell. The odor was localized at first. People could only catch a whiff of it if they passed directly in front of the driveway, but the stench was violent and mineral, like the smell of graves. Over the course of several months, the smell increased, growing ever more disruptive and sharp.

Rubov stopped singing in his workroom. His cabbage face seemed to wither and shrink. Anya missed a total of three weeks of school that semester, and all the time their house ripened with an incredible stench. When the wind blew, the entire block was inundated with it. Someone said it smelled like the savannah, wild and untamed, but no one could see over Rubov's fence to determine what it was. They all feared that Rubov would ban them from his shop if they complained.

Then, in December, the town doctor rushed to the Rubovs' house in the middle of the night. By the next morning everyone knew: Anya had leukemia. Rubov

had been trying to procure special medical treatment in the city. He'd spent large amounts of money on doctors who specialized in pediatric cancer. He'd driven in foreign places, gotten stuck in traffic, let his deliveries lie untouched in his freezer or festering in the alleyway, besieged by cats. But it was no use. Anya was dying.

The doctor also discovered the source of the smell. Rubov had been collecting bones. Rib bones, wish bones. Cow, sheep, chicken, pig bones. Wings, talons, beaks, feet, jaws, femurs. All the leftovers from his shop, all the parts his customers considered waste, Rubov now collected in his backyard. The bones sat in enormous piles on his lawn and sure enough, the neighbors soon glimpsed the white peaks tipping over the top of the fence. Rubov had stripped and boiled them. In the sunlight they shone pale and brownish-grey, arranged in strange patterns on the dying yellow grass. At night they froze, like drips from a dissolving moon.

Not long into the spring semester, Anya became too weak to go to school. Her immune system could no longer fight off infections. Exposure to other children was too high a risk. Rubov watched in horror as bruises bloomed beneath his daughter's skin. Her wispy hair finally gave up and left her. She had frequent headaches, and Rubov sat by her bedside, dabbing her forehead with a butcher's rag.

The treatments weren't working, so the doctors gave her sedatives. When she was awake, Anya looked around her room with wide, muddled eyes. "The lampshade is crooked," she'd say. "But I like it better that way."

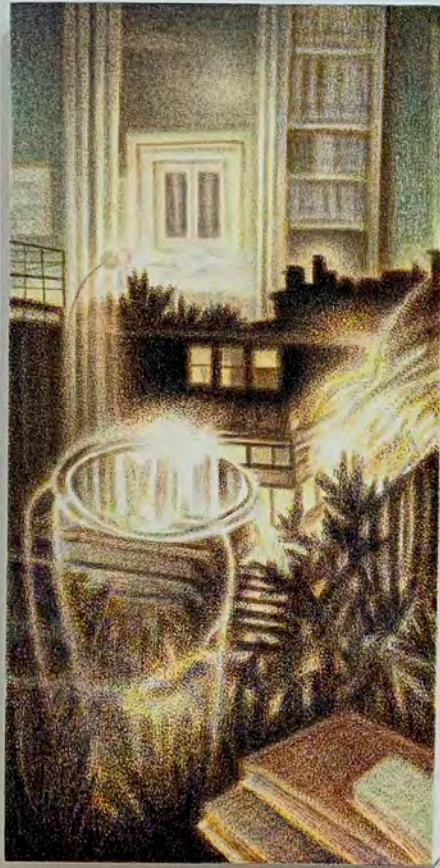
Rubov closed up shop with no intention of reopening. When he wasn't by his daughter's bedside he was in the backyard, arranging bones. He shoved the piles close to his daughter's bedroom window, as if hoping to replace her depleted marrow with the ossified offerings of his own. Each morning, he picked up a bone and pressed

it to the window to solicit Anya's opinion. "It wants to lie over there," she'd point. Rubov dutifully shuffled the piece from one pile to another, but it wasn't long before he requested clearer instructions. Should he organize the bones by animal? By shape? By body part? By size? But Anya liked arrangements that made no sense at all. "Organize them by beauty," she said. So Rubov switched the bones around into every configuration he could think of. Each morning he rose early and toiled late, sweating over his talismans in the cold wintry sun, searching for beauty amid the waste.

Anya slept more and longer each day. When she was not awake to direct him, Rubov imagined his own patterns. Over time, he developed a hypnotic intuition about the bones' placement. He hummed as he worked, growling tuneless ballads of love and sacrifice from the bards of the Soviet seventies—Vysotsky and Vizbor and Nikitins. Eventually, Rubov labored so assiduously over the bones' complex configurations that he no longer noticed the patterns he created; it was the act of configuring that soothed him, like a prayer whose words no longer matter. He had already sliced away all that was unnecessary. There was nothing left to do but to make meaning with what remained.

One night, Anya cried out in her sleep. Rubov rushed to her side, his portly face flushed and creased from the pillow, his large body defeated inside its bathrobe. He dragged a chair closer to his daughter and breathed heavily. Anya took his hand as her large eyes wandered to the window. The piles of bones glowed in the moonlit yard like a half-finished painting. "How beautiful they look," she said softly. "Like glints of light on broken glass."

Nikolai Rubov could not stand it. He began to sob. He clutched his daughter's hand and pressed it to his sweaty forehead. "Then it was not a waste," he said. "Not a waste."



Kate Teale, *Scenes from a Storm*, 2022



# MURDER, THE ILLOGICAL FEAR

*Abigail Chabitnoy*

of course

I was afraid of the dark

for a while also

uneasy at

an open window

a man with a knife

a swift shine

might come that same dark

and slit throats sleeping

before or after

I dreamt a yellow dog

came and ate my mother

's neck whole right

to her spine

which was just

a ribbon of paper

after all

before or after

each descent into the earth

down cellar steps      gaping

my grave

hands wait to grasp

a foot

fall easy

to break

I didn't really think  
I came elsewhere but  
this earth, I couldn't overwhelm  
the volume of my sternutation

perhaps that same apprehension  
moved my father to cast  
out the yellow flowers I had picked  
breathing costly and ever  
y growing body an assault  
on his lungs  
mother never let me  
know how near  
they sputtered  
toward the long night

she scooped my small hand  
full of weeds  
in plastic

a north facing window  
with just enough light  
for snakes  
and I learned  
to guard that light  
that swift shine  
under cover  
until waking









Above, left, and previous: Charlotte Eta Mumm, *Thresholds and Their Phantoms*, 2022

# GOOD RECEIPTS

*Haley Johannesen*

My mother is a praying mantis.  
The first time I saw her,  
I tried to kill her.  
But she got away. Like always.  
Next time I will be so much faster.

I work in the basement of my house. The cold, damp basement. In my basement there are gray walls, made of cement. Sometimes, if the weather is just right, the walls feel wet to the touch. Water will drip-drip right down the crevices. On days like these I put my water glass close to the wall and wait for tiny drops to collect at the bottom. I do not drink it, of course. You would think that is bad hygiene. You would say, *put that glass down!* I just do it to measure time, and lure my mother back from where she is hiding. But she rarely makes an appearance. And if she does make an appearance, I am usually busy and by the time I see her she scurries away. After I am done working, I take the glass up to the sink and wash it out. And I do it every time.

Last night I went to see a movie. In the theater everyone was in couples, even the teenagers. I sat alone in my usual seat. The movie was about a man who falls in love with a ship. He gives everything he has to be with his ship, and in the end the storm takes them both. It was a romance. When I left the theater, I felt happy for the man and his ship the whole drive home, even if it did mean death. What sweet, sweet love. And death is not so bad.

By the time I pulled into my driveway, it was dark. Just as I was about to get out of my car a familiar praying mantis landed on my windshield. It was my mom again. I waited for her to speak, the key clicking away in the ignition. I turned on the windshield wipers. She tried to hold on, but she couldn't. I didn't even watch where she landed. That will teach her to come around after dark.

Today, in the basement, I pulled all my files by noon. I was technically done, but as you know, I would never quit early. I would never *cheat the clock*, as they say. Not me. As you well know, I am an honest person.

Instead, I decided to go outside for lunch. It's Friday, so tuna salad and fruit pack. And wouldn't you know? My mother was there. Just sitting on the porch, as if she wasn't waiting for me. I ignored her as best I could and ate in silence. I certainly was not going to be the first to speak. Not after the windshield incident.

After a while I started to feel bad. Both of us just sitting there not speaking. I tried to tempt her with a raspberry. But she wouldn't even look at me. So I put two raspberries out for her, my own little amends. Right as she was about to turn her head, the cat came up. I fed her a piece of my tuna sandwich and when I looked back at mother she was gone, the raspberries left untouched.

At night is when it is the worst. Sometimes I turn on my radio and listen to music I will never hear again. Last night a woman sang over and over again a burning urge to dig for warmth, *a burning urge to dig for warmth* and I finally understood. It was great-great. I fell asleep for what seemed like hours.

Wouldn't you know, she came back.  
Perched on my windowsill.  
But now there are two mothers,  
mirrors of each other.  
Both, I am positive, are mine.

Today I unplugged the radio and took it to the basement. I worked as I listened to the singers sing. Nothing wrong with that. The files I did slowly. You remember how fast I used to be? Not today. I worked and listened to music and felt calm. Nothing wrong with that. Nothing at all.

And guess what? You'll never guess. I got an email from my boss. She said, *You seem happy. Keep up the good work.* I printed it out and taped it above my desk. All day I kept looking at it and reading it while I listened to the singers sing. Then, at five, I took the printed out email upstairs and put it in the window for my mothers to see. The whole time I hummed the songs from my very good day.

In the commercial, on the radio, the announcer said EAT AT CHINA PALACE, so I went. I got a seat nearest the fish tank. They gave me a paper napkin, but it looked like a bib so I wore it. Couples around me glanced, but no one stared. I had dumplings, and noodles, plus an egg roll with pork. The eggroll was the best I'd ever had.

At the end of my meal I filled out the customer survey and gave the waitress four stars. On the way out she gave me a receipt that said COME AGAIN in her own handwriting. I smiled and said, "I will." She smiled back and nodded. I felt like



she and I really hit it off, and I think she thought so too. That night I taped the good receipt in the window, next to the good email.

The phone rang today. I stopped mid files. I looked up the stairs to the kitchen. It rang and rang. You remember, I hate it when you call someone and no one answers. So I went up the stairs and answered it. As you know, it is just the right thing to do. On the other end it was only my mothers. They were hissing. I couldn't believe it, you know? *Hiss, hiss, hiss*. I couldn't believe it, so I just hung up. I mean, what else was there to do? I imagined my mothers laughing hard at their little joke. Probably, they were bent over their praying knees, just trying to catch their breath from laughing so hard at me. I hung up and just stood there picturing them laughing. That night, I decided to sleep with the blinds pulled, just in case they wanted to visit me. I figure two can play this game.

Today, the files were all so long. I tried but I just couldn't do it. I emailed my boss, and said I was sick, but that I was still going to do a good job tomorrow. She wrote back, *get some rest*. Instead, I cleaned my kitchen. In my sink there was one of my mothers. I stopped cleaning and whispered "Who let you in?" I still wasn't over the whole phone prank. She looked at me and crawled into the drain. Maybe her idea of a raspberry. I waited for her to say, *I'm sorry*, but she wouldn't. So I ran the water over her. She tried to hold on, but the drain took her. I thought, for once, I had got her. She is gone.

That night when I went out to get the mail, there were three praying mantises in the mailbox, all sitting right on top of my gas bill. I slammed the box hard and left the gas bill right where it was.

I will not kill my mothers.  
I will not kill my mothers.  
I will not kill my mothers.

Now, there are four. They tap on the windows and stir. I turn up my radio so so loud. The singers sing, but I can still hear the tapping in between their songs. I taped up all my good receipts from CHINA PALACE in the window, but my mothers want more. I eat there almost every night now, just to get away from them. The waitress still writes COME AGAIN on all my receipts, but I wonder sometimes if she even sees me. Still, I appreciate her notes, you know?

My mothers are never ending. Tapping and stirring. Tapping and stirring. I think I will have to sleep in the cold, damp basement if this gets any worse. Maybe I should look up EXTERMINATOR in the yellow pages. Maybe I can buy traps. I google *traps for my mother*. I find nothing.  
I will not kill my mothers.  
I will not kill my mothers.  
I will not

I got one. I let her in through the screen door. I was sweeping the floors and saw her looking in. I thought, what the heck? She came in and did not even say anything about the clean floors or the fresh flowers I put out on the table. She just went straight to the corner, and I could tell she thought I hadn't swept well enough. You know how she can be. I told her, *this is my house and if you don't like it you can leave*. I tell you, it took all my will not to squish her flat right then. She just stayed there for the rest of the night, staring. Finally, I told her goodnight and shut off all the lights.

The house is filling up. The mothers are everywhere. It is warmer than it has ever been in here. Their motherbodies are stirring and tapping, constantly looking around, with their wide wobbly eyes. You know how I feel about this sort of heat. It rained today, and the basement walls were wet to the touch. But I couldn't even collect the drops in my cup without squishing a motherbody. Besides, they are all here now anyway. I didn't even need to lure them. It's like they want to be here just as I decided I was through with them. I don't even know how they are getting in.

Did I mention they are all over the files? I don't know what my boss will say. Now I keep the radio loud to drown out their noises, so loud, I wonder what the neighbors are saying. Anyway, the mothers just keep multiplying.

I have to order for delivery from CHINA PALACE. I can't possibly leave them all here. I tell the woman on the phone, leave it at the door. I keep wondering if she will recognize my voice as the one she wrote all the receipts to. I wonder if she ever delivers my order to the door. I don't go check when the bell rings because I can't risk anyone seeing them all here, hissing and hissing. Stirring and tapping. Always using my phone, collecting my bills, eating my fruit packs. You know how they can be. Now, I never get the good receipts. Never get the real handwriting. Sometimes, whoever it is doesn't even bother to ring the bell, if you can believe it. So it is just me and my mothers here. They don't even talk. They just watch me and get in my way, and when I'm not looking they laugh at me.



Monica Church, *Bee*, 2020

# ROOTBOUND

*Maryam Ghafoor*

I'm a good processor.

I see the way my students mistake  
my earnestness for gullibility. Which

isn't to say I haven't been hurt. I still  
don't understand how someone can come back  
with this kind of hope. As always,

my stomach bloats. The truth is I'm as afraid  
of love as anyone given the circumstances.  
We spend hours with our hands in the dirt,

see roots upon roots like hair, thin ones  
bound up in circles, thick ones jutting  
through smooth river rock. Of course,

I break some, and you, so careful,  
don't want to hurt the fishtail palm.  
How to untangle yourself. I've asked

everyone, gone to every group. I told  
you the other day I can't listen to that band,  
and you said, isn't it sad the music

we have to let go of? Our words fall flat.  
We don't have them for what happened  
before we knew each other. I cut you

off the other day when you tried to explain,  
but in this poem, I have time.  
Tell me everything. I want to know.



Kyra Garrigue, *Bedroom*, 2022

# THE LAWS OF ANGER

*M.H. Reza*

## THE FIRST LAW

In a closed system, anger is neither created nor destroyed.  
At its most basic unit, it is a transfer of energy. Anger can change  
from one form into another, but it must exist somewhere.  
The energy always exists in someone.

## GROWTH

I thought I knew what it meant to be angry. I knew what it felt like  
when

my mother said I couldn't sleepover at my friend's house;  
my cousin, Yasmin, didn't share any fizzy sweets with me  
after school;

my parents brought home a baby brother.

These were childish thoughts. Now anger is when

my boss won't give me a pay rise;

Yasmin's husband whisks her away to Leeds;

my parents let my brother, Ali, get away with murder.

But those feelings subside, wash away in the froth of other  
emotions and daydreams.

Yasmin comes back home sometimes, but by now we're used to the  
routine of her infrequent visits,

summer holidays,

half term,

Easter break,

only when her husband, a teacher, could spare the time.

And everyone wants to see Yasmin, so there's never a spare  
moment to just sit on my bed and talk with our legs up on the wall.

On one of these infrequent visits, Yasmin comes home with a big,  
round baby bump. We hug and twirl around the living room until  
Yasmin feels sick so we fall back on the sofas. It's always been me  
and her, Nowsheen and Yasmin.

She produces a little brown paper bag before she is summoned  
away by Ammar.

Inside are some fizzy sweets, the packet half empty.

#### TRANSFER I

He squeezes my hip, a soft pressure that appears from nowhere. It lingers.

He stares straight ahead at the garden party. I stare too and watch my younger cousins chase each other around the adults.

The pressure is still there. It stretches across to the small of my back. I keep watching and waiting and waiting and waiting

*We'd better get going, you know how your cousin gets, he says.*

He slinks off in the early evening warmth and takes Yasmin by the elbow.

Yasmin, who wears a sky blue hijab, the edges of which flutter in the wind;

Yasmin, who's talking to my mother about being a mother and having a baby and morning sickness that happens at night and insomnia and, *oh, is it time to go now?*

I stare at the spot where Yasmin stood. The grass is bent from her weight. Each blade quivers in the quiet breeze. Then my mother calls me over and I switch back on, powering up like a robot.

*Coming Mama.*

I'm still frozen as I get ready for bed. I brush my teeth, spit in the sink, rinse my mouth twice. I comb my hair and scrub my skin, but forget to floss my teeth.

I stare at my reflection in the mirror and wonder if I can stare long enough for the mirror to crack.

#### THE SECOND LAW

Whenever anger changes from one form to another, entropy increases.

*(noun. entropy, en-tro-pee*

*the lack of order in a system;*

*the progressive descent into chaos)*

#### DREAMS I

I am scared to sleep because I always see him. But it's not the sight of him that scares me; no, it's the intensity of my screams.

They aren't screams of fear but of fury: cries strained against the parameters of the dream. I can never truly express the extent of them. Sometimes, I hear him scream, too.

It's not just what happened in the garden. Moments flash in my mind

when he gave me pointed advice on what to do after graduation;

when he offered to look over my postgrad application; when he winked at me after I got my driving test results; all the times he made conversation in the silence of the kitchen even though everyone else was in the living room.

I watch the digital alarm clock next to my bed turn the hour

1 : 00 AM

Minutes drip by like water droplets joining an endless stream

1 : 01 AM

1 : 02 AM

1 : 20 AM

But the dreams come like a series of slaps: short, sharp and painful,

*Why*

I ask

*Why*

I beg

*Why*

I shout into his face, my voice hoarse and hot and sore with rage.

But I never get my answer, never hear the reply because I'm thrown into the next dream: we're in a field, not a garden but a field of dried grass where I stand at the edge of a cliff and he stands behind me and there's that pressure again on my hip, burning into my side, turning my hip to stone, my bones to ash until finally, he pushes me off the cliff

8 : 37 AM

I open my eyes and see the blank white of my walls. During the day, I can't focus. I can't shake that feeling away, of a world that knows my intimate feelings better than me.

All the dreams bleed into a single, breathing conscience that is cast over my head like a blanket. It merges reality with fiction and I start to wonder when I will truly wake up.

#### PARADOX

We have dinner with Yasmin and Ammar the night before they leave. We sit in our coordinated, respectful arrangement around the table with

Baba

Ali            Ammar

Mama        Yasmin

Me



A respectful arrangement, to avoid any untoward behaviour. I gulp ice cold water but my throat remains dry.

*You should get Nowsh into teaching,* says Yasmin over mouthfuls of pilau. *You both get nerdy over physics.*

Ammar laughs and my insides burst alight. A bead of sweat trickles down my back.

Ali yawns loudly and Mama scolds him. Baba chews before asking some mundane question about teaching.

*I don't want to teach,* I say quietly. *I want to go into research.*

*But what kind of jobs can you get with that?* says Baba, a statement more than a question.

*You could teach at a higher level,* says Ammar. *You're more than capable.*

I dare to look at him. He doesn't smile or wink or do anything out of the ordinary. His tanned face stays still, unconcerned.

I want to gouge his eyes out. Rip the curly hairs from his scalp one root at a time. I want to stab him with the silver knife by my plate. Blood would splatter everywhere, all over the tandoori and pilau; all across Mama's salwar and Baba's thin-rimmed glasses; all over Yasmin's swollen belly.

Yasmin's belly, where a baby grows just below her heart, her stupidly big heart, because despite the half eaten packet of sweets and the immeasurably long distance between us she was still my cousin, my sister, the other half of me.

I stare at my plate. There is so much energy that crashes inside me, that urges me to

grab

slap

hit

twist

stab

burn

but I don't. I can't.

*Thanks,* I say to Ammar, and Yasmin smiles.

#### REASON I

Two weeks later, I tell Mama. She pours oil into the frying pan and says nothing. Her back is to me. I sit as I tell her what happened, but now I need to stand and run, do something other than lamely wait for a response.

*Are you sure? she asks. Have you told anyone else? Did you tell Yasmin?*

I answer like the robot I have become: Yes, No, No.

But something itches inside me. Tears prick my eyes.

*Good, don't tell anyone. Before you know it, my sister in Leicester will be calling me about it, and your father's cousin. We don't need that. You don't see them that often anyway, maybe two or three times a year.*

The hot oil spits from the pan and Mama turns the heat down. My throat is dry so I choke the words,

*He touched me, Mama.*

She sighs, and I know that sigh. My stomach twists whenever I hear that sigh.

*They're about to have a baby. Do you really want to give Yasmin this stress? Next time we see them, just stay away from him.*

Moments later, I sit on the floor of my room and clench my jaw, curl my fingers into fists until my nails pierce my palms, bite my inner lip

and squeeze my eyes shut.

The energy shatters me from the inside, desperate to burst out. All I manage are some tears and a muffled cry.

#### INTERLUDE

The baby is born three weeks early, so we go to Leeds for the day. He's a tiny little thing in his white basket, white baby-gro, white mittens.

Dark smudges are under Yasmin's eyes. Her scarf is thrown loosely over her head instead of being pinned down. She has the body of a mother now, soft and pliable.

Ammar takes Baba and Ali to the shops so it's just us girls at home, plus Yasmin's mum and the baby. He doesn't have a name yet, but Mama calls him chuto babu.

The windows are open. A soft summer breeze floats into the living room as Yasmin tries to feed chuto babu. Her mum helps her; she hasn't got the hang of breastfeeding yet.

Her face scrunches up with the same frustration she had back when she struggled to ride a bike. I straddle two universes: one where we're thirteen again and spending our loose change in the corner shop after school; the second where Yasmin has a scrawny pink baby wrapped in white and her husband is bringing home milk and nappies.

*Nowsheen, try to burp him, says my khala and I find myself holding chuto babu in my arms.*  
He wriggles and squirms, trying to find his mother's warmth again, but Yasmin has gone to the loo and our mothers are in the kitchen. So I place him on my shoulder and rub his back, pacing up and down the small living room. He whines and whines before turning a shade of plum red, releasing an almighty cry.  
*It's okay, shhh, it's alright, shhh, you're fine, you're fine!*  
I wonder, what could a baby possibly have to be angry about? On another plane of existence, does he know? Does he know about his father? Does he know he carries the blood and bones of someone who has broken my mind? Or is he simply angry that he did not get enough milk, or that some gas is trapped in his tiny little stomach. What could a little baby have to be angry about, barely a second into the world.

## REASON II

I run from physics. I am now an insurance tele-agent, receiving calls from customers who don't understand how to use the company's convoluted website. Whenever I applied for research positions, every application screamed a reminder of his help. I could not have got to where I was without his help. I want to scrub and burn every memory of that. I want to burn the roots of the family tree that link us together, but you cannot cut kith and kin.  
*Hello ma'am, my name is Nowsheen and I'll be helping you today. Can I take your six-digit account number?*  
I haven't seen Yasmin for a year. I hear chuto babu, now called Ilyas, is chubby and cheeky with big, brown eyes like his mother. I wonder if he's got her stupidly big heart, too.  
*That does sound frustrating. Have you tried using your email address as your username? You should be able to log in to your account then.*  
I still have nightmares. It sounds so childish, that word. As if all will be well once I wake up and have a hug from my mother.  
*Can I interest you in our premium-deluxe package? You'll save a few hundred pounds on your annual statement if purchased today.*  
My mother won't acknowledge what happened. My mother will

drag me through shame  
and guilt  
and self-disgust;  
odium, obloquy, opprobrium;  
an entire thesaurus of lies, just to cover up the mortification of the  
male species.  
It sounds so childish.

#### INVISIBLE I

Yasmin is visiting, alone. She sits on our living room sofa and  
rocks Ilyas in his car seat. His eyes flutter for a few moments, long  
eyelashes like the wings of a butterfly, before he falls asleep.  
*He couldn't come, busy with work, you know, she says when Mama  
asks about Ammar.*  
My mother goes to check on lunch and Yasmin deflates on the  
sofa. Her shoulders wilt and the corners of her mouth droop.  
*How's mum-life treating you then?* I ask.  
She laughs. *Has it really been that long that you have to ask me  
questions like that?*  
I want to say that a year is not long enough to forget, but I keep  
quiet. She turns towards me, smoothing out her clothes, looking  
down as she speaks.  
*It's fine. I'm fine. It's a little hard when he's at work all the time, but  
being a teacher isn't easy I guess. I just...*  
I hear it in her tone, the pauses between her words; disappointment  
and heartbreak. I hate myself for revelling in it.  
I wait for her to finish, but she shakes her head and smiles. *I miss  
being home, you know?*  
*You're welcome to swing by here any time, I offer.*  
She laughs again, this time bitter. *It's not like I can come and go.  
With a baby in tow, I add.*  
She looks absently at Ilyas. *He's fine, he just sleeps in the car for  
the whole journey. But his father doesn't exactly like it when I  
come down here on my own.*  
Mama calls us for lunch. Yasmin sits up straight once more and  
beckons me to follow her.

#### DREAMS II

I fantasise hurting Ammar. It happens without warning, whenever I  
close my eyes or put my head down at my desk. Whenever I look  
out the kitchen window or fold the laundry. The most mundane

activities turn into fertile ground for these delusions of violence.  
I rip him apart limb by limb;  
stab him through the head, heart, groin;  
feed him molten lava that spills out of his eyes and ears;  
grind his bones into dust.  
They satisfy me for the smallest of moments. In each of these  
moments, I loathe myself more.

### INVISIBLE II

It is Ilyas's first birthday party. There is a bouncy castle in the garden and a table laden with sweets and candy floss and a chocolate fountain.  
I sit beside my mother on the chairs outside the conservatory. There's chatter inside the house—Ammar's parents' house in Leeds. Kids run around outside as if they own the whole place. The birthday boy is in his mother's arms dressed in a smart little plaid shirt. He looks hot and bothered and squirms in Yasmin's grip. They stand at the photo stall where there is a backdrop of balloons and sparkles.  
Ammar arrives late with a purple box in hand. My limbs feel light and my stomach squirms. My body stays in our garden back in Surrey but my mind fights to stay here in Leeds.  
The purple box is opened up on the table. It's a birthday cake for Ilhan. *They've done the wrong name*, says Yasmin. *Didn't you ask to change it?* Ammar's voice is too low for me to hear. Yasmin's soft expression withers away, her jaw stiffens. She hands Ilyas to his grandmother and takes the purple box indoors. She barely makes it there before she trips over a cord. The cake splatters across the patio.  
*For God's sake*, says Ammar.  
They both stoop down to the ground to clean up, waving away offers of help. Ammar nudges Yasmin out the way; it is a gentle push but she falls on her bum. She stays in a daze on the floor.  
I look away.

### INVISIBLE III

I'm told to look for paper plates, so I go to the kitchen. Yasmin stands in one corner with a tissue in her hand. She's looking at her reflection in the microwave and dabs the corner of her eyes.  
I startle her but she relaxes when she sees me.  
*Make-up got a bit smudged*, she says.  
There are chocolate stains on her white and gold kameez and grass

stains at the back.  
I ask her how she's feeling but she waves the question away.  
*Just stressed, you know? Kids birthday parties are never as simple as you think!*  
She moves away before I point out a tear in the seam of her kameez, just above her hip.  
She sighs. *It was supposed to fit... I was supposed to lose weight before the party...*  
Her face crumples. I take her hand and lead her into the bathroom upstairs. I help her pin the dupatta in a way that covers the rip. She sits on the edge of the bath.  
*You should come back down to us for a longer break, I finally say.*  
She says nothing, not even a laugh. I sit next to her on the edge of the bath and place an arm around her shoulder. She rests her head on mine. A pin from her headscarf digs into my scalp but I don't care.

## TRANSFER II

My parents have gone shopping so I'm left in charge of cleaning the house.  
I call out to Ali from upstairs, tell him to Hoover the living room as he's already sitting in it. There's no answer, but I can hear the tinny sounds of the video game he's playing.  
I snap off yellow rubber gloves and throw them into our bath before marching downstairs, calling his name.  
*You can play your game after you've hoovered—*  
He's on his phone as the game's cutscene plays out. There's a picture of a topless woman that disappears after a second.  
I slap the phone out of his hand.  
He shouts at me,  
I scream back.  
*It's not my picture, I swear, my mate just sent it to me, he protests.*  
I yell at him,  
*What the fuck do you think you're doing*  
*Is this what you do now*  
*You pervert*  
*Haven't you got any shame?*  
He stares at me in shock. I've never uttered a curse word at home, never screamed at him before.  
*Get out the room, I whisper.*  
He grabs his phone and runs upstairs.  
I crumple to the floor, my head too heavy to keep straight.

### DREAMS III

There's a story by Begum Rokeya published in 1905 called *Sultana's Dream*. In it, she envisions a utopia ruled by women scholars and warriors, a utopia where the men are kept indoors. I fantasise about a world like this, where Ammar is shut indoors. I fantasise about a world where I can get my cousin back, my sister. In this world, I am a respected researcher who had no anguish in pursuing physics. I did not break each time I remembered the goals I'd given up, because I never gave them up. There was never a reason to.

But then I wonder, would I simply keep Ammar indoors? He'd figure out a way to escape the confines of this new world order. He would figure out a way to break me once more.

No, it would be much better if he simply didn't exist;  
if his name dropped off the edge of the Earth  
and his memory evaporated into the vacuum of space.  
That is my utopia.

### TIME

It feels like a sin to wait;  
is it a sin  
to wait for someone else's sadness?

### THE THIRD LAW

The entropy of anger approaches a constant as time progresses. It becomes steady.  
Its chaos won't always control you.

### TRANSFER III

It's a quiet day when I tell her. It's the first time in three years we've been left alone, with Ilyas at her parents'. We share a sticky toffee pudding over our coffees.

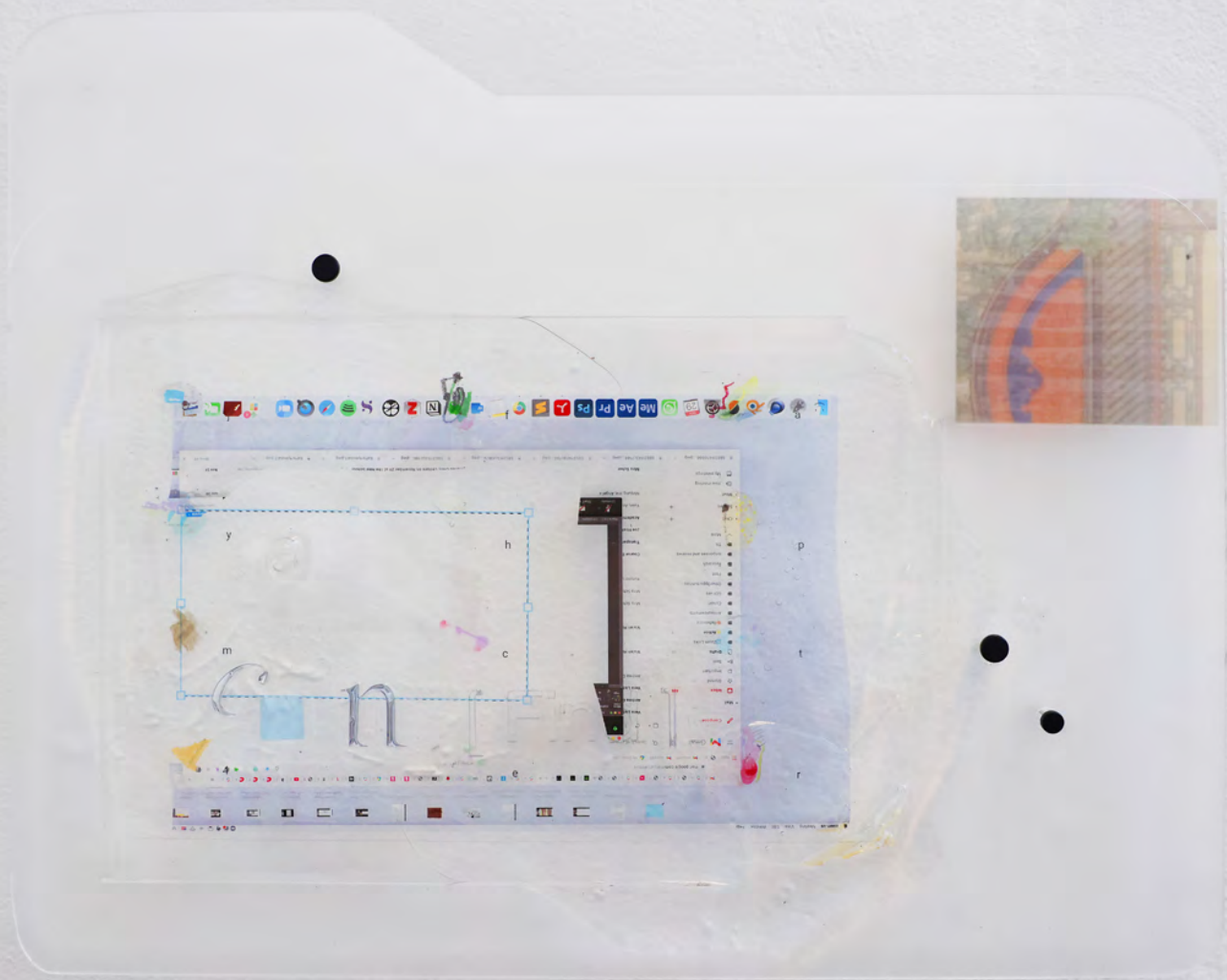
Her eyebrows crease and her mouth falls open ever so slightly and thin film of tears forms over her eyes.

For a moment I'm scared she'll respond like Mama, ask me why I've even dared to bring this up.

Instead, Yasmin stares out the window of the cafe. I ask if she's okay, but she doesn't reply. After some minutes have passed, she looks back at me, her jaw clenched.

*It's time to leave*, she says and offers to pay the bill.





Tianyi Sun, *Softbox [Find]*, 2022; *Softbox [Sweet]*, 2022



# MY BEST FRIEND'S FATHER

*Ben Michelman*

A boy fears what his father lacks:  
gun safe, girlfriends, loud Louisiana laugh.

*Guns locked up safe, your father laughs;  
his work-stained hand claps my dad's back.*

Dad's nail-gnawed fingers never clap back.  
We shift in the eyes of a twelve-point buck.

Your dad opens the eyes of twelve-year-old bucks:  
cowboy movies, snakes in a Solo cup.

Wild, freckled sons: snakes in a Solo cup.  
Down in their basement we hold each other

down. Chicken-wing farts. Safety. Hold each other's  
secrets: one ear to the upstairs rumble.

His secret escape: the Ram's rumble.  
He *opens her up*. We buckle in back.

He opened her up: buckle to the back.  
A boy fears what his father lacks.



Krista Sheneman, *Terra Incognita*, 2022

# GHOSTS, DOING ORDINARY THINGS

*Hillery Hugg*

The ghost was washing the dishes. It picked up the dish-soap bottle and inverted it, squeezing, until something landed on the scrubber. Later, we would wonder if we'd been spellbound by some sort of ghostly approach, or if the soap did indeed take that long to travel from the bottom of the bottle to the neck and then to emerge from the spout in a drizzle like green honey, taking its sweet time. The ghost started with the plates, as anyone would. Its ghostly limbs made circular motions as it cleaned the front and back of each piece of flat pottery given to us by a close friend. Then the ghost moved onto the bowls and glasses, taking care to really get to the bottom of the goblets, where circles of leftover Merlot, like the rings of very small planets, had been left to deposit in rotations of grapeskin and sediment. We felt embarrassed that we'd left the glasses out so long, that such a fixed record of our past joys remained. The ghost continued on to the more difficult pieces, the pans with settlements of risotto at the bottom. As it labored to remove the stubborn grains, we resisted the urge to suggest the steel-wool pads, just under the sink, for fear of what might happen if a ghost were interrupted at this kind of endeavor, the way you worry about waking a sleepwalker. Through the ghost's form, we could still discern the tap, fully open, as water poured down the drain, and we also resisted suggesting the ghost turn it off while scrubbing. It was such a habit when we ourselves washed the dishes that the sound of the water roaring down the drain, sending soapy water

out to sea, almost distracted us from accepting fully that a ghost was positioned in front of the sink in our kitchen, wholly disinterested, it seemed, in us. The ghost was working methodically but not cheerlessly, with a lightness to its touch as it moved through the pile we'd left on the countertop. Should we say something? one of us wondered. Should we clear a throat to announce our presence without alarm? The other of us did cough, almost as if through communication without speaking, but the ghost didn't move or turn around to the nervous, dry sound. We never saw the ghost's front, only its back, as it finished washing, replaced the scrubber, and wiped up the few leftover lagoons of water it had made in its industry. The ghost then folded our faded dishtowel into a shape not usual to us but perfectly serviceable, and discussing the experience later, we both admitted we found it satisfying that humans and ghosts do not fold towels in the same way.

At night we could hear the ghost rustling around in our pantry. We'd spent a long weekend, months ago, organizing the area ourselves, but it seemed the ghost didn't like the way we'd grouped the dry goods in one section, canned selections in another, with scattered jars of sweet and savory spreads along the left side, and sporadic baking ingredients along the right. Admittedly, we'd left the rest of the items more or less uncategorized, which caused a jumble of orphaned elements in the middle section, perhaps as if waiting to be classified

and sent to their rightful province. By morning, the ghost had established clearer groupings and had given each item a designation and a justified place. We stood in the kitchen and had to admit the improvement. The coffee was brewing in its maker, the toast was ticking in its warming cage. The cats wound around our legs with impatience for their own meal as we stood and marveled at the efficiency of the intuitive systems of organization, the revelation of the ghost's choices. "Why hadn't we thought of that? Or even that?" we asked each other over breakfast. Our scrambled eggs were dotted with an impulsive pinch of the paprika we'd seen in its new setting and been inspired to add to the dish at the last minute. The smoky taste reminded us of the notion of choreographing existence so that opportunities have the chance to appear. We'd encountered that idea once in a motivational speech someone had sent us in an email. At the time, we'd both laughed at such a concept. Opportunities are made, we believed, not happened upon. We ourselves, we felt, have to bear the responsibility for creating prospects out of whole cloth. But the ghost's manipulation of our foodstuffs convinced us otherwise. The way our home was ordered had changed the way our life progressed. Even the cats could tell the difference in our moods as we lay on the couch with them in the afternoon, hoping the ghost would return.

The ghost wanted to host a dinner party. We had to guess at this at first, since it didn't tell us anything directly, not with words, but when we came home from work, the ghost was sitting at the dining table surrounded by neat stacks of our best linen napkins and piles of our good cutlery, arranged like silver firewood ready to be burned. The ghost was engrossed in composing something on paper, and one of us leaned forward enough to see over, or through, its lumpen shoulder some marks scrawled in a pattern that looked a lot like a list. The inscrutable characters were arranged on the paper in inky groups that suggested deliberate associations, as if certain alliances needed proximity, both in whatever mind the ghost might have to think about those sorts of concerns, and also in a diagram by which to ensure that the groups

would remain congregated in the real world. We mostly assumed these associations, if indeed the marks denoted which guests the ghost was hoping would attend. Another piece of paper lay next to the ghost's elbow area, the writing on which looked to one of us like a menu, but the other of us remained unconvinced. "Do ghosts even eat?" was the harshly whispered question that begged a lot of other questions, in truth. We lay awake for a long time that night, listening, as the ghost made frustrated sounds downstairs, none of the emissions evoking actual words, but sounding more like sighs, if sighs were made of some variation of seafoam or fog. The next morning the ghost was still there, working diligently at setting the table, ensuring everything was perfect. Flowers were brought in from the garden and placed thoughtfully at each place. Pots and pans were assembled in the kitchen as if readied for a long night of intricate food preparation. In the end, no ingredients appeared, and the ghost never cooked anything. The ghost just remained seated at the beautifully-laid table, silently surveying the arranged plane of polished glasses and sparkling serving pieces, the good plates stacked like Russian nesting dolls in flat towers of anticipation. No one rang the bell, though we were hopeful and fearful that someone, or something, might. We stayed in the kitchen out of respect as the hushed night wore on, and we quietly discussed whether or not we, even in our limited and corporeal state, should attempt to enliven the failed gathering so that the ghost wouldn't be so alone. But we could sense the elaborate planning and excited preparations hadn't been for us, and would likely be sullied by our intrusion, so we stayed in the kitchen and ate some warmed up beans on toast without saying much. The next morning, the lists and menu were gone, as was the ghost and any evidence of its plans. The linens had been put away carefully, the glasses re-polished and returned to the cabinet. The plates sat re-stacked in the dark of the cupboard. Too late, we decided we should've fashioned some way to invite the ghost to a dinner party of our own making. Some of our friends could be a bit boorish sometimes about newcomers and things they didn't fully understand, but in the end, their

hearts were good, and we knew that somehow, in the unexpected manner we had come to love, they would've found a way to make the ghost feel welcome.

The ghost was hammering on something down in the living room. "It's your turn to go," one of us said to the other in the manner of loving but weary parents, acclimatized to the constant division of life into shifts of responsibility. When we finally peered down the stairwell together, we could see the ghost sitting on the floor near the sofa, surrounded by framed photos, those static representations of our people and our experiences, collected from their usual locations and terraced around its seated shape. Early life, middle life, pictures of ourselves, travels, friends and family from afar, all gathered from their household diaspora and piled up, ready. The ghost had our hammer and a box of penny nails we didn't even remember buying. Maybe we'd gotten them one year to put up holiday lights? We usually left the carpentry chores undone until the arrival of a handy visiting relative, or we might sometimes hire a local tradesman to come and finish up a few loose hinges or fixtures. The ghost seemed comfortable with the tool, that much was clear to us, as it held the hammer aloft with a vaporous hand shape and held a penny nail with the other. One by one, the ghost labored to hang our photos on the wall in a pleasing arrangement. It seemed to have chosen one wall, the one opposite the fireplace, where we'd previously hung only a single large photo suspended, center stage. Instead, the ghost hung all of our assorted photos there, one after another, until there was a map of our life on the wall. The record began with our separate trajectories—each of us as a child, one seated between grandparents in now-outdated clothing and hairstyle, or one of us perched on the lap of an unknown stranger, the adult face just out of the frame. There were the photos of us as we grew up, one of us working class, the other having enjoyed more material privilege and less parental affection. Then the photo arrangement flowed into an assemblage of our lives together, like two waterways pouring into one channel, the trips we'd taken together, ceremonies we'd attended, traditions

and holidays we'd marked as a pair instead of alone. The effect touched us, and we watched as if we weren't entirely sure what the outcome of our story might be. The ghost became lost in the rhythm of its industry, ordering the framed pictures on the floor below the wall before methodically placing each nail on the surface where the image was meant to be. The ghost tapped in each nail, hung the picture, squared it to perfection, then bent back down to the floor for the next. And so on and so on, into the night, until the tableau was complete and a larger pattern emerged. When our images had previously been scattered all over the house, no story was so easily shaped, no unifying account so indisputable. But, after the ghost's work, our own faces peered back at us from the wall in a sort of accusatory chronology: what had we wanted when we first started our lives, where had we ended up? The next morning, after a night of fitful sleep for ourselves, the ghost was gone, again, and all our photos had been removed from the one wall and returned to their former rightful places, onto tabletops, shelves, and nooks. The nail holes the ghost had made in the wall remained, though, and one of us stood close in front of them and touched them like reading a vast span of braille. From a farther distance, the tiny dots evoked a pattern of constellations in an unfamiliar sky, arrangements of astronomical significance and clusters of already-dead stars that might be referred to, if needed, to guide someone home.

Later, we came home from the market to find the ghost dancing by itself to loud music in the living room. A selection of records from our collection lay on the sofa in a horizontal queue. Spiraling with abandon, the ghost was strangely graceful and immersed in its own rhythm, appearing unaware of our watching. The ghost seemed to be humming along, but the sound wasn't like the hum made from the bodily vibrations we're accustomed to. The sound was like feathers wiping the sky, or insects scurrying under a log, and we resisted the urge to run out of the room at the discomfiting nature of its effect. Instead, we covered our ears and continued watching the dance until the song finished and the ghost, apparently

worn out by its effort, settled into a chair by the television, not attempting to turn the machine on, but merely staring. Another day, seated in the same chair, the ghost seemed to be trying to read a book, turning the pages at an alarming rate, until we worried it might damage some of our favorite editions. For the first time, we came within a hairsbreadth of intervening, one of us stepping forward like a stranger stirred to interrupt criminal activity. Only the ghost's sudden stillness stopped us, the page-turning paused abruptly, mid-flip, and the ghost turned its head shape toward us for the first time, in what can only be described as boundless frustration. We felt peered into, even without the presence of a face or eyes. We hesitated. The ghost put the book down with what felt to us like resignation, but not indelicately, and stood up from the chair. "Move," one of us said instinctively to the other standing in its path, and the ghost passed by to leave the room and the house, a current of air steeped with the cold of a winter cellar in its wake.

The last time we interacted with the ghost, we didn't even get to see it, we only heard it splashing around from the other side of the bathroom door. The ghost had already been in there over three quarters of an hour, running the tap, opening cabinets, and generally making a ruckus of bathing noises. We stood in the hallway and listened to its ablutions, wondering what the ghost looked like as it lowered its amorphous form into a filled tub.

Were there bubbles? we wondered. Did the ghost have a need to clean itself or was it just there to try to relax, to sit back and enjoy the warm embrace of modern conveniences and the comforting scent of our soaps? After a while of lessening splashes, we noticed a sound like sobbing, but more raspy or muffled, like something crying inside the confines of a bag, shored-up tight. One of us was alarmed, but the other was more used to the idea of sad release in solitary moments. "Just let it be," the more accustomed of us said, as the ghost sobbed what we can only imagine were saltless, and perhaps weightless, tears, alongside the bottles and lotions of our daily morning rituals. We sat on the floor near the bathroom door in the unlit hallway, holding hands as we leaned against the wall, listening to whatever indefinable grief the ghost was trying to shed onto our newly re-tiled floor. What we didn't say out loud was that we'd probably had different ideas, or hopes, more likely, before the ghost came, about what an afterlife would turn out to be. Maybe we'd been optimistic that, after a body passed on, the little concerns would leave forever, molting like skin, gladly lost in the passage. Maybe we'd hoped that there would never be any need to revisit those pursuits and frustrations of a former life, the ones that keep us so attached.







Georgina Berbari  
*Reflection 1, 2022*

# TODAY I BOUGHT MY BRIDE A GRAVE

*Thomas Reed Willemain*

Will Michaels, sometime poet, figured that there were few moments in life more adult than going out and buying two graves—the weirdest kind of shopping. To mark the occasion, he penned a bit of doggerel:

*Today I bought my bride a grave  
And one for me beside it  
I even paid for dig and fill  
And thus did I  
My dear bride's will.*

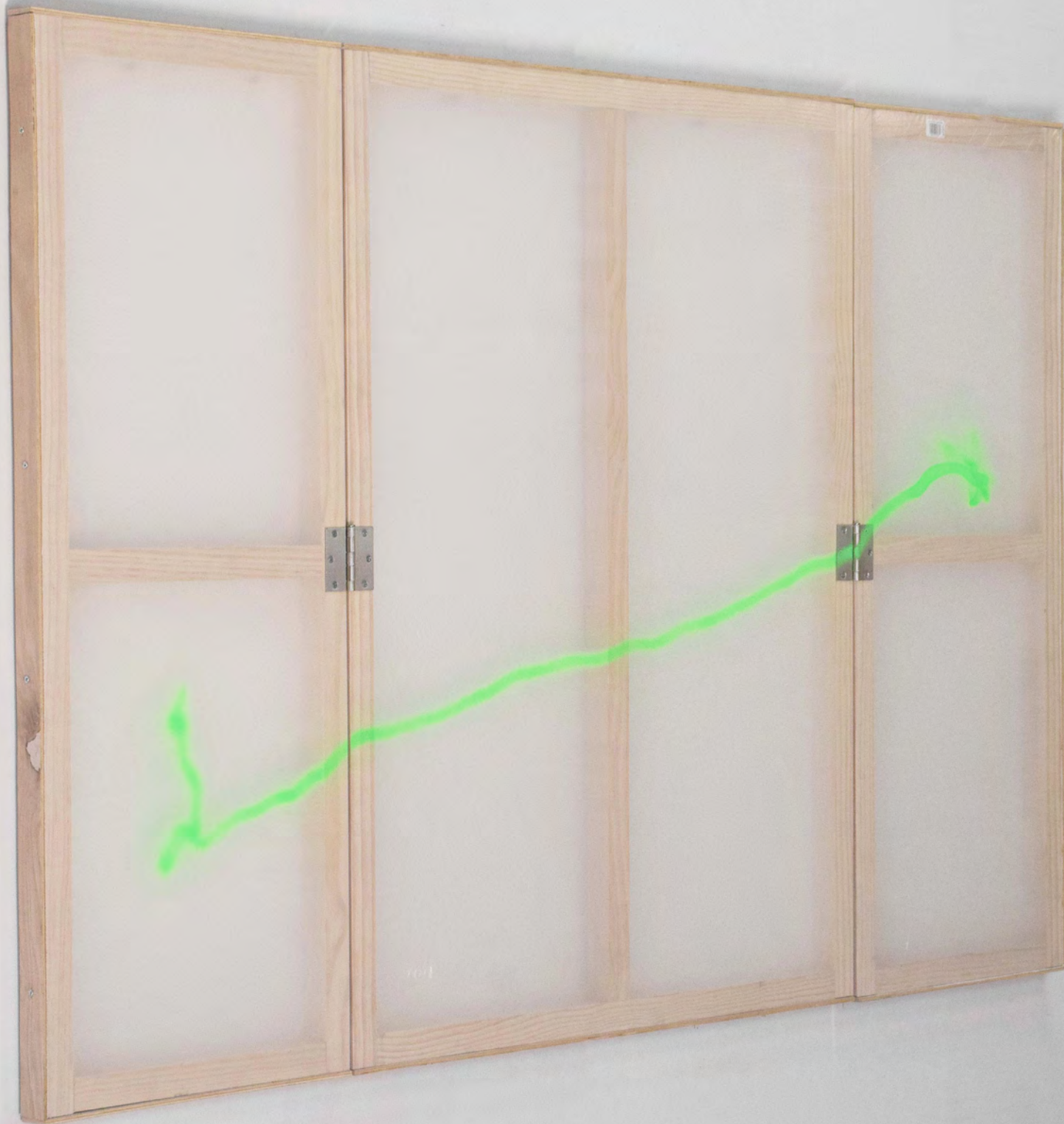
*She loves the meadow  
Where we will lay  
Wrapped in our linen shrouds  
Peering up through wild flowers  
At everlasting clouds.*

*We still must think of four lines each  
To etch upon some bricks  
Our names, no dates, and chosen verse  
something gentler  
than Shakespeare's curse.*

A few years earlier, an article had appeared in the local newspaper announcing a new “natural burial” site in a wildflower meadow carved out of the local Catholic cemetery. Will knew he was honor bound to point the article out to his wife Lucy. A hard core “plant lady,” Lucy knew the Latin and common names of everything that grew, with a special fondness for weeds, wild edible plants, and mushrooms. Lucy read the article with obvious interest, then she said a few fateful words that added the concept to the family someday-list. Then, more recently, Lucy bumped the issue up to the top of the list by having a (minor) heart attack. Will looked at his own blood test results and started to hear two clocks ticking.

Once money changed hands, graves 3 and 4 were Will and Lucy's final real estate play. Will thought he was pretty clever to select graves at the very back of the meadow, adjacent to the forever-wild area recently purchased by the Nature Conservancy. Will imagined his grandchildren sneaking up on the meadow, pausing at the tree line, and putting little trinkets on the two graves, maybe a My Little Pony or a Bart Simpson—nothing too respectful. Or if he were to go second, he imagined himself staggering through the woods in camo gear, sitting quietly next to grave 3, and thinking back over nearly 50 years that started by a punch bowl one October in a house on Mellon Street in Cambridge. There was one young woman in the room who looked up and thought to herself *Oh look, a narc*, while the young man thought to himself *Oh look, a hippy*. Could love be far behind?

Occasionally Will drives over and parks near the meadow. Thoughts of past and future scroll by. Sometimes there are fleeting questions about who the neighbors are in graves 1 and 2. But the one persistent feeling is the strange numbness that Will gets when he looks at the spot where graves 3 and 4 lie waiting. Perhaps not yet fully adult after all, he stares at the spot like a chipmunk trying to make sense of a calliope.



# THIS IS NOT ABOUT THE DOG

Shana Ross

This was going to be about a dog I knew who could flatten himself so completely he got mistaken for a rug more than once, which is one way the world comes to step on you. I'd rather talk about guilt, which I watch you gather with one hand and deny with a fist. How you pound on the table to make a point. Guilt: taking your first grader to a Catholic church; gathering: her grandfather and best dress shoes. Who am I to tell this story? It's not my kid, it's not my dog. And yet. How she whispers and giggles into the shadowy stone hall, the wooden benches, incense layered into the walls like a napoleon, crunching and oozing and sweet. She knows it is impolite to point, so she wiggles for your attention. *Why is there a naked man up there?* You say *Oh, that's Jesus.* She's caught you in a lie. *I thought you said he was a baby.* The look in that poor dog's eyes when I put my full weight down, as you do when you stand, on a tail; thank god, on his tail. *He does that,* said his owner, and shrugged.

CHIEF COMPLAINT: Lower GI bleed, concerned for... FUNGUS RECTAL MASS SEEN ON COLONOSCOPY.

HISTORY OF PRESENT ILLNESS: This is a 55-year-old female... admission from 10/04/2018 to 10/05/2018, and she was most recently admitted on 10/14/2018.

Mother and additional family members were met at bedside with the patient. Today, the patient was intermittently asking to leave against medical advice to go home during our conversation.

REVIEW OF SYSTEMS: Positive weight loss, positive bright red blood per rectum, otherwise patient unable to provide.

ALLERGIES: PENICILLIN.

MEDICATIONS: Home medications were not obtained as the patient was unable to provide.

PAST MEDICAL HISTORY table with columns for condition, date, and status. Includes Bipolar disorder, Polysubstance use, Anemia, and various hospital surgical and social history items.

CONSULTATIONS table with columns for date, time, and provider. Includes consultations on 8/17/18 and 8/16/18.

LABORATORY RESULTS table with columns for test name, value, and units. Includes hematology and chemistry panels.

Called to TOLEDA, RN and verified "read-back" of the test result(s) on 08/17/18 0014 at 74545 by FLAGBC.

Patient: RUSSELL, YVONNE MARIE ACCT: (Continued)

\*\*\*HEMATOLOGY\*\*\*

HEMATOLOGY table with columns for date, test name, value, and units. Includes WBC, RBC, Hemoglobin, Hematocrit, Platelets, and various indices.

CAUSE OF DEATH form with fields for immediate cause, contributory conditions, and other significant conditions.

101 CAUSE OF DEATH form with a handwritten entry: A METASTATIC COLON CANCER TO PELVIS, UTERUS, KIDNEY, BONES.



PSYCHIATRIC FOLLOWUP form with a handwritten entry: I is a 55-year-old woman, who I suspect of colon cancer.

108 DEATH REPORTED TO CORONER form with checkboxes for YES/NO.

DIAGNOSIS form with checkboxes for various conditions like Acute blood loss anemia.

ATTENTION: VITAL SIGNS: Reviewed. GENERAL: No apparent distress, lying in supine position...

PLAN: This is a 55-year-old female with likely underlying rectosigmoid adenocarcinoma...

- 4. The patient agreed to stay until all the necessary workup is done. 5. If the patient wants to leave against medical advice...

This was discussed with the family at bedside, and they did not feel the patient will function with an ostomy given her poor function of status and lack of social support.

We will follow up the biopsy results, review imaging with colorectal surgeon and depending on the biopsy results, we consider confirmation with Oncology for potential

LABORATORY RESULTS table with columns for date, test name, value, and units. Includes chemistry panels.

Administrative header table with fields for patient name, date, and other identifiers.

HEMATOLOGY table with columns for date, test name, value, and units. Includes WBC, RBC, Hemoglobin, Hematocrit, Platelets, and various indices.

HEMATOLOGY table with columns for date, test name, value, and units. Includes WBC, RBC, Hemoglobin, Hematocrit, Platelets, and various indices.

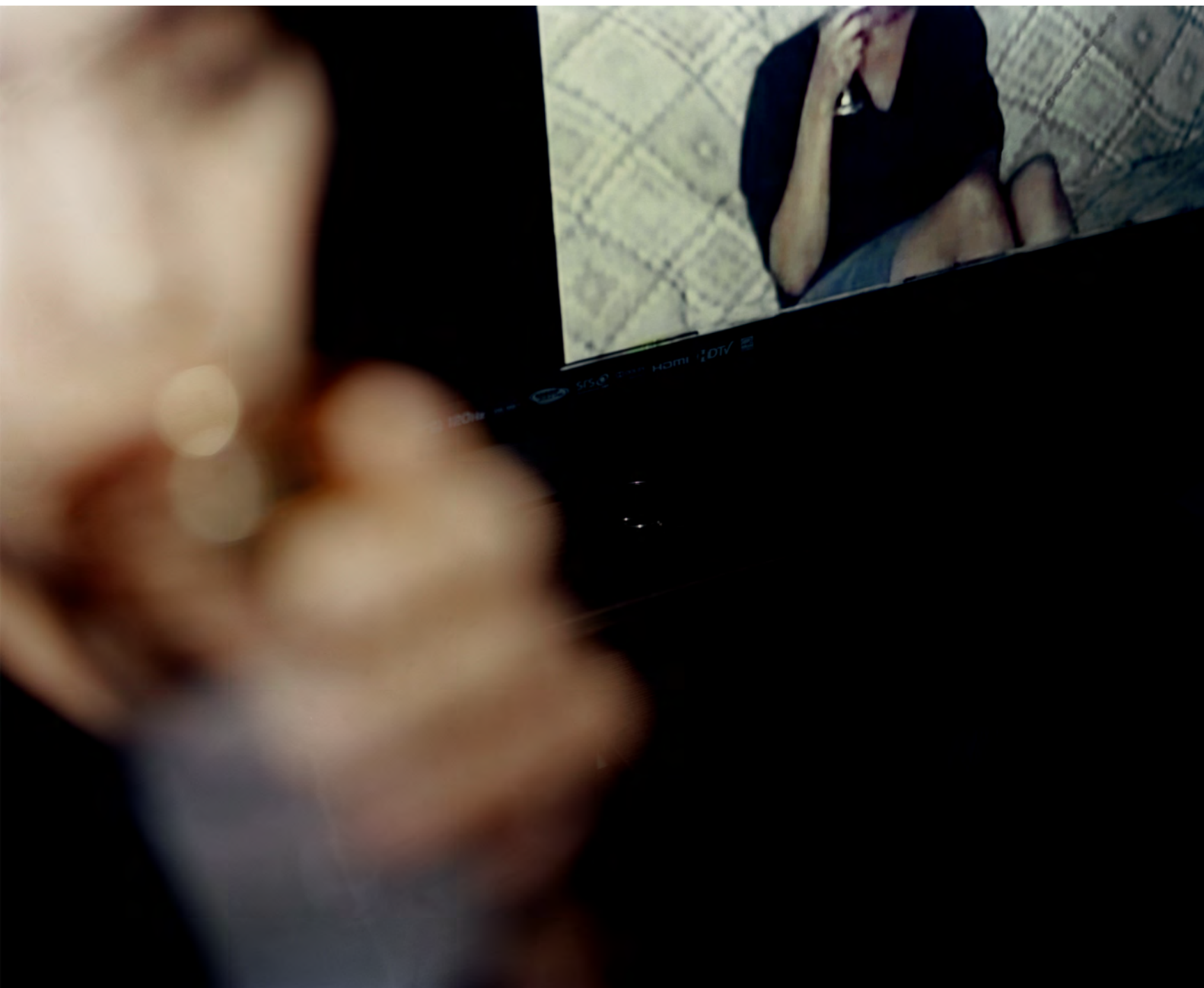
HEMATOLOGY table with columns for date, test name, value, and units. Includes WBC, RBC, Hemoglobin, Hematocrit, Platelets, and various indices.

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[Left] Simone Zapata, *Reason For Consultation*, 2021; [Above] Clara Delgado, *Home Movie*, 2022



# THE SHIFT

*Amanda Shapiro*

What can I say about the night Carl danced at the Rhinocerosopolos? The kids all seemed pretty much unfazed. We were in Denver, after all, in one of those warehouse venues where people also seem to live and no one cares if a mud-streaked dog jumps onstage or the guitarist stops mid-song to tell his bandmates to “kill the downbeat harder” or a fortysomething out-of-towner goes wild on the dance floor. Mostly I remember Tori’s laugh, fast and hard like a balloon when it deflates.

We were in Denver, Carl and I, so he and Tori could get divorced. Tori and Carl were college friends-slash-ex-lovers-slash-they-were-married-once but just *symbolically*, as Carl emphasizes whenever I bring it up.

“All marriages are symbols. That’s literally the definition of marriage,” is what I told him.

“A symbol’s a signal, my fingers are cymbals,” is what he said to that.

Carl hadn’t talked to Tori in close to a decade until, at my strong suggestion, he looked her up online. “Victoria Jammerman” is an easily searchable name. She was still in Denver, an administrative something something at the County Office of Public Health. I was pro-divorce in this situation—a lobbyist, you could say—but it was Carl who insisted we fly from New York; he wanted to do it “free-range and organic,” meaning, I guess, in person. Carl knows I have a thing for aviation so he promised me a visit to the Wings Over the Rockies Air & Space Museum and minimal ex-wife exposure if I came along.

I was expecting to stay in a motel and order room service while my boyfriend met his wife to sign some paperwork. I was not expecting Tori to meet us at the

airport, to drive us in her Golf with no muffler to a house with five dead computers on the kitchen table and an old Pac-Man arcade in the living room and mold growing up the cracks on the walls. I was not expecting the Rhinocerosopolos. But Tori’s boyfriend was in a math-rock band that was opening for another band, and Carl, overzealous as usual, insisted we all go to the show.

I still don’t know what math-rock is, but I can report that it was pretty easy to ignore except when they sang, which happened infrequently.

While the band played, Tori and Carl and I stood in the thin crowd, Tori swaying like a maniac, Carl broodingly focused, me staring at every other person in the room. The kids there were white, every one, and clean cut. No tattoos, one case of dreadlocks, more than a few collared shirts. They all stood with arms crossed, checking their cell phones at what seemed like timed intervals. This was Denver’s famed underground music scene that Carl had gone on and on about.

“Looks like everyone’s going home to Mom and Dad tonight,” I said to Carl. He ignored me.

“Wouldn’t this be so much better if they were a John Denver cover band?”

Carl gave me the look I hate, the look that says you are not funny and I will not laugh at you. I put my hand on his back and prayed he wouldn’t pull away.

I watched Tori, trying to decide whether she was a nervous person or just nervous. She obsessively ran her thumb and finger around the corners of her lips like she was checking for spittle or bits of food and swiping the edges of her face near her hairline and along her chin.

Also she's tiny, and I don't just mean short, like every part of her body was small.

"That's just who she is," Carl said earlier as we stood in the room that would be ours for the night. Clothes, comic books, and used plates spilled from the closet where I guessed she'd shoved everything that'd been on the floor. Open boxes were labeled and stacked against a wall. Inside them were thousands of playing cards, and I riffled my fingers over them. Strange symbols and pictures of wizards.

"We passed a Comfort Inn," I said.

"Sorry, no upgrades."

"But she makes me anxious."

"Take a pill." Which meant, this trip is not about you.

He was right and I told him, but I could tell he was mad as we helped the boyfriend, Robin, load the van before the show. It was the slow-burn anger of a hard year, and we both felt it. I blamed his marriage, which I'd learned about when we were moving in together and I was sorting through a box of decade-old receipts: hemp milk, \$2.75, nose hair trimmers, \$4.99, marriage license, \$24.99. To Carl's credit, he was honest and tactful in the telling. They met in college, at Dream Interpretation Club, and became friendly. They'd both hung around Denver after graduating, Carl doing drugs more than recreationally, Tori avoiding the fire that was her parents' divorce. Occasionally they had sex. One night at a party, Carl was on mushrooms and ended up in the bathtub. The fact that he was sitting in a bathtub isn't important, but it's a detail I never forget. Tori found him and told him that her dad had just driven his car into oncoming traffic and was in

a coma. They stayed in the bathroom all night, cosmic connections happened that Carl can't really explain, and a few weeks later they were at City Hall. Three months after that, he dropped Tori with her mother in Arizona and hitchhiked to New York.

The first time Carl told me this story, I asked in a yelling voice how he could justify his behavior, and didn't he see he was delusional to think he could play the hero, and didn't he understand he'd not only made a mistake but actually probably further damaged a woman dealing with a massive amount of pain? Yes, he said, it was very clear now that it'd been a *childlike thing to do*. Not childish, childlike. Because children are not to be blamed.

For the record: I wanted my boyfriend to not be married to someone else, but that didn't mean I wanted to marry him myself. I considered marriage "state-sanctioned sexism," a phrase Carl called "sensationalist," to which I answered, "Married men get happier over time. Married women get sadder. Married men are healthier than bachelors. Married women get sick more than both their husbands and single women their age." My data is good; it comes from my mother, who spent 27 years as a prosecutor in family court and has pretty much the same position on men as the lesbians I knew in college. She had me when she was 43. My father was a sperm donor she found through a Craigslist ad. "I screened intensively," is her only response when I point out the insanity of that.

The post-doc's band finished their last, blessedly instrumental song, and he came over to us, shirtless and sweating like he'd played an Aerosmith concert instead

of five songs that never went above 80 BPMs. Tori was effusive. Robin benevolently modest. He has the kind of face that gets weird when it smiles.

“Some of the cues were off because our bassist is on tour with The Alpine Girls and we had to get Randy to fill in. He’s a stats guy, so.”

“Right on, man. That was a totally fascinating show!” Carl was trying to prove to all of us how much he liked this guy. He wanted Tori to feel validated, Robin to feel unthreatened, and me to feel guilty for being alive.

“The main band is going to be sick,” said Robin. “They’re from Austin. They’re like the Martian Twins meets Nylon Sam with a synth-grunge twist.”

“The keyboardist played with Dressler Seven,” Tori said. “Remember them?” “Yeah, didn’t we see them at Alice’s?” said Carl. “With Staccato Fever, right?” “That was a great show.”

“I’ll never understand why Davie Malstroop left them to play for Ladle Parade,” said Robin. “A musician of that caliber who sells his soul to play three-chord emo-punk is a disgrace to the art of rock-n-roll.”

I’m generally fascinated by people who talk like they are personally responsible for establishing the truth of things.

“Someone tell me why he would do that,” Robin stated.

Eight years is not an absurd or even uncommon age difference for couples, I think—hardly a Woody Allen scenario, as my mother liked to suggest—but sometimes conversations like this happen, and I have to stare at dark stains on the floor and sulk like a kid at a cocktail party. I didn’t know about Davie Malstroop or the Martian Twins

but I guessed they were names people in certain circles cared about when Carl and Tori were taking mushrooms and going to concerts and symbolically getting hitched. Because, while that was happening for them, I was still in my childhood bedroom on Pennicott Street sliding into third base with Alan Antmen, future high school valedictorian. I remember my mother walking in once to find us half-clothed and mutually masturbating, and saying, “Hello, Jan, Alan. One in four Americans has herpes. I trust you’ll use a condom when the situation calls for it.”

When I was growing up, my mother did not have sex. Most people who say that are in denial, but I promise that no sexual acts occurred in our house until I started bringing boys home. But my mother retired a few years ago, and retirement, I’ve learned, changes people in strange ways. She sold the house on Pennicott Street and bought a yellow bungalow on the nicer side of town. She started going to meditation classes—my mother, who has had a lifelong aversion to sitting down—and she’s taken an interest in one of the teachers. “Senior monastics,” she corrects me every time. It’s hard to tell what the situation is; my mother is tight-lipped. But I’ve been watching her rediscover the world with what I’m forced to call wonder. They take walks around the reservoir, collecting peels of birch bark and cicada carcasses and arranging them on the kitchen counter. Recently it’s pits she wants to discuss—the pinched whorls of the peach pit, an avocado’s teardrop. “Jan, the pit tells the story of the fruit’s essential self,” she says. She wants me to draw my own pit; I tell her she’s going senile. I tease her,

saying she could only fall for a monastic because he's transcended manhood.

Carl, she hates. She says he grasps for meaning in a violent way.

Feeling emboldened, Carl was telling another joke: "So, in ancient Egypt, there was a set of Siamese twins who went rowing through the desert." In New York he does comedy. I used to find his routines weirdly titillating but recently they'd begun to wear.

As usual, the punchline was inscrutable. Only Tori laughed, the balloon-sputter again, and it seemed a little desperate this time, or maybe it was just the way she was gripping the post-doc's arm.

"Tell me we have the volcano," Robin said then.

"It's all in the van," said Tori.

"Let's go before The Shift comes on."

Carl can't hold his liquor, but his relationship with weed is enviable. Mine is estranged, built on a foundation of ignorance and misuse. Generally I crawl into the fetal position and cry. Carl was looking at me.

"Are you asking my permission?" I said.

"I'm guessing you don't want to come?"

"Go on. I'll embed with some seventeen-year-olds."

We kissed but it was weird for both of us, probably also for Tori, who was back to picking at her chin.

Carl and I met at a Tonys party on the Lower East Side. I remember hoarding cheese balls in my pockets and that Meryl Streep was there. I was 21, interning for a magazine that paid me with a press pass. Carl got into

everything though he was never on the list. We ended up alone on the balcony, the river passing blackly under the Brooklyn Bridge, the sky wet and low. Carl had on a pair of Bose noise-canceling headphones; he told me he was learning how to read lips. That's when I learned that some people are turned on by public humiliation. He watched my mouth closely while I talked for too long about my mother, who loves Meryl Streep because they share a birthday and because they both worked for a season at the Hotel Somerset in Somerville, New Jersey, where my mother grew up, back when Meryl was Mary Louise and my mom was skinny.

A few weeks later, Carl met me in Midtown at the end of a very long day, and we walked south toward the spangled maw of Times Square holding each other around the waist, which made our height difference more apparent. I consider myself part of a hallowed lineage of tall women who've fallen for short men (though, for the record, I'm five-foot-nine-and-one-quarter; not some kind of giantess). I told this to Carl and he said he preferred to think of us as John Lennon and Yoko Ono. I am lanky and he does have some Asian blood. At 42<sup>nd</sup> Street and Broadway, we turned west and walked toward the river until we could hear ourselves think again. We stopped at a Thai place and ate dainty fish dumplings and drank the house drink they called Bangkok Fever. The restaurant was empty. The waiter liked us and seemed to want us to stay. He brought us another Bangkok Fever and then lychee ice cream and then another Fever after that.

We took the subway back to Brooklyn, our bodies pushed together in the crowded car. The cocktails had

made me tipsy. Carl was definitely drunk. His hand was halfway up the back of my dress shirt and I was discreetly tongue-ing his ear. In his apartment, we had sex standing up (our height difference worked for us in this way too) and Carl asked me to recite something I knew by heart. The only things I could think of were show tunes. My mother loves Rodgers and Hammerstein and when I was little we'd watch *Carousel* and *The Music Man* and *The Sound of Music* and drink root beer floats and identify patriarchal subtext. So with Carl inside me I started to sing the one from *Oklahoma* about the surrey with the fringe on top. We both came midway through the second verse.

Home alone, I thought, heading into the bowels of the Rhinocerotropolis. I made my way down a black-walled hallway with a door to one side that said, *Piss Here*. The hallway opened into the back half of the warehouse, which had been subdivided into lofts and smaller rooms with plywood walls that went partway to the ceiling. Curtains hung across doorways. On the walls were art posters of the college dorm variety, a mounted fish head, a striped sock, a soft-bodied doll with a nail through her waist. There was a kitchenette in the corner and a bank of couches. I sat on the one that looked the least stained. A muddy dog appeared next to my leg. I scratched its back and felt the dirt in its hair and the oil on its skin. The dog's stink wafted around me so I stopped petting it, and it stared at me for a minute before wandering away.

A girl in a vintage tracksuit and chipped rainbow nail polish flopped down near me and started reading a zine.

"What's that about?"

"This one's about the comeback of Noise."

"Did you say noise?"

"Yeah, Noise." She waited. "It's like an aesthetic."

Kids were milling around in clumps of twos and threes, passing other clumps without acknowledgment and ducking into doorways. I remembered how when you were a teenager you weren't supposed to talk to teenagers you didn't know. You talked to your friends, and if you didn't have friends, you talked to no one and acted like you didn't care.

I was considering my next move when two girls in tight denim and flip flops came out from behind a curtain. Their hair was identical—ironed straight and falling just past the shoulder, long bangs hanging in their eyes. I saw one pull at the bottom of her v-neck and inspect the paltry cleavage that showed up on top.

"We seriously have to go. She's threatening to come in and get me," said the other one, who kept smoothing her incredibly smooth hair.

"I told you, I'm not leaving."

"Oh my God, fine. I hope you get pregnant and syphilis."

"Fuck you."

"See you in Chem."

They hugged and the hair-smoother ran for the door. The other girl and I locked eyes. I looked away first. I've always had inferiority issues. At 27, I've felt threatened by cliques of ten-year-olds. The girl's eyes were darting from the curtain to her cell phone, where her thumbs were moving at high speeds. She had a spray of acne

across her cheeks and a soft shadow of hair on her upper lip. I looked at her chest and saw that it was mostly padding under there. A guy came out from behind the curtain. He was wiry and freckled, and from where I sat I could smell him: the spray-on cologne that dogs wear after they've been bathed by professionals.

"Where's your friend?" he said.

"She left, I don't know." The girl leaned against a plywood wall.

In order to eavesdrop better, I got up and pretended to look for a water glass. I noticed for the first time that the place was remarkably tidy. There were four labeled recycling bins—PAPER, PLASTIC, METAL, GLASS—and a sign that said *Sort it, Bitches* on the wall above them. The only thing on the steel countertop was a bag of cherries, so I tossed one into my mouth.

"You should get one of your other friends," the guy was saying.

"Why?"

"For Greg. Unless you wanna take care of us both."

"You're an asshole," she said.

"I thought you loved the cock."

She feigned outrage.

"What about *her*?" He didn't bother lowering his voice. I assumed they were talking about the girl with the zine, but when I looked over, she was gone. The dog was curled in the indent of her seat, and I had the disconcerting sense that they'd merged.

"That woman?" she said, looking at me.

My mother doesn't believe it, but I never had sex with Alan, future valedictorian of North Reservoir High. I did have sex with Pete Weiss, a Valleycat, as we called the kids from Squaw Valley, our rival school. Pete Weiss played shortstop; their colors were maroon and gold. That's mostly what I remembered now: the colors of his uniform against my shirtless chest. Back then, sex was something to learn, and I wanted to learn everything I could. In my bedroom, when I knew my mother could hear. Who can say what I was trying to prove. There was a silence in our house so I filled it.

I looked down at the sink and saw the stems and pits of cherries, bits of red flesh still holding on. I opened my mouth to speak.

"My boyfriend's getting a divorce." Not what I'd been planning to say.

The girl stared at me.

"Wow, I'm sorry," said her fellow with the amount of sincerity you might show a serial killer.

There was cheering in the front room. It seemed everyone had cleared out except us three. A guitar strummed. The buzz of amplification. "We're The Shift," said a gravelly voice. "And we're going to make you so fucking glad to be a human tonight." The counter vibrated under my hands, and I pictured Carl in a van full of beat-up rock-n-roll gear, getting high and making people laugh, reliving a time he'd probably call youth. It occurred to me that Carl's "youth" had beat mine and lasted longer too. I expected to feel that by-now familiar resentment,

but instead I felt weirdly proud and then a little nostalgic on his behalf.

The kids were backing away toward the curtained-off den of iniquity. I saw the boy's hand move to the girl's low hip, light and guiding.

"Hey, don't worry if you get herpes," I said. "One in four Americans has it already." Then the drums kicked in from the other room and everything got incredibly loud.

When Carl dances, he begins calmly enough. His fingers start tapping against his leg or on his chest, and his head cocks toward the sound. But soon his hand isn't enough, he has to move the music through him, so his whole arm starts pulling the notes up and down as if he's finger-picking an upright bass except his body is the bass. When his feet start to march, there's no going back. His body has him now and it's anyone's guess what happens next. There are stories in those thrusts—those stomps, his arcing, folding spine—but I don't know them. He moves for himself and against himself, and my mother is right, there's violence in there.

Nobody else was dancing, but there was a space cleared around Carl. I saw Tori standing toward the back.

"He does this sometimes," I said when I was next to her.

"I know," she yelled back.

A few kids were making advances into the circle. They bopped around for a second, imitating Carl, which I could tell just got him more excited. The kids were getting bolder and the music more wild, and I wondered if we'd have to pull his bloody body out from under their Converse shoes.

"Do you dance?" asked Tori.

"No," I said. "I like to be invisible rather than mocked."

"Me neither. Except I try to a little when Robin plays."

"Where'd Robin go?"

"Oh, he's sleeping." She smiled. "He fell asleep in the van."

For a while we watched Carl contort himself. Then she said, "That's true about him. He hates feeling invisible."

"I really can't stand it sometimes. He expects the whole world to love him. Sometimes I want to say, you don't deserve that. But that would make me a bitch."

I stopped myself. "Now you think I'm a bitch."

"When my dad died, nothing was real for, like, months." Tori was rocking her little hips back and forth and looking into the crowd. "I never wanted to touch Carl or even be in the same bed, and when he left it was almost like he'd never been there in the first place. So he's the one who should've been mad, probably." She did the fast, deflating laugh.

I started to say that, regardless, what Carl had done was shitty. But then I pictured Carl eight years ago, thinking he could save Tori's life. Carl, who did card tricks for people in elevators and chalked x-rated haikus on sidewalks and told taxi drivers how much we were in love. Who told me, on our second date, that he was high-functioning but neurodivergent and needed hugs, frequently and with pressure. Who wanted, more than anything, to be completely, aggressively new. Carl, my boyfriend, who was at that moment swinging his arms in reverse pinwheels and marching around in a pool of his own sweat. I thought, a pit is a core, it's also a hole.

Something to fall in or fill. I had no interest in defending Carl but I didn't need to indict him either. It was a new feeling, and I let it sit.

The song ended and the crowd around the stage eased back. I saw Carl wipe his face on his shirt and look up.

"Thanks for the hot moves, guy," the singer said. "We like to see y'all getting dirty."

I met Carl's eyes and waved, and he shouted something I couldn't hear. I walked toward him, pushing through the thicket of teenage bodies, inhaling weed and youth and starched laundry as the band segued into the next song.

"Don't be fooled by the slow beginning," the singer instructed. "This one will rock you."

I squeezed between two sweat-slicked shoulders, and Carl was there, alone in front of the stage, and we were shouting.

"What are you saying." That was me.

"I want your feet on my knees."

"How much did you smoke?"

"Come on, before it's too late!" He looked at me with round black eyes, and I almost believed he was afraid I'd say no.

"Can we just talk somewhere?"

"We have to flee the leaking ferry! We have to scale these knotted bedsheets down to the armchairs of tomorrow."

I squinted at him as he half-crouched, his shirt hanging, his hair flat with sweat. You're in Denver, I thought. Nobody here knows your name. I linked my

fingers around his skull and pulled one foot up on his quad. Then I lifted the other.

"I don't care," I said into his ear. "I mean, about the divorce. You don't even have to do it. Carl, are you listening to me?"

He put his hands on my waist and I felt a jolt of arousal, in spite of myself.

"You listen to me. What you're going to do is jump backward, and then all these good people are going to catch you. Move in, everyone." I doubted anybody heard him, let alone cared.

"I'm definitely not doing that. Carl."

He looked past my shoulder. "Get ready, all you good kids. Here comes the woman I promise to never marry."

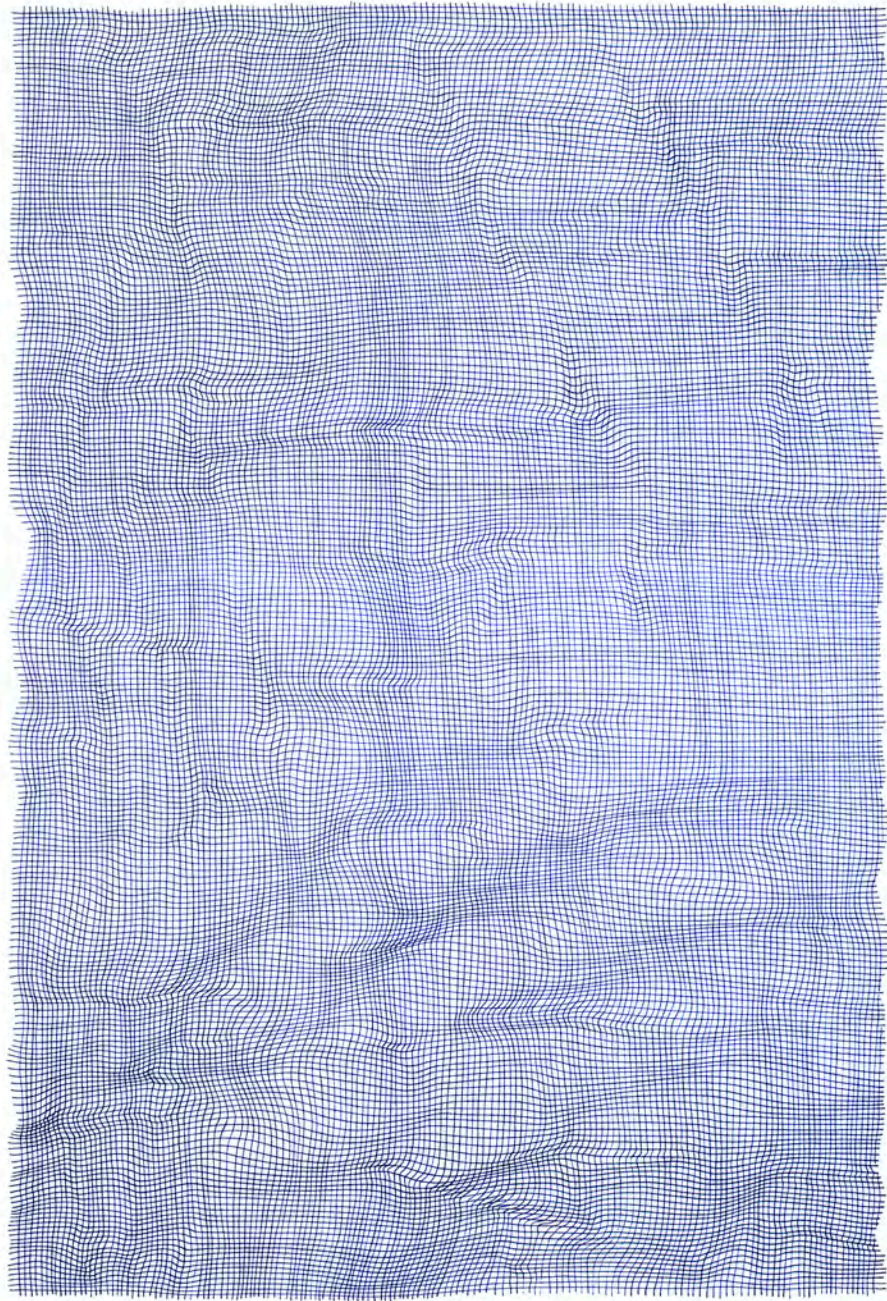
The band was reaching new peaks of noise or Noise, but I heard a faint cheer rise behind me. I was gripping Carl's head; his hands were on my ribcage, nice and tight. In a way we'd reached a stalemate, or maybe we were finally agreeing with each other; regardless, here was something to push against, so I pushed and then I flew.







Yixuan Wu, *Soft Congee, Still Waters*, 2022



Karin Schaefer, *Making Waves*, 2022

# I HIRE MY FRIEND, TY, TO CUT MY FORMER BOSS'S HAIR ONE LAST TIME AT FRANK E. CAMPBELL- THE FUNERAL CHAPEL

*Rodney Terich Leonard*

Greeted with bows & salutations.  
Cause-like cash counted yesterday,  
I ask for a pre-peek of the meadow.  
For a mental splash of the salon  
To which we, the barber & I, are headed.

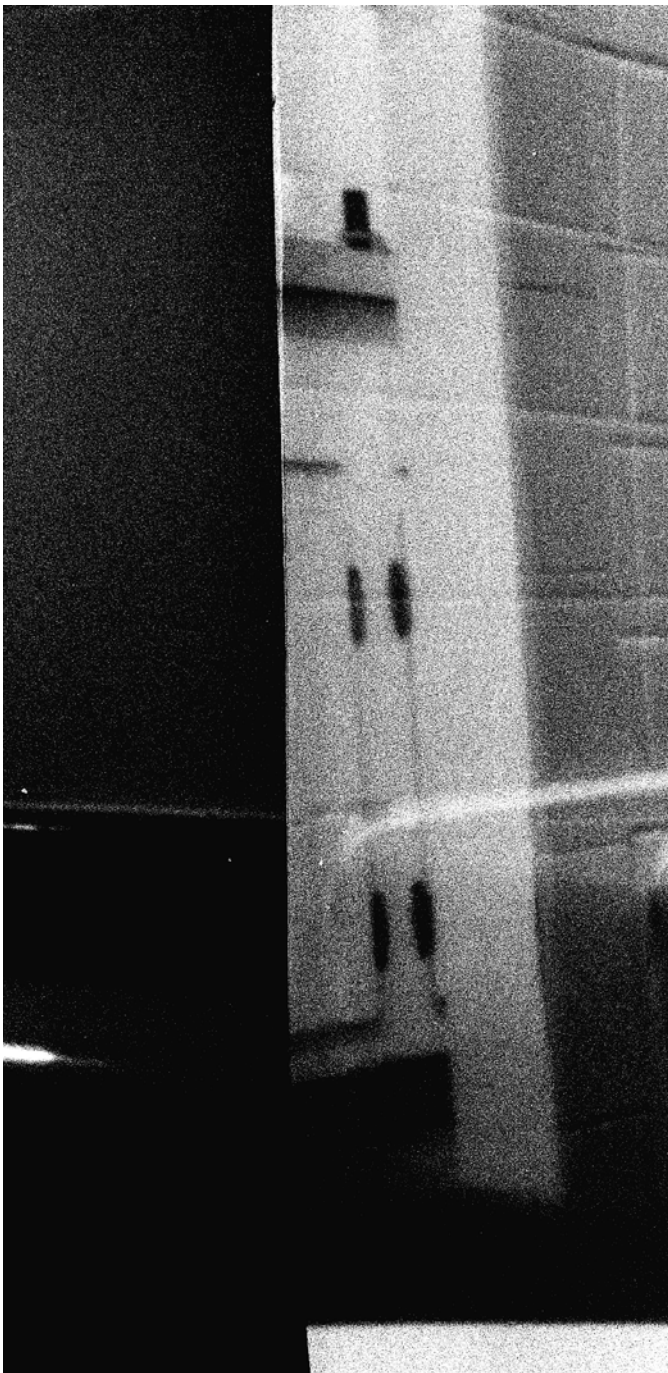
We step off the gold-gated elevator  
And exchange Black-looks 1:  
See herds of settees & wingback chairs.  
Sun cousins its way around the room.

And then we Black-looks 2:  
See a stocked bar cart.  
Bucketed Brut.  
We could fart.

I wonder if anyone's ever puckered  
Or hollered out  
Or needed ammonia  
Or a handkerchief in here?

Three evenings ago  
Twelve floor-to-ceiling windows dim the East River.  
Flanked by nurses & cellists  
The long-legged Mr. was sundowning.  
Today he is semi-ready;  
Cream-rose nostrils & hands, buffed nails  
Starched, white, crewneck tee.  
Upon a slab draped with attentive black pleats  
In-process, laid out.  
Hear Bach.

Between snips  
Ty muses:  
"This set-up is dope as shit.  
Was G a Mason?  
I have to remember this Black man's name."





# BABY GAP. NOTHING.

*Mila Holt*

A lot of shoes for a housewife:  
button-flapped, half-mocs, a pair  
with pointed toes—too long, a little witchy,

even once Manolos, a gift from her husband;  
subversive bits of fashion. The ones  
I'll put on her for her coffin.

She emerges aquiline, ratchets up her family tree.  
Ears unpierced. She doesn't like elective  
surgery. Soon after we meet, we spend

three hours at my house watching toddlers play.  
*what did you talk about, my husband asks.*  
*Baby Gap. Nothing.*

I don't yet know roots intervolve under  
nursery carpeting—that you can start to  
love a person after hours and hours

of *nothing*. In the hospital, I find her  
oxygenated, awake all night. She is punching in  
the hotline number for SNL. She has a sketch idea.

*You can have it* she laughs when the call  
doesn't go through. I see her twice a day.  
Ensure Plus, some ice cream.

*They have to fix me.*

After surgery, she's on a ventilator, doesn't know  
what they didn't do. Her husband lifts her,

slips a pillow under. He says, *Lean this  
way. Go where I go. She writes, I go  
where you go.* He saves the piece of paper.

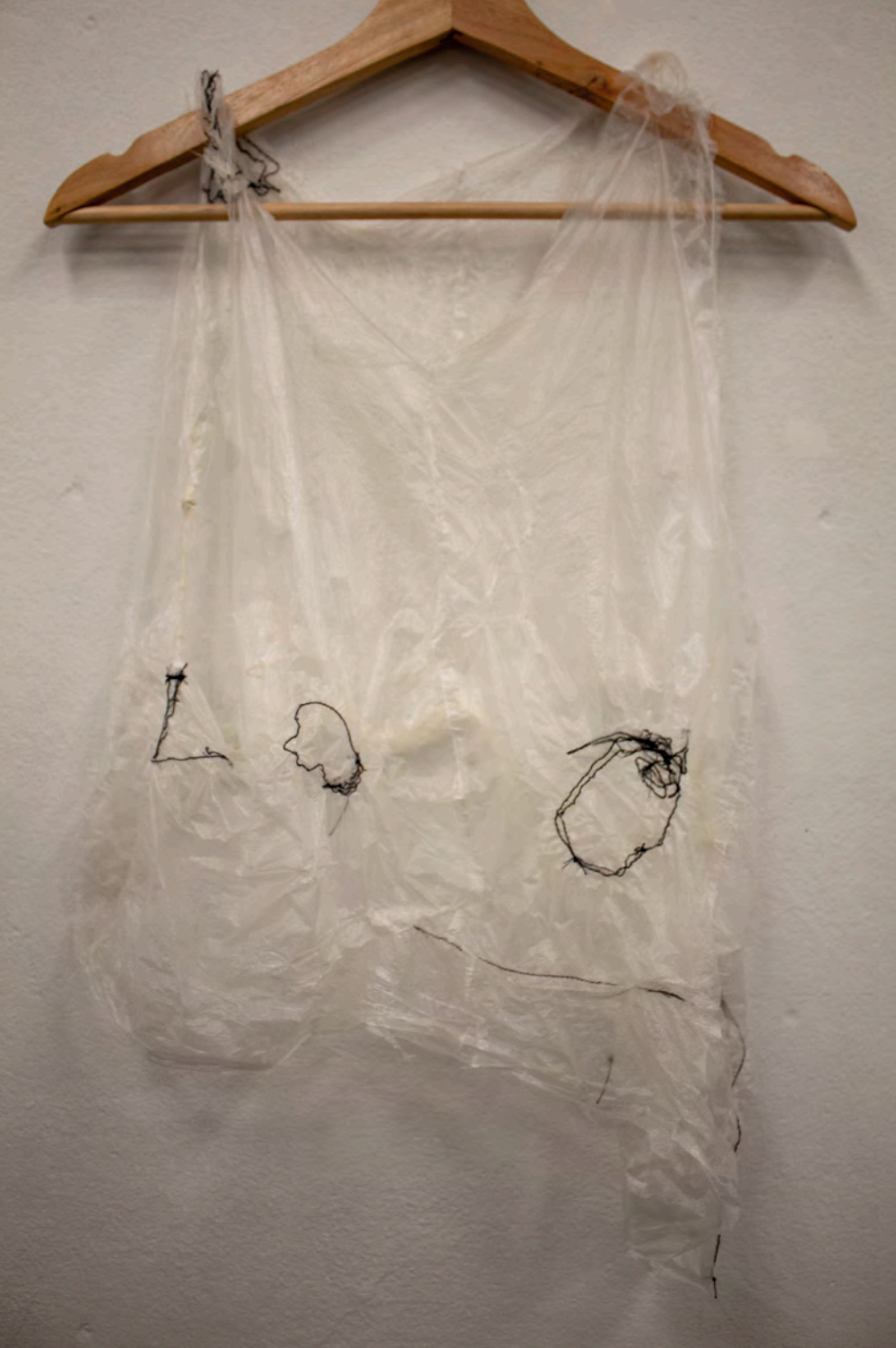
Why not admit it: that night I go nuts.  
Make her sisters-in-law angry. Drive.  
Am erratic. Have trouble in the parking lot.

Lay my hand on her calf. It is swollen,  
hairless. Small dents from my fingertips  
on her flesh. The nurse cranks up morphine.

Extracts the tube. *She won't breathe  
much longer.* An hour later she still gasps.  
Seven weeks total from car ride to crypt.

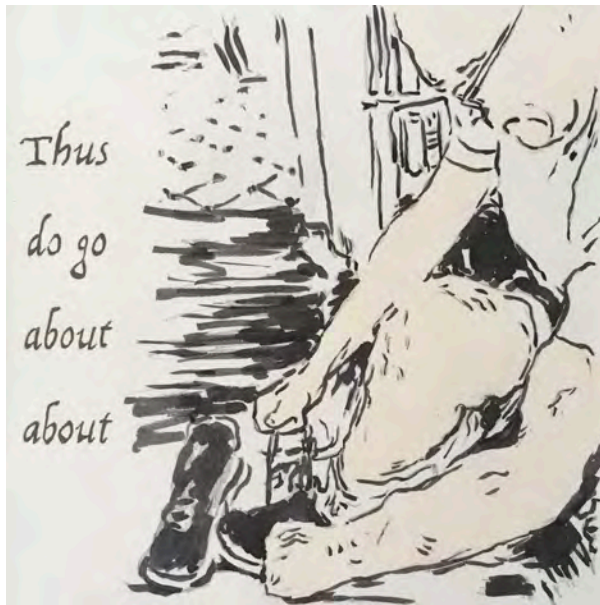
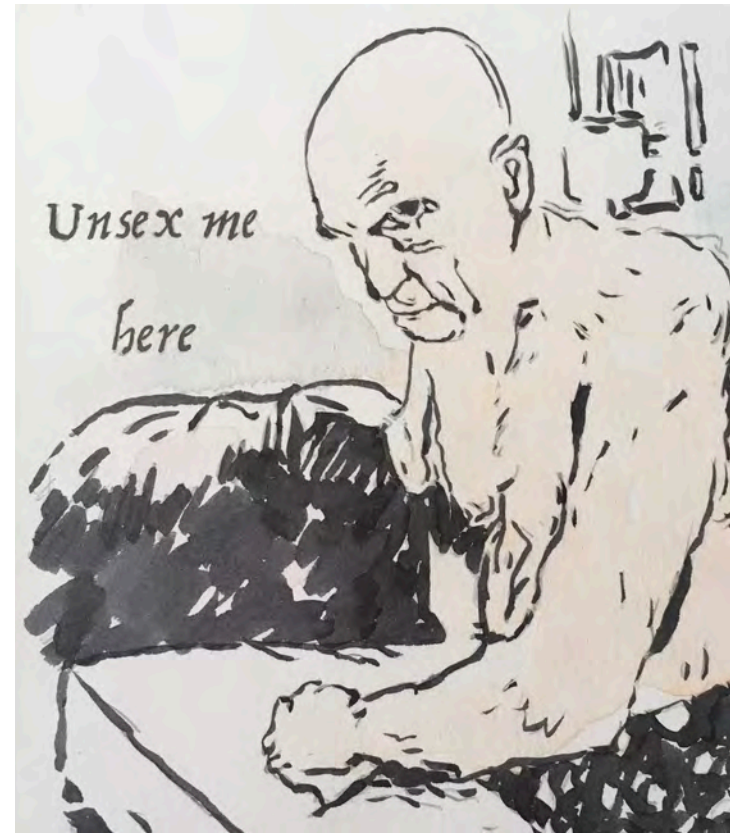
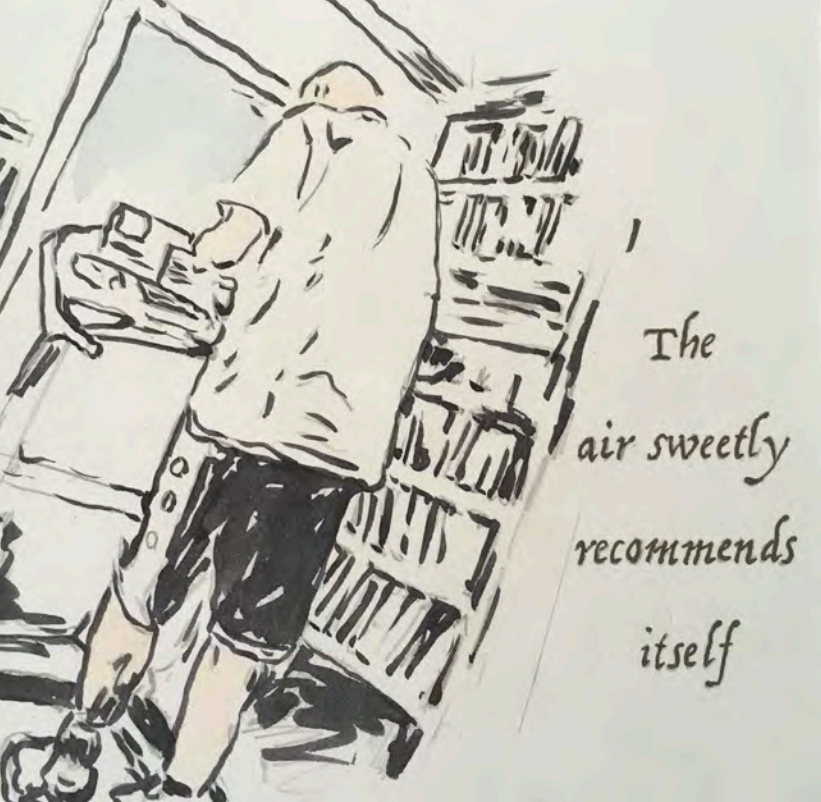
On the hospital pillow, her puffiness gone  
like before she was sick. Pale pink. Pretty.  
I didn't know she'd arrive like this.





Krista Sheneman, *Walking Series*, 2022







The  
guest of  
summer  
does  
approve



Balm of a hurt mind

# BATSHIT

*Stella Wong*

I want to say something  
about horses but my family is watching

a horror show in screaming violins,  
ghoulish trumpets, and a drumbeat for

a heart. it's come  
to the day we knew would come, and maybe it's the end

of the engagement or the storied  
chivalry I'd built

up in my head. and I'm turning back  
to celibacy, to climbing the cloisters

alone and thinking about monkhood  
among the poison plants, the first sign

in Eden, to drawing the worst possible  
bats, in nubby lead pencil, with human faces, the kind

of smiles that only  
babies can smile. there will be a lot more now. not ours.



JIC JIC  
SAS  
SAS  
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SAS

# MUSEUM OF THE FUTURE

*Samantha Neugebauer*

Amir called in the middle of the day and asked if I would meet him. Twenty minutes later I was on the Dubai metro thinking about Aristippus saying life's greatest pleasures were neither intellectual nor necessarily moral. In Gold Class, I sat on my own enjoying the view, the smooth teal seats, and the air conditioner chilling my ankles. In the car ahead, Standard Class, the passengers swayed together, packed. The driverless, bullet-shaped metro was elevated. We passed crystalline tower after crystalline tower—lilac, blue, and glass—then the long stretch between Noor Islamic Bank stop and Business Bay stop, where desert interspersed large, gated villas, all white and palatial. Behind them, the sun was white too, its blousy rays on the horizon, dancing for the skinny minarets and construction cranes. Although the metro windows were clean, the outside was hazed, as if someone, without pressing too hard, had dragged an eraser across everything.

"No shoes," Amir said when he opened his door. "No phones." His occasional bluntness could sound discordant to some, but to me, it was revelatory: saying as much about me as it did about him, namely that I was someone who could be loved by a self-possessed man like him.

"Sonja." Impatient with my excited fumbling, he bent over and unbuckled my sandals, one then the other. He kissed my toes, and placed the sandals gently in line beside his own. I dropped my phone on the small tray next to his keys and pinned receipts. Like most apartments in Dubai, the floor was cold white tile and the walls were made of windows.

"Are you going to be in town long?" I asked.

He cuffed two fingers like a crab and pinched me. "Only through Thursday."

"Oh." He searched my face for disappointment, anger, but I wouldn't give him either.

"I'm so glad to see you," I said.

We'd known each other for years, since I was twenty-three, and because he traveled for work, we could go months without seeing each other. In the beginning, this

had made me crazy. I'd wanted to be near him all the time. Twice I'd proposed converting to Islam, but later I improved. I changed my expectations. When Amir wasn't around, I learned to exist at a lower frequency. I had my work, some friends. Every so often I reactivated my online dating accounts or tried a new hobby. But what got me through the monotony of life, and the small injustices of living, was remembering Amir, our story, and imagining our next time together. Women were supposed to be more evolved than this, I suppose, but for whatever reason, I wasn't.

He took my hand and, squeezing it, led me down the foyer and into the living room. He was grinning and so was I. "You know what's funny?" I said.

"La."

"We're designing this new VR ride for the park. It will be one of those where you're in a harness with your legs dangling—"

"Like the one you did in Ferrari World?"

"Exactly. But this is for Dreamworks Park."

"Ah," he arched an eyebrow. Like always, he was polite, interested, amused.

"It's called 2320 and you ride through the future. What I'm getting at," I grabbed his loose linen shirt, "all the characters wear what are essentially white synthetic straitjackets." I didn't mention how they were also all thin, tall, androgynous; thus, I was contributing to writing myself out of the future. "And I keep thinking, why aren't they wearing linen? It's gonna be hot. It's gonna be like here."

He reached out and held my shoulders. "Linen's not as sexy."

"I think it is."

"I want to show you something," he said, twirling me toward the window. "Look." As I peered down forty-six floors to Sheikh Zayed Road, I marveled at how Amir's body could go from rigid to fluid in a moment, as if the child inside him and the man outside had switched places.

Did the same transposition happen with me? Did Amir recognize it when it happened? Or was I always a child with him?

A covered footbridge cut across the twelve-lane highway, connecting to the silver-domed metro station where I'd just been. There were more than four dozen such bridges in the city, one built every week for a year.

"Your baby," I said, finally looking where Amir wanted me to look, beyond the metro, to the colossal torus building upon an artificial grass hill: The Museum of the Future. I designed cheap thrill rides, but I'd studied civil engineering, so I knew all the reasons why the gigantic, lopsided-doughnut-shaped structure was technically impressive. I was thinking of Amir, of what it must feel like to be one of its architects, to know for certain something you'd worked on would outlive you and be celebrated. None of the things I built would last, not that I minded too much; I'd chosen my profession, and there were worst ways to spend our time on earth. I only wished to step inside Amir and know what immortality felt like.

"Not mine, Sonja." He clicked his tongue. "The Sheikh's."

"Ah, yes, a statesman, master architect, and a poet too."

Steel plates wrapped around the building bearing Arabic calligraphy, letters the size of the palatial villas I'd seen earlier, cut out from the plates. The text was the sheikh's own poetry.

Amir clicked his tongue again. "Don't be bad."

He was joking. He was Arab, but not local. The most enforced laws in the UAE were: thou cannot criticize Islam, thou cannot criticize the government, and thou cannot criticize the local royal family. But how could an expat know what local was and wasn't a royal? The local Emirati population was small, less than nine percent of the country, and so interconnected that non-locals were afraid to offend locals all the time. Yet among non-locals the spell of self-censorship would break frequently; in fact, our criticism pulled us together in situations where otherwise we would remain distant.

"It's much more finished than last time I saw it from this angle."

He nodded.

"What's it say again?"

Amir wove his fingers in my hair, saying, "The future belongs to those who can imagine it." He brushed his other hand in the air as if bored. "The future does not wait. The future can be designed and built today."

I noticed a silver band on his little finger. I opened my mouth and closed it. I would ask about it later. I supposed he was engaged again. This had happened twice before, and each time he'd broken it off. Both times he'd gone home to Egypt for Eid and had been presented with a woman from his small town. They would spend a few weeks talking, and he'd realize they didn't have enough in common.

"When will it be finished?" I asked, wanting to focus on the present to avoid worrying about what would come.

"Never," he joked, then added, "A year or more. The inside is still empty."

"I can't wait to see it," I said. "Maybe we can go together someday."

My transparency shamed me when I caught myself trying to secure future experiences together. Without speaking, he turned to his sofa and I followed him. We sat down close together. The man-made city below became invisible; only sky and cloud surrounded us, all bluish-grey. Then I picked up his little finger and with a carefree tone asked: "Engaged again?"

"Later," he said, and his air of dismissal felt directed not at me, but at whoever the ring promised him to, so I caressed his chest, unbuttoning his kurta, tugging it. He stopped me gently; he knew what I wanted. He pulled the shirt over his head, and I rubbed my little finger over the crude, dime-sized crater on his shoulder, his smallpox vaccine scar, yearning for him to kiss me, and he did. We kissed, making circles, and when I was thinking, I was thinking someday I will not recall the exact texture of his scar, of his hair, of the inside of his mouth. Amir's image would become like an animated drawing, because you cannot relive texture; texture is love, and like love, you can remember what something feels like—you can see the shape of it, see yourself gripping it, touching it, even rotate the image in your head in 3D—but you cannot feel it again once it's gone.



I don't believe most people really care about the future; they only care about their own afterlife (if they're religious) or legacy (if they're not).

Our desire never expired because we never consummated it. Amir stood before I was ready to stop, and his hands flew to his thick hips, and then through his own hair, and back to his hips, the whole while breathing heavily and eyeing me. I wondered for the thousandth time what it must feel like to be a thirty-five-year-old virgin. It impressed me that it didn't kill him. If it was killing him, he could end things with me, and marry one of his countrywomen.

"What's wrong?" I asked. We usually did "everything but" penetrative sex. "It's this," he said, and pointed to the ring.

"What? What's different?"

He sat back down in the chair across from me. A cheap IKEA table separated us. That was the thing about people like us, the nouveau riche, the educated children of the uneducated: we exist in a three-part Venn diagram of indulgence, guilt, and practicality. We didn't just remember having no money and resenting the hypocrisies of the middle class, we felt it. We recognized each other immediately, and we saw through those who had always been haves, who would continue to be haves in this lifetime, and we stayed quiet lest they expel us.

"Don't you want to be married?" Amir asked. "Don't you want to have a family?"

"Not particularly," I responded, because I could not say only with you, for we had been around that block before, around and around it, and it always led to the same spot. "Only convert if you believe," he told me way back when. "Don't do it for me." I could lie. I could say I found him, and inside him I found Islam, and that was true, but not in the way he required. When we first got together, there was a chance of this happening, at least in his mind. I know because he told me: technically I was a "Woman of the Book," and Muslim men could marry Christians and Jews, but my Christianity was memory, not feeling.

"I have something for you," Amir said. He wandered down the hall that led to his bedroom and study, and came back carrying a round gold tin. He sat back down beside me,

and our thighs touched again as he placed the present on my lap.

"It's from Bangalore," he explained while I peeled the sticker off the sides.

"It's Bengaluru, I thought."

He clicked his tongue twice. "Half my colleagues called it one thing, the other half called it the other. They said it was too late when India got around to changing the names."

"Do you think that?"

"I don't have an opinion."

Amir never pretended to care about what he didn't.

"Is that where you were then? Do you have a project there now?"

"The firm does. An apartment complex. I was only helping set up."

I nodded. I feared the day our work would separate us. Both of us knew we couldn't stay here forever. No matter what we contributed, this place would only keep us temporarily, while our minds and bodies were able. Unless we did something to change things, we would both go back to where we came from. I opened the lid and found rows of little square sweets, neon-colored, pink, green, and orange, each in ruffled paper cups, all of them dusted in powdered sugar and pistachios. They smelled perfumed: rosewater, I assumed. Amir picked up a pink one and pressed it against my mouth. I opened my lips and let him feed me.

"Delicious," I mumbled, closing my eyes. For next hour, we went on like this, talking and eating and touching. At some point, Amir's call-to-prayer ringtone sang. As if waking from a dream, we both shook our heads and glanced towards the foyer. It was beautiful and disturbing at once.

"I thought you said no phones?" I smiled.

He eyed me, then grinned, wiping the powdered sugar on his pants. "Different. I have a new theory." He got up and began walking towards the sound.

"Hmm?" I leaned backwards, setting my chin on the sofa, and watched him walk away.

"Who you really are," he called back, "is what you know when you're unconnected, what you know without the Internet."

I thought about that for a minute. For some reason, it reminded me that I was a Woman of the Book, that all those stories of creation and good and evil and heaven and the meek-will-inherit-the-earth still swam inside me. “Did I ever tell you I won the Philadelphia Archdiocese Religion Bowl in eighth grade?”

“The what?” he asked, walking back.

I leaned forward on my knees and wrapped my arms around him. “You know a spelling bee? A bit like that, but about Christian trivia.”

“And you won this?”

“It shouldn’t surprise you.”

He chuckled.

“I’m a good student.”

“I know.” He picked a sweet for himself and ate it admiringly.

“The questions were like, ‘Which saint discovered the Massabielle grotto, where today thousands of sick pilgrims travel every year to splash themselves in Lourdes’ healing water?’”

“What did you win?”

I paused; I’d thought he’d ask me the answer. “I don’t remember,” I said with a self-deprecating smile. “Besides fame, of course.”

“Hey,” he said softly. “I need to go pray.”

“Right, right,” I said. “Of course.”

He kissed the top of my head.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Then we’ll get food, maybe?”

“Insha’Allah.”

From the sofa, I listened to Amir in the bathroom: the sink water running as he cleansed himself and after, in the bedroom, the swoosh of his prayer mat unrolling on the tile, and then quiet. I walked back to the window and thought about the first trip we’d taken together. We’d been together for a couple weeks and for the long National Day holiday weekend, we went to Turkey. On the first night in our hotel in Konya, before we got into bed together, Amir prayed in front of me. I’d offered to leave him. I’d said I’d go have a tea in the lobby bar, but he insisted I stay. We went back and forth a few minutes, but he insisted, and looking back, I realized he’d wanted me to see him in

prayer. So I watched him as he found the right position to face Mecca, unrolled his gold-tasseled, blue-and-yellow carpet out, as his mind left the room, and connected himself to something greater than us. In my hand, I’d held the book I’d intended to read while he prayed, but I never thought to open it. His body supplicated and rose, and supplicated again, on his knees, off them, and I’d felt dizzy with desire for him.

It was so powerful to witness someone doing something they loved, and doing it well, rhythmically, with self-assurance yet gentleness. I had nothing in my life like that. I was atomistic. I felt outside of any cycle, any routine, any purpose except my own ambition and desires. When I was a child, I’d believed in God, and after I lost Him, I replaced Him with belief in my education, with a purpose to do well in school, and now, having done well in school and achieved some upward social mobility, I didn’t know where to stake my belief. A different group affiliation? Womanhood, perhaps? Or an individual love story? Me and Amir?

Before the trip, Amir had reassured me that we wouldn’t be having sex, and secretly, I’d hoped he’d change his mind, that I’d seduce him when we were finally away and alone together. I’d wanted him, but that wasn’t the only reason I’d felt that way. Two colleagues—one British, one Lebanese, well-intentioned perhaps—had put some hurtful ideas in my head: one said to be careful, that he might just be after me for an American visa, that he might try to convert me, and the other implied that maybe he was only with me because he could resist me, that I was not attractive enough and therefore he could enjoy my company without breaking his religious vows. The worst part was that the idea of not being attractive enough for him had already been in my head, for Amir was handsome, tall and elegant, in a trans-historical, trans-borders way, while I was plump and graceless, like a typical young woman from my particular background, raised on Kraft foods and soda. But while I watched Amir pray, I knew there were no ulterior motives inside him, that like everyone his heart molted every season; he shed goodness and badness, bias and prejudices, joy and sorrow, in a rhythmic fashion, according to his own nature.

Later, he would tell me that his older brother, the only member of his family who knew about me, had told Amir to be wary of me. He'd said that Western women use and fetishize men like him, and I would discard him as soon as I moved back home or found a Western man who would commit, whichever happened first.

Sometimes I wish Amir had tried to convert me in those days. My heart had been so supple then, like a bird of paradise in bloom, the edges of me in vivid color, everything inside me squawking instead of beating. I wondered if he could have done it; I wondered what would have happened if he'd tried a little harder to pick me. If he'd blamed it on his family, if it was one of those stories where it was me or his family, it would have made a bit more sense to me. But it wasn't that. He'd told me it wasn't. He was more religious than his mother and father, he'd said. His family was proud of him. They relied on him. Like me, he sent a large sum of money back to his family every month. It was him. It was his choice.

"Shall we?" Amir said, twenty minutes or so later, although it felt longer. I'd paced his living room several times, touched the surfaces of all his furniture, opened his cabinets, picked up his things and held them, feeling his charge in everything. "Where do you want to go?" he asked. The calmness from prayer still clung to him, but he'd changed into dark jeans and a t shirt, and he was wearing some kind of popular cologne, like the men had worn back home, purchased at kiosks in malls. It wasn't the kind he'd had on earlier when I'd arrived, the kind that was locally produced, made from whale ambergris—a surprisingly pleasant spoiled odor, fruity and fecal. He looked in the mirror and ruffled his hair.

"Honestly," I said, "I don't want to be around other people. I'd like to just be with you. Could we get to-go and go somewhere?"

"The corniche? We could walk along the water."

"Yes, yes."

"Are you okay?"

"Me?"

I caught the glint of his new ring again.

"I'm fine."

"Okay, good." He closed the sweets box. "We can bring these."

I worried that meant he didn't intend for me to come back here with him. Was this woman different? I pulled a shimmering scarf from my bag and threw it over one shoulder. Although there was still light in the sky, the sun had mostly set, and it would be cool, possibly windy outside.

In the garage, Amir led me to a white sports car I hadn't seen before.

"Wow," I said, as I read the egg-shaped logo on the trunk: "Maserati."

"It's only a lease," he said, suddenly embarrassed.

"It's nice," I said. "You deserve it."

"No," Amir said, shaking his head.

"You're right," I said, "but, it's only a lease. And think of all the Italians in Bologna who need people like you and me to desire this craftsmanship."

He shook his head with a smile. "You want to drive or me?" Amir knew I could get car sick. "It's manual."

"I'll drive," I said. Driving would distract me from my growing worry.

Amir tossed me the keys while he headed to the passenger's side. Once inside, I adjusted the seat, which was like a leather ladle. After we strapped on our seatbelts, his hand gripping my leg, I drove us with a little screech out of the garage, turning onto Sheikh Zayed. The setting sun ribbed the sky radiant pink and white, and from either side of the highway, cranes and towers fanned outward with their glowing windows of yellow and white light. My fist tight around the stick, I drove fast, faster than the metro, though faster cars still passed us. From the corner of my eye, I saw the Museum of the Future, above us now, then behind us, on its hill. I could only see the bottom of it, a silver streak, and yet someone—who?—had turned the lights on inside, so that when I saw it in the rearview mirror the calligraphy glowed.

"It looks so much larger from down here," I said.

"I know," Amir agreed without looking.

"How's Eman?" I asked after a minute. Eman was one of his younger sisters, the only one of his siblings who, like himself, had done very well in school and then migrated for work. She was a doctor in Saudi.

"Eh, she's back home."

“Why? Is she getting married?”

“Yes, actually, but that wasn’t what brought her back.”

He removed his hand from me and dragged it over his face. “It’s like Hala Shiha.”

“Who?”

He sighed and laughed at the same time. “You don’t know Hala Shiha?”

“No, sorry.”

“Tonya Harding moment.”

“Tonya Harding moment!” I repeated.

Earlier on in our relationship, in the course of a conversation, I’d referred to Nancy Kerrigan, and he’d stopped me to ask who she was. “You don’t know Nancy Kerrigan?” I’d said, surprised because although she wasn’t a president or world leader, she felt like a universal figure to me, someone that everyone had heard about. Since then, we’d collected many such figures and events, things we expected the other to know, not because they were important, just because they’d loomed so large in our own histories.

“Hala Shiha was a very famous actress,” Amir said. “Masha’Allah, very beautiful, talented, not modest, yanni, and then she gave it all up to start wearing the hijab, covering everything.”

“Oh?” I paused. “I wonder why.”

“It’s not a bad thing,” he said, a pinch of defense in his voice.

“I didn’t say it was.” I had sensed Amir felt some confusion about the actress’s choice too. “But it’s... different, no? It seems like it was a big transformation? You think it’s similar for Eman?”

“Yes,” he said. “But it happens often. So many of us, from my grandfather’s generation especially, came to the Gulf to work, especially in Saudi. After years and years here, we became more religious too, and we carried it back with us.”

“That makes sense.” I thought it did, somewhat, as long as someone’s mind was already fertile, ready to let their belief grow. But looking at the decadence on every side of us, the luxury car cocooning us, I wondered how often a religious person here could be spoiled into non religiousness too.

“Eman is more happy now.”

“That’s what’s important.”

“Exit here,” he told me, and I did. We curved into Jumeirah, a mixed-residential neighborhood, one of the few areas in the country where Western, Arab, and local Emirati families lived together. The villas were beige with red roofs, the mosques more modern, brutalist in design, and the streets were narrower with brick sidewalks, benches and bus stops, and medians with feathery ghaf trees instead of soaring palms.

“I don’t want the night to end,” I said when we turned down Beach Road. “Let’s not think about that now,” he said, patting my hand. “It’s still early.” “Sometimes being with you feels like my birthdate,” I explained. “The date belongs to me, I know it so well, I anticipate it, then when it actually comes, it feels a bit unreal and too fast.” He laughed and, a beat later, so did I. I wanted him to say something, but he didn’t. I turned off the air conditioner and we rolled down our windows. Music poured from car speakers and cafes. Traffic inched. Families with strollers and young teens lingered on the café patios, drinking coffee and smoking shisha. Young children ran around, playing tag and laughing. Some women were covered, some not, some in black, some in long sleeves, others somewhere in between: a scarf on a shoulder or laid flimsily on the back of their heads, hair flowing over their shoulders. The men were the same—some in long linen kanduras, some in Western clothing, but all with their knees covered.

Amir was looking too, his expression as wistful as I imagined my own, and I wondered if he was thinking the same thing as me: this could be us, too. But I didn’t say anything, because a part of me worried that it wasn’t just me any more in his head, that he was imagining living in a place like this with another woman.

After a few minutes, we slid into the parking lot of one of our favorite tea shops. A man trotted over to the car window, took a look at me in the driver’s seat, and did a little circle around the car to Amir’s window. Before greeting the man, Amir shot a glance at me and smiled, as if to say, what can we do?

“As-salamu alaikum,” the man said, leaning down, and licking his thick finger before flipping his notepad to a fresh page.

“Wa-alaikum salam,” Amir and I responded together.

Amir ordered, and then turned to ask what I wanted, and instead of telling him, I addressed the man, ordering in my slow, not-guttural-enough Arabic.

“Your wife speaks very pleasingly,” he said to Amir in English.

“That was generous of him,” I said after he left.

“It’s true. You’re improving.”

“Not fast enough.”

The tea shop had long smudged windows and a large blinking store sign. A lanky old man strolled by in a navy kurta, his beard long and bright orange from henna. He had his hands clasped behind him. He stopped in front of the store window and inspected inside, and when he was satisfied, he turned around in dismay for some reason and stared into our car window. Amir’s windows weren’t tinted very dark; only the locals could tint their windows black. “I wonder what he is trying to see,” Amir said.

“What kind of people own this car?”

“Maybe.”

The man took a step closer, his hands still clasped, his face still dismayed. Closer to us, I could tell he was even older than I’d thought; his teeth were long and yellow, outlined in black. He almost touched the car hood. Then, looking at us, he spat on the ground.

“What?” I said, looking at Amir, and back at the man. “How weird.”

Amir got out of the car.

“Don’t,” I called. “It doesn’t matter.” I didn’t understand what was happening, but I also wasn’t afraid. I thought Amir was going to defend my honor, although I didn’t really know if I had honor or if I wanted it. With great gentleness, Amir pulled him away from the vehicle, and face-to-face, they spoke rapidly to one another; they were too far away and too quick for me to catch anything they were saying. The man pointed to the car, or to me, I wasn’t sure, and Amir shook his head, and spoke to him some more.

The waiter came with our drinks and shawarmas wrapped in white paper bags. When Amir noticed, he said something to the old man, and shook his hand. They were both smiling.

“What was that about?” I said when he was back in the car.

“Nothing much,” he said. He took the lid off his tea and sipped it. “He was a nice man.” I didn’t think the spitting was so nice, but I didn’t want to press him. It wasn’t important. “Okay,”

I said.

“He was commenting on all the changes, how the neighborhood used to be, that kind of thing.”

“I see,” I said, and drank my tea.

While we were eating our shawarmas, Amir’s phone pinged.

“I thought we were boycotting phones?” I joked. I wondered if it was the girl.

“That’s my boss’s ring tone. I have to keep that on.”

“Oh,” I said, relieved, and waited as he checked the message.

Amir folded the remainder of his sandwich into the bag.

“What?”

“He needs me to do something at the site.”

“Now?”

“Yes.” He exhaled. “I can drop you home.”

“No,” I said quickly. I felt incredulous. He’d just said the night was still early! “Let me go with you.”

“To the site?” He chuckled. “It’s not allowed. Insha’Allah we can see each other again soon.”

“It won’t take long what you have to do, will it? I can wait in the car. I won’t touch anything. I’ll be as quiet as a church mouse.”

He looked at me.

“Sonja.”

“I just want to see it with you once. So we’ll always know we were there before it opened to the public. I want us to have something that you’ll never have with anyone else.”

“We already do.”

“Please. I feel funny tonight. I sense something is about to change. Am I wrong?”

“I don’t know,” he said, and grinned, “A church mouse? You?”

We switched seats. Amir drove much faster than me. Both of us felt it then, a kind of urgency to go, for a reason that wasn’t based in anything concrete. He put loud music on and, once back on the highway, he drove like

a comet. His crystal prayer beads dangled and glittered from his rearview mirror. They were so beautiful, the kind of beads I would have thrown on my neck as a child and danced around my room in, playing dress up. I was already in my afterlife, I decided. Anything after childhood was afterlife.

Amir turned off at the exit to the museum. It loomed ahead, the ruler's poetry-prophecy glowing brighter and brighter the closer we got. We drove up the drive to the thick iron entrance gate. Desert roses bloomed along the drive and around the gate. Amir stretched out of the window and waved his lanyard over the sensor. The gate opened quickly, disappearing into the larger iron barrier wall. Amir drove more slowly. Spotlights lit up the construction site. Nothing stirred on the ground. Debris lay about: beams and crates, tools and small construction vehicles. Everything was covered in a patina of sand and dust.

"It's like a ghost town," I said.

He nodded.

We got out of the car and from the trunk Amir pulled out an orange hard hat and handed it to me.

"Do you have one for you?" I asked.

"It's okay," he said.

"You take it."

"No. I'll just be a minute in the office." He closed the trunk. "Wait here."

After Amir went into one of the trailers, I strapped on his hard hat and for ten minutes or so I toured around, stepping cautiously, afraid of hurting myself or doing something wrong. The fluorescent lights competed with the glowing letters. Eventually I wandered over to an area with picnic benches. There were names carved into the wood—men's names, laborers, I presumed.

"Done," Amir called.

"It's amazing," I said, getting up.

I felt the wind blowing my scarf backwards.

"You look so beautiful," he said, leaning into me. He had finished his work. He was a boy again, excited. A few moments later, he grabbed two flashlights from the crate on the ground behind me. He handed me one.

"Come on," he said and jogged ahead.

"Where?" I said.

"Hurry."

I followed him, my scarf still blowing behind me, into what looked like a dark mouth. The darkness gave way to beams and what I imagined as a carriage at first, but it was an open steel elevator. Amir inserted a key and we rose with a jolt. I clutched the side handles.

"Don't worry," he said, turning on his flashlight. He leaned over and pressed on mine too. "It can hold twenty-eight men."

"I'm not worried." I swung my flashlight around, throwing beams of light here and there on cement walls. We held hands, and I shone my flashlight straight up next to his beam. The elevator stopped with a shudder and Amir removed the key.

"Be careful," he said. "There are wires and debris everywhere."

"It echoes!" I said, and I followed Amir as he climbed the steps. Though they were iron, they were narrow like a ladder, and rickety too. At the top, we entered a new space; we were on the inside of the glowing letters. It was huge and empty inside.

We paced a bit, inspecting the walls. Amir turned on his heel, hand in his pocket. He wasn't smiling the same way anymore. He started shaking his head like I was a mischievous child, a child he adored.

"Are you happy?" he asked.

"I am. I'm Isadora Duncan!" I shouted, spinning around with my scarf.

"Who?"

I grabbed his forearm and spun him with me. Then he threw his other arm in the air and in mid-spin, he placed his hand on my lower back and dipped me. We both laughed. When we stopped, we collapsed onto the concrete floor with me in front of him, dizzy and panting, and my back pressing into his chest.

"If you could put anything in here, what would you put?" I asked.

We scanned the interior.

"That's not part of my job," he said.

I caught my breath and exhaled again. "Just pretend," I whispered. I had my head under his chin. "If you could? If you could put anything in here?"





Kate Teale, *Study for Tumult*, 2020



# MONTH OF LEAVES

Jana Martin

The geese flew overhead, calling to each other, in formation to get south. The cold air came in. You and I drove into town for a show, a bona fide indoors in a bar show with a stage and red lights and a crowd. There was a shimmer to the roads. We didn't know if it was frost or magic, but it was too early for frost. You said, I'm staying in the middle and straddled the lane. We talked about getting new tires and you shook your head. Plenty of grip left, you said. No cars on a Saturday night, just a quiet road and us. Middle of the road, we said, middle of nowhere. Middle of the woods. Middle of our lives.

In the bar we got a table and a couple came and sat right in front of us, but you just watched the show, taking in its rollicking tightness, polished grit. But that couple in front of us acted like they owned that center table, playing mogul and trophy wife. If I were drunk and it was long ago. I'd say it isn't 1986, you know that, right?

The man sported a brown cowboy hat with not a speck on it, never near a horse or dust. His little finger rested on the rim of his artisanal whiskey on the rocks. She watched him, all radar and need, overworked blond waves, a spangled USA T-shirt and tight denim, slightly westernish boots. She kept her diamond ears pricked at the man who seemed to be pretending not to know she was watching him.

Onstage, magnificent songs crescendoed but here was this fake casual Aspen couple taking up so much space. The long-legged singer did his side-part heroics, sweet grandeur and twang and why was I noticing that couple at all?

I looked at you and you were watching the show and there I was watching you.

I hate imposters, I whispered in your ear in the quiet while someone swapped guitars.

Who?

Them.

Didn't notice.

Maybe I was overdoing it because it was so long since I'd been out. I sipped seltzer and lime and sat against the chair, breathing in the telecasters and standup bass and road poetry hurled like gin into the dark. But I was stuck between the channels. *Who the fuck are you* I wanted to say to the faux Aspen pair. Years ago someone could pass me a beer and point me at a person and I'd head into them with a slurring, sudden vendetta. But that girl was gone. I left her in Florida, left her down South, told her stay away. Turned her into a perpetual hitchhiker, same road the rest of her life. A pale face appearing here and there if I knew where to look.

✱

You and I had a routine: you come up from the city, we drive down, if there's time we drive back up, you go back down the next day. A sawtooth back and forth, but why not? You loved the highway. This time we drove back from the city after seeing my Dad in his dim apartment, Dad coming back to life on Mozart and chocolate bars. We raced the afternoon to get up here by dark and finally got to the back roads, the dusk playing tricks with shapes. We saw a log on the side of the road that looked like a deer on its flank, we saw a deer on the side of the road that looked like a log, the same brown. Deer brown, you said. Dead deer brown. We passed something large and dark, mounded on the asphalt right where it had expired. Wish that was a log, you said.

Would have to be a very dark log, I think I said.

But the trees were brilliant, birches flipping their yellow leaves into the half-light like they wanted to make one last scene.

✱

You down in the city again, I sat on the porch up here and watched new grass rise into the air, the rhododendrons steaming in the sudden warmth.

\*

The UPS man delivering my coffee and cat food said, We're heading for a strange fall. And why? We are why.

\*

At the horse barn, cars crunched gravel, that benign country sound, like no one in a hurry, no need. The bees buzzed the mums, the Japanese maples waved their magenta flags. On the phone, Dad wanted to know if it was cold out. It's been way too warm, I told him.

What season is this he wanted to know.

It's still fall. It's a fall day, I said.

Actually I haven't fallen today, he said. So it's not a fall day. It's a good day.

\*

Then my old car broke. The exhaust pipe cracked—age or hitting a bump, but it cracked. I drove rattling and leaking exhaust and people gave me a wide berth and I felt like a climate sinner.

You should get this fixed, you said. It sounds like a Bluebird bus on the hills of Chile. You'll never pass inspection.

The mechanic said, I can't do it, but there's a guy.

The guy said, I can't do it for three weeks, but you won't die in it, least not from that. Just live with the bad smell and we'll get it set.

\*

We know when you're coming, the barn kids said, making vroom rattle cough noises. It was getting chilly, a surging wind took leaves right off their branches, cascading gold, red, russet, amber, orange, ochre—maple, aspen, beech, oak, cherry, redbud. The horses kicked their heels at the gusts. My horse high-headed it next to me, fired up in his halter, eyeing the fields and hawks. In the ring we leaped at jumps as a biplane crossed the cirrus clouds, the sun so brilliant everything was luminous, the pond was glass.

Long ago one October, I locked myself in an apartment in Miami and a neighbor took my silverware and needles away. There was no autumn there. No leaves

turning, no trees shedding except from stress. Ten days I grit my teeth on the balcony, watching seaplanes land in the bay til I broke free. Moved north but got stuck in the city, dreaming of horses and leaves. Now here it was. Horse and I stood in the meadow after the ride, he pressed his head against my arm and breathed out grace.

\*

The cold snap lingered. Crossing the bridge between the home and the barn, the wind at the car sideways, the light gave the river a silvery skin, like a fish. The treetops in the hills swayed like a crowd. The air flinted with cold rain. It was a day of small miracles, I decided. Making coffee. Drinking it. Feeding the cats. Having the cats. Driving to the barn in the rattletrap needafix but making it across the bridge. Riding the horse, his long silver tail sailing behind.

I got work done. I went for a run. I breathed and covered miles. I took a shower, the hot water a blessing. The world not falling apart at the seams, I not falling apart, no one I love dying, my father responding to antibiotics and here I was in the ruddy woods, thinking of all these miracles.

\*

Before winters I coated the driveway so the ice wouldn't stick. My neighbor came with big cans, did it top to bottom. In the morning it shone like leather, oil rising up through the cracks the tree roots made. The next day more rain and wind came and the maple leaves piled yellow and slick on the new driveway. I skidded into a tree so slowly nothing happened, not a dent, the trunk just gently pushing my dumb car away.

\*

At the table as you packed I wrote letters asking people to vote, hand addressing, remembering penmanship, how to make elegant lines, a skill long forgotten. Also, isn't it magic: putting names on a white space and the whole thing arriving at their door, I said, watching you coil computer cords. Want an apple for the road?

\*

Not every day this month was hard. Not every day was easy. You had to be in the city a lot, I had to be here. It felt like a test. Simple things kept saving us. The leaves. The being. The having. I am, I have, I do, I said to myself, crossing the bridge over the gray river, blue river, metallic river, shiny river, fog-socked river. One weekend we crossed the bridge together and the trees were brilliant, colors saturated against the blue sky. It's Vivaldi day, you said, and I wanted you to never leave.

\*

I headed to the high school reunion, held on a city rooftop overlooking the back of a cathedral. Rushing up the avenue with boxes of crackers—sweet potato, spelt—I forgot the name of the town I live in. It felt like a door was off the hinges, or one foot was on a lower floor. It felt like my head had a new space in it. It felt like I was getting old.

I sat in the lobby as strangers passed on their way to apartments, hustling kids and groceries and labradoodles into the elevator. I ran through town names: East, West something? North? At the reunion I said, I live between this and that. A small place, part of another place. West something, more like south of a famous town and north of a historic town. It came through as clever until someone asked if they could GPS it. I could remember the street, the zip code, so I gave them that. That's the best way, I said.

It was a new and sudden affliction. My old best friend scrolled us through pictures of her kids, her husband's village, surrounding towns. This is Saint Janice. This is Point d'Arlene. Here's Fawn on the hill, she said.

My stepsons like to cliff dive at Fawn's Leap, I suddenly remembered and said that out loud. But it still wasn't the name of my town. That didn't come back until

we were saying goodbye, and then it was like a billboard. West Hurley! I said. If you're ever in West Hurley, I said to everyone. Come to West Hurley!

\*

This is the month my dog died last year, the day before Halloween. He probably knew he was going, his heart skipping, lungs pulling at air, back legs going sideways. We would walk with him half in a sling, we'd get back up the long driveway and rest on the knoll he always chose, probably a gopher's mound, and I used to wonder if he could sense the animals deep down in their burrows, turning around in the earth. He would study the road we'd just left. I tried to not to make assumptions, just let him know how much I loved him. It was colder last year, already calling his bones. But this year, that preternatural warmth came back, sallow and humid. Outside it got dark earlier each day but steam rose from the fallen leaves like smoke in the glare of the porch light.

3 am, 4 am, I wandered the house, remembering when it was that dog, my dog, my best dog, when I'd come downstairs to his dark form curled around itself, my guardian sleeping near the front door. It took so long to get used to the silence of the inside and the songs of the outside without him.

The night was a bird calling in loud, slow repeats, an owl's *Who are you*, the hurled-out whoop of a coyote close by, rustling and acorns hitting the roof. A truck downshifted on the road behind the woods, the road that was always closer than it seemed. I hoped you were asleep, down in your place in the city. I wished you good dreams.



Enne Tesse, *Eye*, 2014

# CONVERSATION WITH KATIE KITAMURA

Violet Guinness\*

Katie Kitamura's fourth novel, *Intimacies*, focuses on an unnamed woman who arrives in the city of The Hague to start a job interpreting for "The Court," an international judiciary body focused on prosecuting war crimes. The book was longlisted for both the PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction and the National Book Award and was included as one of the *New York Times* 10 Best Books of 2021. The *Vassar Review*'s Editor-in-Chief, Violet Guinness, met up with Kitamura on a snowy afternoon at the Crafted Kup, a Poughkeepsie coffee shop.

From afar Kitamura can be intimidating in her coolness and posture. The air of mystery in her books seems to rest around her own person; however, once you start talking with her, you quickly realize she is an incredibly warm, attentive person. Her voice is one that draws you toward her. Throughout the interview the noise in the cafe is constantly quite loud and disruptive, yet Kitamura's mind remains impressively fixed on the discussion at hand. She's open and lets Guinness into her processing, and in that is a real subtle power. Her novel is filtered through the perspective of the narrator—everything passes through her as though she is a vessel. Words and observations move via her to the reader, just as she moves through life somewhat passively. Kitamura traces the movement of a mind with her book and generously allows us a peek into the movement of her own with this conversation.

**VIOLET GUINNESS:** I'm going to start with a question I think you've gotten many times in past interviews, but it feels highly significant for this issue. What does the word intimacy mean to you, or what are the kinds of intimacies that you were interested in discovering with the book?

**KATIE KITAMURA:** The title was initially different, it had much more to do with instability. And then I was asked to find a new title and I came upon this word "intimacy," and "intimacies" in the plural specifically, for the reason that you're kind of mentioning, which is that there are so many different kinds of intimacy in the novel. I think probably the one that felt most important to me was really the one between the reader and the narration. You know, there's so little information in the book in some ways. There's very little backstory, we don't know her name, we don't exactly know her age, we don't know the history of her past relationships. But the gamble that the book takes is that through drawing the reader into her observations and her way of seeing the world, the closeness that is necessary to a piece of fiction would

be possible. And so that's certainly one form of intimacy that's very important to the book; the others are obviously the ones that are a matter of interpersonal relationships between people, whether it's a lover or her friendships with some of the female characters in the novel. And that's a closeness that I think she craves and in a way has been conditioned to crave. To be a person in the world is to have these relationships.

But the flip side, that the novel I hope explores, is the kind of intimacy that is a form of violence—intimacies that are imposed upon her. There's a surprising amount of sexual harassment and sexual intimidation in the novel which was not necessarily intentional, but that I think came out because I wanted to write a novel about power and you can't really write about power without writing about gender in some way. And then there's the closeness that springs up between the narrator and the former president which is the closeness of the act of interpretation and the act of inhabiting another person's point of view, which is not dissimilar of course to what it

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\*Additional preparation for the interview was completed by Alexander Pham and Anna Molloy.

feels like to write fiction in the first place. So, it's a kind of combination of all those things. Novels are so funny in a way because if you know what you're going to write before you start, there's no process of discovery in the writing and that feels much less satisfactory. I very rarely have a particular message that I want to share, I just have a vague sense of the terrain—and hopefully that ground is shifting all the time as well.

**VG:** I feel like that intimacy between the reader and the narrator is so genuine.

**KK:** I'm relieved to hear that.

**VG:** And then with these false intimacies or these forced intimacies, it kind of changes.

**KK:** It's interesting you say that because something I've been thinking about a lot is authority in first person narration and so much of what I wanted to try to do in the book was to not have—because I don't feel myself to be a person with authority, you know, and I'm terrible at telling stories, at a dinner party I never want to tell a story, I never know how to deliver the punchline or the necessary information for the story to even make sense—

**VG:** I'm the same way.

**KK:** and so the idea of the Nabokovian first person narrator who knows their story, who's manipulating the reader, that's the kind of first person voice that I love to read, but I don't necessarily want to write. And so I think the book is predicated on the attempt to create a first person voice that's certainly not deliberately unreliable, so that it's not a false intimacy, but at the same time she is unreliable in the sense that she herself isn't sure of the reality of what's taken place.

**VG:** Yes, but she's very transparent about being unsure.

**KK:** Yes, I hope so.

This idea of people as containers for experience and language is something that I'm definitely interested in. I mean interpretation was, you know, it's always a little risky to make somebody's occupation the metaphor for how they are in the world, but at a certain point the style itself is essentially interpretive...It's a kind of voice that is looking and interpreting the world around it, and to have that also be the central character's occupation allowed me to talk about it quite directly.

**VG:** Also, talking about these forced intimacies, a lot of those moments, like that moment with Amina when she shares that look with the accused—that's a kind of intimidation, but it's also intimate.

**KK:** Yes.

**VG:** And it's so interesting how you pose those intimate moments which I think people often envision as being in the interior, in a very public sphere.

**KK:** I mean when you just said that thing—it's intimidation, but it's also intimate—I haven't really thought about this before but I feel like all intimidation has to be intimate because it's about exerting force on another person or having force exerted upon you. But you're right, it takes place in a public setting. I'm always interested in these contained physical environments that have a public, almost theatrical element to them; it's a court, but it's a theater, it's a boxing ring, but it also has rules and regulations. They're very bounded spaces, but I think the thing that interests me about them is that nonetheless there is the sense in which within those very artificial spaces there's something very real that is touched upon. If it's in the context of a boxing ring, there remains that quite primal aspect about this sport between two people. Obviously, in the court it is all artificial and yet there is something true in the heart of it, or you'd like to believe there is. So although it's a public space and an artificial space, there are moments that cut through that.

And then also, I'm interested in complicity and to some extent complicity requires an outside. You're most complicit with somebody when there is an audience that doesn't know. Complicity is built on the division between people who know and people who don't know, on some level, and so I suppose that's also part of what's happening in that moment. I'm always interested in how the different versions of performance come into play and a lot of that depends on audience.

**VG:** So you like those spaces that have their own set of rules?

**KK:** I do because I think ultimately that's what writing a novel or a short story is. You're creating this completely artificial container. You create a world, it has this artificial boundary around it; it has a beginning, middle, and an end which is a sequential integrity that's completely artificial and different to how we experience time and then, nonetheless, I think the thing that we all hope is that even though it's all artificial, something is real—I mean, real and true are very fraught words to me to use and they seem sentimental and clichéd, but I think that's still what the practice of writing fiction is. As a writer you're so aware of all the artifice, at least I feel I am, I'm very aware of it. Especially the more you write, the more aware you are of technique and the effect of technique and structure and all these things, but you're still writing because you're still hoping for that thing that is more than, that kind of supersedes that, I would like to believe that this can happen, sometimes.

**VG:** Our theme for this year is "Interiors and Intimacies," so we're very interested in private and inner lives, the work that's created in those spaces, and then the intimacy of sharing that private work. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about that moment when you share a draft, when that private, internal thing becomes external.

**KK:** I mean it's a real moment of sadness (laughs)...I live with a family and it feels like there's very little that's private in a way because my kids are in and out of my office and there's constant interruption, you know they're always shuffling through my papers and going through

my books and everything...but the space that really does feel private for me is the space of the novel. I know people talk a lot about the anxiety of the blank page, but, touch wood, I've never had that. It always feels like a really private, free space for me. And the writing of the first, second, third draft is just the happiest I am—and then you have to share it. My husband is also a writer and every time we finish a book, we'll ask each other how we're feeling, and he always says the same thing, it's always a sense of, "well, I guess that's that."

Our idea of what the novel can be is almost limitless and then bit by bit, decision by decision, choice by choice, the decisions that you make form a book. It gets whittled down. And obviously you hope, and for some writers and in some cases there is a thing that is more than the author intended or understood, but there's always a little feeling of the book becoming finite, and that's part of it becoming public as well. And then sometimes it turns around, like with this book. It's been interesting because people have had reactions that I just did not predict or expect, and so that's actually really nice because then I feel like, "oh I don't actually know what the book is in some way, or I didn't think it was a book that you would react to in this way." So, in that sense it does get away from you and that's quite nice. It's funny that you said interiors and intimacies because there is something about the kind of space of that page that does feel like a physical space in some way to me, I think about it in physical terms. I think about it as a space that I can stretch out in, even though it's just pixels on my computer screen.

**VG:** You usually write on a computer ?

**KK:** I write on the computer screen, yes. I have quite a few friends who write in notebooks, but I have such terrible handwriting.

**VG:** It's funny you say that because for our Archives section we wanted to include Elizabeth Bishop. The Vassar Library has a lot of her old notes and she has horrible handwriting, so Archives was going to do this whole paper about her handwriting and that intimacy—only she can understand it and decipher it.

**KK:** Yes! And some of that feels like a deliberate tendency towards privacy, because my husband Hari had something similar. When he was a teenager he decided to make his handwriting illegible to anybody but himself and I really cannot read it. He writes on a computer but he makes a lot of notes in notebooks and I cannot read a word—I mean it's impenetrable.

**VG:** But he can read it?

**KK:** But he can read it, and I suppose that's how it remains for him very private, but there's something almost quite adolescent about that decision, which I think makes sense because adolescence can be that time when you don't have privacy and you want to create and guard it.

**VG:** It's the one piece of control—

**KK:** That you have, yeah, yeah. Exactly. But then our son's like you both have terrible handwriting. Why do I have to work on mine?

**VG:** Do you think there's any merit in keeping work private? In never sharing it?

**KK:** Well there's an interesting project in Norway, do you know about this? Each year, an author writes a novel and then they bury it and it won't be opened up for a hundred years. I think Ocean Vuong has done it, David Mitchell has done it, Knausgård has done it. It's in Oslo. It's this beautiful chamber and they have these paper manuscripts and these little enclosed glass drawers that won't be opened for a hundred years. It's a really interesting idea. What kind of a novel do you write when you know nobody's going to read it for a long time, when you'll be long gone?

I don't keep journals and I know there are a lot of authors who do as part of their practice, and those journals are private and not necessarily to be shared. I love reading the journals of writers I admire, maybe for that reason. I don't write journals, but I suppose with a finished novel there's so much other material that is never shared, and that goes into the writing of a novel. Every time I sit down

to write, it feels important to me to assume that nobody will read it and that I'm just writing it for myself and then at some point that may not be true, hopefully, but I think starting out, that feels helpful. Privacy feels important for sure. I think it's very bad to write in conversation with how people have received your other work. To me it feels that you're then giving up the one thing that writing fiction can give you, which is a sense of interiority and privacy.

**VG:** I love what you said about the parts you cut. It's kind of like a linocut, the parts you cut, you get to keep all those scraps. They're yours.

**KK:** Yeah, there was an entire section of the novel, I wrote 60 pages about one character that I loved, which everybody told me had no place in the novel, so I cut it and it's still some of my favorite writing. And now that's just something that I know about these characters and I love having that. There's a lot of stuff that gets cut, you just can't think about it too much (laughs).

**VG:** Ok, I think that's mostly it. Is there anything you'd like to add? The *Review* is typically read and contributed to by authors and artists who are at all stages in their careers. Do you have advice for emerging artists and authors?

**KK:** I don't know that I have any advice, but I did just see this beautiful quote, I wish I could find it. It's by a writer and he said that he can't untangle writing and reading, and that it's not just that you become a better writer through reading, but that the acts are the same somehow for him. There's a real truth to that. I think he's pushing slightly further than just saying in order to be a good writer you need to read a lot. I think he's saying that there's something fundamental in the act of writing that calls in the act of reading. And I want to think about that more. I think it's definitely true that when you write, whether you want to or not, you're in conversation with everything you've read. It's all present and so I think I never feel alone when I'm writing because I'm writing with all of that at my shoulder.

**VG:** I think that's all. Thank you so much.



# SAINT JAMES STREET

*A.E. Povill*

You were in your room crying over a boy I'd never met. I was in my room listening to the trains go back and forth. Lying in bed, I could hear the sound of your door opening and closing. I wanted to know where you were going, and if you would take me with you.

The first time we met, you had two tiny braids in your hair. We drank our way through Soho, and I asked you to do my hair like yours. You said of course, but we didn't touch back then. I don't think it would suit me anyway.

You told me that you were most beautiful at 15. That no matter how you turn out, you'll always have that one year of radiance. I said you have a perfect nose and you say everyone tells you that. I imagine how it would feel to run my finger down the slope of it. When you fall asleep in the back room of the bar where your friend works, I let myself trace the curve of your profile with pen and paper. It doesn't come out right, and I wish I was a bit more sober. On the bus ride back home, you are silent. When we say goodnight, I press a kiss from my fingertips to the place just below your hairline.

Our beds are pushed up next to each other, separated by a layer of concrete. I can hear the

whir of your hairdryer and sometimes tinny music through the wall. You texted me an apology when you had a boy over; said you'd buy me chocolate if you were too loud. I lay awake in the dark, listening to rain sounds at full volume and wondering why it hurt and when it wouldn't. I had heard you bring him in. I stopped to listen to his voice, but it didn't tell me anything. It was the night I left lavender outside your door. The next day, you called me the love of your life.

We communicated through voice memos and notes left in each other's borrowed shoes. I read your books and you read mine. You highlighted the lines you liked, the neon stripes a window from the page to you. I wanted to find you inside the words you chose to mark. I wanted an end to the loneliness that scratched at my ribs all through the evening. I wanted to see you with wet hair.

I asked once how you'd want to die if you could choose, and you said in your sleep. It had never occurred to me that that was an option. I myself have always been partial to poison, or perhaps starvation. You listened thoughtfully, then said that if you had to choose a violent end, you'd want a bullet through your brain. You held two fingers

up to the exact spot at your temple. I wondered but did not ask if it was your own fingers that you were picturing wrapped around the gun. You have lovely fingers; I can tell you played the piano as a child.

Now we're sharing a rollie out our kitchen window and I know that this is our end credits scene. I've brought in the tiny lamp from my room, so we can do without the overhead light. Without that fluorescence, it's easier to ignore the clouds of fruit flies and our flatmates' dirty dishes piling up in both sinks. I can tell you're tired, but neither of us is ready for the night to end. Songs from 2018 play from a friend's chunky speaker, and we talk about how we're not 16 anymore. We'll never know each other as teenagers. I can't decide if this is a tragedy or not.

You roll another cigarette even though by this point we're both slightly ill and barely aware. Your lighter is pink and half-size. It looks like my first

lighter, the one I bought with a girl I no longer speak to and lost on the hill by the lake during my first semester of college. I stayed up when you got sick later that night, in case you needed me. Dodging sleep, I took inventory of my collection of salvaged items and thought of how our arms touched when we shared a pair of earbuds on the bus. In front of me: the shiny red ribbon I found on the street. An abandoned bottle of silver nail polish. A thank you note you scrawled on the back of a price tag and left outside my door.

Everything I say to you feels like a postscript. I can't bring myself to say goodbye, so I'll say goodnight instead.

# FROM THE ARCHIVES

Christine Ladd-Franklin was a psychologist, logician, and mathematician born in Windsor, Connecticut. She attended Vassar from 1866-1869 and kept an extensive diary both before, during, and after her time at the college. She arrived at the young age of eighteen and found herself at a brand-new institution in an era of monumental change. Christine had wanted to go to the “Vassar Female Institute” for years, often referring to it as a “legend” and a “dream” of hers. Learning and education—as processes—were important to her; they were part of who she was. She frequently references impactful classes and difficult exams. Thus, from a surface level examination, she appears to have been a serious and scholarly woman. Yet, her diaries are hilarious, controversial, and critical of everyday life around her.

We approached this year’s theme of “Interiors and Intimacies” with Vassar in mind—yet we began with a different Vassar graduate. Elizabeth Bishop rang true to “intimacy.” Having painted watercolors of her homes across the globe and written moving letters and poems, she seemed perfectly suited. Her unpublished poem, “Happy Birthday,” revealed a poet who wrote about more than just the smoggy streets of New York City. Ironically, and perfectly in theme, her work is not always open to the public. And thus, our pursuit of “intimacies” ran too deep.

Our exploration in Vassar’s archives led us to Christine’s diaries. We have decided to publish excerpts from her second volume, covering the period from November 1866 to April 1873. Her diaries are peculiar objects because the experience of reading them seems to contradict their very purpose. Despite being written

for an audience of one, they don’t feel like private objects. Her writing exudes a story-like narrative that would be perfect for the published page.

Christine has a strong sense of humor and powerful convictions. On September 20th, 1866, Christine introduced herself to her diary: “It is quite degrading to my high and lofty inspirations to be obliged to record them in so small and mean a book as this, but it is the best I can obtain.” This is the first entry in the diary and it sets the stage for a life of transparency. In that very same entry, she tells her diary that she is “grievously disappointed in Vassar,” for “instead of the independent University my imagination pictured, I find a fashionable boarding school; and instead of the tall intelligent and enthusiastic young women in blue merino that I fancied, I found a troupe of young girls who wear black chamois and are wholly given up to the tyranny of fashion.” Christine was witty—she wrote down all of her critiques of Vassar life, be it “black chamois” or more substantive concerns. She comes across not just as a chronicler but as a character. This first entry is a light-hearted one, ultimately, but frames her narrative as a form of intimate resistance—one that she was able to access (and express) in her day-to-day life.

Beyond her humorous critiques, Christine’s diary comments on the life of someone who was reckoning with the United States’ religious and political institutions. She was a strong critic of Vassar’s Christian obligations, writing that “day by day [I am] losing the little respect I once had for truth and purity [...] I am heartlessly selfish. I am light and irreverent. I am immodest and utterly

indifferent to every good motivate. I do not know that this confession is to done any good, for I have no intention of reforming.” Christine’s identity transcended her intelligence and her humor to encapsulate someone who questioned the very nature of life around her. She resisted the world she inhabited.

Christine’s political and religious entries pave the way for a more intimate understanding of who she was. Fundamental to Christine’s diary is another woman: Carrie Davis. Christine refers to Carrie as a “companion” and the “most nondescript in the College.” She writes that Davis has inspired her “with a passion that reminds me of the days when this tough old heart of mine was young and tender.” Her writing is rhapsodic, at one point she worries that “I believed I had outgrown my love for her... but once I saw her, to feel the magnetism of her beauty, was all that was wanted to rivet again my chains.” As we read through Christine’s diary, it became clear that Carrie was not just Christine’s friend, but the focal point of something else:

“Breathless I leaned forward, bowed, and there darkness fell upon me, for she had turned away. The sensation of that moment! [...] The glad sense of the presence of my only one filled my soul and left room for nothing else. And yet I believed that I had outgrown my love for her. I had heard that she was coming to town, and I had borne it calmly; but once I saw her, to feel the magnetism of her beauty, was all that was wanted to rivet against my chains. This passion is beyond my control, and it is very real. The eyes that enthrall me—how shall I describe them? The face has grown somewhat thin, and the color has gone. The eyes are burning fires that send forth scorching rays | of | all-powerful upon my poor heart” (Sept 28th, 1871).

These entries suggest that Carrie held an intimate and romantic place in Christine’s world. This memory takes place post-Vassar, revealing a continued relationship between the two women. Their relationship at Vassar was composed of long walks and “bursts of laughter.” Her entry just two years later, in 1871, implies a deeper nature. As archivists, we are wary of imposing a contemporary

context upon Christine’s writing. She never explicitly mentions romance, and yet romance seems to permeate her writing, suggesting a relationship that was kept to the intimacy of the page. Christine’s diary is thus a clear demonstration of resistance as it not only critiques concrete concepts (like religion and politics), but it holds a space that was missing at 1860s Vassar. In creating this intimate space, Christine subverted the larger societal narratives that may have forced her onto the page to begin with.

Reading and processing Christine’s diaries is invasive. She writes in a beautiful script that necessitates a “decoding” by its unintended readers. Her entries about “blue merino” felt less intrusive to us, yet we quickly learned that with one light hearted entry comes another more-serious anecdote. Christine, in this private space, writes unashamedly about religion, love, and isolation. Indeed, diaries are where we share our most intimate thoughts—yet they also carry a degree of risk. To expose your thoughts on the page requires courage and demands articulation. Christine may have been private in her personal revelations, but her voice was public enough to make it to the page. In other words, she transformed her thoughts and memories into tangible materials.

Still, the view we get of Vassar from Christine’s diary is incomplete. We find, counterintuitively, that the experience of peering into the intimacies of Christine’s life is one of alienation. We are forced to consider our own perspectives as we try to understand Christine’s, and in doing so we must confront its limits. Intimacy constrains us to Christine’s perspective, we see through her eyes only, we experience her world only as she chose to present it to herself, using her subjective lens. To the historian, this may present a problem, but we find that the view of the world through Christine Ladd-Franklin’s eyes is made more compelling by its incompleteness.

Annika Heegaard '23 and Tao Beloney '23  
with Ronald Patkus, *Archives Editors*



(1)

"And now a right spirit within me."

Yassar College. Sept. 20. 1866. It is quite degrading to my high and lofty inspirations to be obliged to record them in so small and mean a book as this, but it is the best I can obtain, so it must suffice. With great sorrow I at once confess that I am grievously disappointed in Yassar. Instead of the independent University my imagination pictured, I find a fashionable Boarding-school; and instead of the tall, intelligent and enthusiastic young women in blue merinos that I fancied I find a troop of young girls who wear black spencers and are wholly given up to the tyranny of fashion.

Sept. 22. To say the truth my estimation of Yassar fluctuates in quite a remarkable degree. I begin to think that in time we shall see a college that will answer our highest expectations. This should I take into consideration that I am tired of having waited more than a week without having a single class

I would have said something about the miraculous manner in which I obtained this result. I thought of it as I went to sleep and I wished I might see Mr. Sherman to talk it over with him. I dreamed that he sent me a piece of paper on which was written what I have given above. Of course I look upon it as a mere dream and figment of the brain, only I would gladly know if Mr. S. was thinking of me - praying for me at the time.

Feb. 3. Olaus! for the rarity of Christian virtue under the sun! This I know, that all suspicion of virtuous conduct is far enough removed from <sup>me</sup> although Wayland lies in my drawer and I read the Testament daily in three different tongues. I wonder if it is any loss to live the life of a hypocrite? It is a fact that I am day by day losing the little respect I once had for truth and purity, & with the deterioration of my ideals, my conduct must also fall.

- 21 I have already distinguished myself in Astronomy today.

- 24. Ditto. I was one of four to make no mistake in extracting logarithms and one of two to work <sup>another</sup> little thing, the other girl being one who has studied astronomy before and is now in both classes. I do intend to work hard this year.

Oct. 3. That same girl is the mistress of my affections. Carrie Davis is her name, and she has inspired me with a passion that reminds me of the days when this tough old heart of mine was young and tender.

Mr. S. has written. He is established as physician and surgeon in Westfield, Ky. The way it has just flashed across me that he is not Dr. Sherman. I should never have thought of addressing him so. It appears remarkable to me that a young man of education, reading and some talent, should write so very



Oct. 16. From the heights of prosperity to the depths of adversity! I have the misfortune to hold the office of critic in my society and tonight ~~was~~ occurred my inaugural address. It was hastily written, poorly read, and a most stupid production on the whole. The office is exceedingly disagreeable.

Oct. 17. Oh misfortune! I had set my heart on a long walk today, and I awake to find it raining. Carrie Davis was to have been my companion. She is a strange girl. Her face, when in repose, is perhaps the most nonexpressive in the College, and yet she is exceedingly witty and never speaks without causing bursts of laughter.

Evening. By a rare chance it happened that I walked with her after all, for a few moments just before tea. She gave me her good wishes and I answered as awkwardly as possible.

Again a letter from S. He ~~can~~ writes in an unusually cheerful mood, and he seems inclined to write quite frequently.

toucher inadvertently. May it not be that the law by which vice entails suffering is simply a law of nature?

14. Jennie grows very beautiful. Beauty is surely the only desirable quality in a woman.

A resumé? I left it a week before the end of the year, summoned by Dr. S. After a few days in Michigan, I returned to my usual position in this interesting family. Voluntary and Anesthetics have furnished me some amusement, but for the most part I have been abominably lazy. To eat and sleep and grow fat is the only thing that I am persistent in. Let me not forget to say that a little note of mine was successful with the Nation.

Apr. 21, 1871. Six months not uneventful. March 16 - March 26, dies infanti

Sept. 28, 1871. Washington Pa, has the felicity of numbering me among its inhabitants. My position with Mrs. Hanna is far from enviable, but I shall still study contentment. H. had come to be very pleasant to me, but

Five hundred a year is more  
profit with a good teacher  
than three hundred and fifty.  
Moreover money is especially  
desirable to me this year, because  
next year I propose to be a  
 pupil under Prof. Channing or Prof.  
Rice, as the party may decide.

But I came here to write of  
my beloved. At a concert, when  
the evening was half over & I  
looked idly upon the audience,  
I became conscious of two eyes  
magnificent as of old, warm  
and eager, & waiting for  
recognition. Breathless I turned  
backward, forward, and then dark-  
ness fell upon me, for she  
had turned away. The sensations  
of that moment! All my frame  
trembled, I was cold and faint  
and then the hot blood rushed  
tumultuously through my veins.

I was literally "all kind of smiling  
 round the lips and turning round  
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 not have concealed my emotion.  
 At what the singer sang I was utterly  
 oblivious. The glad sense of the  
 presence of my only one filled my  
 soul & left room for nothing else.  
 And yet I believed that I had not  
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# TRANSCRIPTS OF THE DIARY OF CHRISTINE LADD FRANKLIN, 1866–1873

## PAGE 1

“And renew a right spirit within me.”

Vassar College. Sept 20, 1866. It is quite degrading to my high and lofty inspirations to be obliged to record them in so small and mean a book as this, but it is the best I can obtain, so it must suffice. With great sorrow I at once confess that I am grievously disappointed in Vassar. Instead of the independent University my imagination pictured, I find a fashionable Boarding-school; and instead of the tall intelligent and enthusiastic young women in blue merino that I fancied, I find a troupe of young girls who wear black chamois and are wholly given up to the tyranny of fashion.

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five hundred a year is more potent with a poor teacher than three hundred and fifty. Moreover money is especially desirable to me this year, because next year I propose to be a pupil under Prof. [C??] or Prof. [P??], as the fates may decide. But I came here to write of my beloved. At a concert, when the evening was half over and I looked idly upon the admirer, I became conscious of two eyes, magnificent as of old, warm and eager, waiting for recognition. Breathless I leaned forward, bowed, and there darkness fell upon me, for she had turned away. The sensation of that moment! All my person trembled, I was cold and faint and then the hot blood rushed tumultuously through my veins.

PAGE 7

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Vassar College Libraries,  
Archives and Special Collections



# ARTS

## GEORGINA BERBARI

*Reflection 1, 2022*

Photography

11 × 14 in. (27.9 × 35.6 cm)

*Reflection 2, 2022*

Photography

11 × 14 in. (27.9 × 35.6 cm)

## CATI BESTARD

*Corner #1, 2017*

Wooden sculpture

48 × 13 × 29 in. (121.9 × 33 × 73.7 cm)

*Shadows #1, 2018*

Gelatin silver photogram

20 × 16 in. (50.8 × 40.6 cm)

## HEIDI BRUECKNER

*Waiting to Wait, 2022*

Oil and paper, dichroic film, tile, thread, tulle, ribbon, and sequins on recycled Amazon bubble mailers

72 × 45 ¼ in. (182.8 × 114.9 cm)

## MONICA CHURCH

*Bee, 2020*

Acrylic, oil, collage, and pencil on wood block

5 ½ × 5 ½ × ¾ in. (14 × 14 × 1.9 cm)

## CLARA DELGADO

*Home Movie, 2022*

Archival inkjet print

20 × 16 in. (50.8 × 40.6 cm)

## KYRA GARRIGUE

*Bedroom, 2022*

Digital print

30 × 40 in. (76.2 × 101.6 cm)

## CHARLOTTE ETA MUMM

*möbliertes Portrait, h, 2013*

Mixed media on wood

11.8 × 11.8 in. (30 × 30 cm)

Photographer: Stefan Ruissen

*Thresholds and Their Phantoms, 2022*

Plastic sheets, colored spray, tape, collages, and objects

Installation: Size variable

Solo-exhibition: Exhibition views gallery Phoinix in Bratislava, Slovakia.

Photographer: Leontína Berková

## BRENNA SASTRAM

*II, 2023*

Pinhole photograph on 35mm

42 × 28 in. (106.7 × 71.1 cm)

## KARIN SCHAEFER

*Making Waves, 2022*

Ink on paper

30 × 22 ½ in. (76.2 × 57.2 cm)

Sears Peyton Gallery, New York

## DAVID SCHOFFMAN

*My Life in Macbeth, 2022*

Ink, watercolor, and gouache

5 × 5 in. (12.7 × 12.7 cm) each

## KRISTA SHENEMAN

*Terra Incognita*, 2022  
Textile with wooden frame  
66 × 51 in. (167.6 × 129.5 cm)

*Walking Series*, 2022  
Water soluble interfacing and cotton thread  
Size variable  
Additional: These 23 shirts were made for each day of a walk from Cincinnati, OH to Memphis, TN during April 2022. Each day a new shirt was worn under clothing in order to collect sweat from the artist's journey to their childhood home spanned from Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee for a total of 500 miles. This journey allowed the artist to investigate the concept of home through identity, collection, and labor.

## TIANYI SUN

*Softbox [Find]*, 2022  
Acetate, epoxy, digital print transfers, heat treated Plexiglass®, laser cut mirrored acrylic, neodymium magnets, acrylic polymer, and oil on laser cut Plexiglass®  
14 × 17 in. (35.6 × 43.2 cm)

*Softbox [Sweet]*, 2022  
Acetate, epoxy, digital print transfers, heat treated Plexiglass®, laser cut mirrored acrylic, neodymium magnets, acrylic polymer, and oil on laser cut Plexiglass®  
14 × 17 in. (35.6 × 43.2 cm)

## KATE TEALE

*Scenes from a Storm*, 2022  
Acrylic on mulberry paper over canvas and board  
11 × 22 in. (27.9 × 55.9 cm) each

*Study for Tumult*, 2020  
Watercolor on paper  
18 × 24 in. (45.7 × 60.9 cm)

## ENNE TESSE

*Eye*, 2014  
Linen and chickpea  
18 × 11 × 2 in. (45.7 × 27.9 × 5 cm)

*Organ 1*, 2022  
Cotton butchers twine, and nylon zip ties  
16 × 15 × 8 in. (40.6 × 38.1 × 20.3 cm)

## BRENNAN WOJTYLA

*Bathroom Divider*, 2022  
Hijacked school bathroom divider  
82 × 4 × 40 in. (208.3 × 10.2 × 101.6 cm)

*Plastic Altarpiece*, 2022  
Single aerosol line on plastic sheet  
48 × 72 in. (121.9 × 182.9 cm)

## YIXUAN WU

*Soft Congee, Still Water*, 2022  
Blown glass, cast iron radiator, rice, millet, round PVC pipes, lemon cream cracker, glazed tile, and monkey tail cactus  
32 × 66 × 39 in. (81.3 × 167.7 × 99.1 cm)

## SIMONE ZAPATA

*Reason for Consultation*, 2021  
Digital collage  
8.5 × 11 in. (21.6 × 27.9 cm)

## CONTRIBUTORS

### ALEXANDRA BANACH

Alexandra Banach is an MFA candidate at Columbia University. She comes from Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

### GEORGINA BERBARI

Georgina Berbari is a queer, middle-eastern, multidisciplinary artist. She has been taking photos since the age of nine, discovering observation through the lens to be a form of meditation. Her practice is daily: a communion between viewer and viewed, an exploration of the human body, sexuality, and psyche.

### CATI BESTARD

Cati Bestard was born in Mallorca (Spain). She received her MFA from Columbia University in 2018. Her work has been exhibited at Ulterior Gallery, Times Square Space, the Jewish Museum, Museu Palau Soterra, Crush Curatorial, and Untitled Miami. She has been a resident at the Institute of Investigative Living (Joshua Tree, 2018), Hercules Art Studio Program (New York, 2019–2020), Art Workspace Easthampton (Easthampton, 2021) and Penumbra Foundation (New York, 2022).

### HEIDI BRUECKNER

Heidi Brueckner is a Professor of Art at West Valley College in Saratoga, CA where she has taught painting, drawing, and design for 23 years. Professor Brueckner's work has been shown at museums, galleries, colleges, and in publications nationally and internationally. She currently lives and works in Oakland, California.

### ABIGAIL CHABITNOY

Abigail Chabitnoy is the author of *In the Current Where Drowning Is Beautiful* (Wesleyan 2022); *How to Dress a Fish* (Wesleyan 2019), shortlisted for the 2020 International Griffin Prize for Poetry and winner of the 2020 Colorado Book Award; and the linocut illustrated chapbook *Converging Lines of Light* (Flower Press 2021). She currently teaches at the Institute of American Indian Arts low-residency MFA program and is an assistant professor at UMass Amherst. Abigail is a member of the Tangirnaq Native Village in Kodiak.

### MONICA CHURCH

Monica Church is a Hudson Valley artist working in collage, painting and photography.

### CLARA DELGADO

Clara Delgado is a photographer and a current MFA student at the Rhode Island School of Design. She holds a BFA in Two-Dimensional Studies from Bowling Green State University. Delgado's works question past and current identity through the objects and scenery around her.

### FLORA FIELD

Flora Field is a poet from Oregon. She received her MFA from Columbia University where she was a Teaching Fellow and runner-up for an Academy of American Poets University Prize. Her writing can be found in *Thimble Literary Magazine*, *The Adirondack Review*, *Entropy Mag*, and elsewhere. She is currently at work on her debut manuscript *Green Dream*.

## KYRA GARRIGUE

Kyra Garrigue is a multimedia artist living in upstate New York. Her work explores the details of everyday life through macro photography, scanography, video (single channel and installation) and audio soundscapes. Her artistic path has included studying a variety of art forms from music at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, fine arts at the Art Students League in New York City to photography and sculpture at the School of Visual Arts, where she received her BFA. She also holds a certificate in Digital Media from Harvestworks Digital Media Arts Center in New York and an MFA in Electronic Art from Rensselaer Polytechnical Institute in Troy, NY. Her work has been exhibited across the globe in exhibitions and festivals such as: the New York Video Festival at Lincoln Center, NYC; the International Media Art Festival, the Armenian Center for Contemporary Experimental Art; CITYZOOMS at the Uebersee Museum, Germany; Photophobia, the Art Gallery of Hamilton, Canada; and Pulse, the Bass Museum of Art, FL. Currently, Ms. Garrigue resides in the Capital District area and is an Assistant Professor of Digital Media at Hudson Valley Community College.

## MARYAM GHAFOR

Maryam Ghafoor is a queer Muslim Pakistani-American poet from Illinois. Her work has been published in *Barnstorm Literary Journal*, *Foundry*, and *American Poetry Review*. Her poems are forthcoming in *Peatsmoke*, *Spry*, and *SOFTBLOW*.

## MILA HOLT

Mila Holt is a former Emmy Award-winning TV writer/director. She lives in Northern California.

## HILLERY HUGG

Hillery Hugg is a writer based in Austin, Texas. She received an MA in English Literature from the University of Texas at Austin, where she was also a Michener Fellow in Fiction, and she is a graduate of the MFA program at Columbia University. Her stories have appeared in *American Short Fiction*, *The American Reader*, *3rd Bed*, *Caketrain*, *NANO Fiction*, and *The Lifted Brow*, and her nonfiction has been published in *Guernica* and *The Believer*.

## HALEY JOHANNESSEN

Haley Johannesen is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and currently lives in Iowa City, Iowa with her husband and daughter. Her work has appeared in *Tomorrow Tomorrow*, *Caustic Frolic*, *From SAC*, and elsewhere. She is a high school English teacher and reads for *Brink*.

## RODNEY TERICH LEONARD

Rodney Terich Leonard is the author of *Sweetgum & Lightning* (Four Way Books). His second poetry collection, *Another Land of My Body*, is also forthcoming from Four Way Books. Born & bred in Alabama, he currently resides in Manhattan.

## JANA MARTIN

Jana Martin is the author of *Russian Lover and Other Stories* (Verse Chorus) and *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes* (Abbeville), and a contributor to *Women Who Rock* (Black Dog & Leventhal), *Avedon: The Sixties* (Random House), among others. She was an editor on *The Weeklings.com*, and has appeared in publications from *Glimmer Train* and the *Mississippi Review* to the *New York Times* and *Cosmopolitan*.

## BEN MICHELMAN

Ben Michelman is a father, husband, teacher, and poet in Durham, North Carolina. His work has appeared in *Passages North*, *Up the Staircase*, *Barrelhouse*, and elsewhere.

## CHARLOTTE ETA MUMM

Charlotte Eta Mumm (b. 1980, Netherlands) is based in Amsterdam. Her work is about ambivalences and tangibility. She works with multiple means of expressions and materials. It isn't about the material per se but rather about the transformation and entitative qualities. Mumm's work has been both exhibited and awarded internationally. Recent projects: Phoinix, Bratislava; Museum Brot und Kunst, Ulm; Keramiekmuseum Princessehof, Leeuwarden, Kunsthuis SYB, Beetsterzwaag; AER Thread by Josef & Anni Albers Foundation, Senegal; Sculpture Quadrennial Riga 2024.

## SAMANTHA NEUGEBAUER

Samantha Neugebauer is a lecturer at Johns Hopkins University and New York University in Abu Dhabi. She is also a senior editor for *Painted Bride Quarterly* and a podcaster for *Slush Pile*. In 2022, she was named a 2022–23 D.C. Arts Fellow with Day Eight, through which she is writing for the *Washington Independent Review of Books*.

## M. H. REZA

M. H. Reza is a London-based writer and healthcare professional. She received an MA in Creative Writing from Lancaster University and has been shortlisted for the Future Worlds Prize for SFF writers of colour. She has published several short stories and essays in various online and print publications, and is also the co-founder of *Overtly Lit*, a magazine dedicated to faith-inspired art.

## SHANA ROSS

Shana Ross is a transplant to Edmonton, Alberta and Treaty Six Territory. *Qui transtulit sustinet*. Her recent work has appeared in *Cutbank Literary Journal*, *Laurel Review*, *Phantom Kangaroo*, and won the 2022 Anne C. Barnhill prize for creative nonfiction. She is an editor for *Luna Station Quarterly* and a critic for *Pencilhouse*.

## BRENNA SASTRAM

Brenna Sastram is a Connecticut based multidisciplinary artist whose body of work spans across photomechanical printmaking, sculptural installation, and writing. Articulating the complexities of trauma through objects and imagery, she gently interrogates the ways that memory becomes the driving force in which we navigate the external world.

## KARIN SCHAEFER

Karin Schaefer (b.1968, America) received her BFA from the School of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA. She has exhibited her work at Barbican Art Galleries, London, UK; Museum of Contemporary Art Tucson, AZ; Sears Peyton Gallery, New York, NY; Christopher Henry Gallery, New York, NY; University Art Museum, SUNY, Albany, NY; Bernay Fine Art, Great Barrington, MA, Geoffrey Young Gallery, Great Barrington, MA and numerous other galleries and institutions. Grants and Residencies include Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, artist-in-residence; Lef Foundation, individual artist grant; Isamu Noguchi artist-in-residence. Her work has been written about in the *Wall Street Journal*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Last Magazine*, *Wallpaper Magazine* and published in several catalogues and books including *Map as Art: Contemporary Artists Explore Cartography*, Princeton Architectural Press; *Rapture*, Barbican Art Galleries, Thames and Hudson; *Women in Clothes*, Blue Rider Press; *Brooklyn Interiors*, Rizzoli; *9/11 Memorial Visions*, McFarland. She lives and works in Brooklyn, NY and South Egremont, MA.

## DAVID SCHOFFMAN

Brooklyn bred and poorly seasoned in California, David Schoffman is the director of the artist collective The Plausible Deniability Project™, of which he is the only member.

## AMANDA SHAPIRO

Amanda Shapiro is a freelance writer and editor living in New York. Her fiction, journalism, and poetry have appeared in *The Cut*, *VICE*, *GQ*, *BuzzFeed*, the *Oxford American*, *75l*, *Smallwork*, *Cutbank*, and more. She is the founding editor of *Healthyish* and the former editorial director of *Bon Appétit*.

## KRISTA SHENEMAN

Krista Sheneman is a time-based sculptural artist who explores identity through collection, health, labor, and memory. Krista grew up on the bluffs of the mighty Mississippi in Memphis, Tennessee. Although the accent is gone, she still considers herself a southerner at heart. She holds a sculpture degree from the Art Academy of Cincinnati (2021). She currently lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan where she is completing her MFA.

## TIANYI SUN

Tianyi Sun (b. 1996, China) explores the structural functioning of digital interfaces, communication systems, imaging technologies, and physical architecture as concurrent networks of power. Through installations of responsive environments, she questions the body's enmeshment in technologies that both oppress and console. Sun is based in New York and has recently exhibited at the Sheila C. Johnson Design Center, Helena Anrather, New York; Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Proxy Gallery, Los Angeles.

## KATE TEALE

Kate Teale is a British artist who lives and works in Brooklyn. She teaches at Parsons School of Design.

## ENNE TESSE

Enne Tesse (Antonella Piemontese) has exhibited her work in museums and galleries in the US and Japan including the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art, Southern Vermont Arts Center, New Britain Museum of American Art, and Wadsworth Atheneum. She lives and works in Beacon, NY and is the recipient of the Pollock-Krasner Foundation Grant, the Arts Mid-Hudson Individual Artist Commission Grant, and the Arts Mid-Hudson Under-Recognized Artist Award. Collections include the Museum of Modern Art Kyoto, the Kyoto Costume Institute, and the Sol LeWitt Collection.

## SHELBY WARDLAW

Shelby Wardlaw is a professor, writer, and translator from Austin, Texas. She is the co-founder of the Red Light Fiction Reading Series in Brooklyn (@redlightfiction). Her fiction, nonfiction and Russian poetry translations have appeared in numerous publications. In the spring of 2020, she won Honorable Mention in the Pigeon Pages Fiction Contest. She was a Finalist for the 2021 Salamander Fiction Prize, the 2021 McGlenn Prize for Fiction and The Writer's 2020 Fall Short Story Contest. Her story "Papaya Erectus" was recently nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

## THOMAS REED WILLEMMAIN

Dr. Thomas Reed Willemmain is a former academic, software entrepreneur and intelligence officer. His flash fiction has twice been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *Ariel Chart*, *Granfalloon*, *Hobart*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *The Medley*, and elsewhere. He holds degrees from Princeton University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

## BRENNAN WOJTYLA

Brennan Wojtyla is a transdisciplinary artist whose work explores the concepts of context and industry in an artistic setting. Growing up in an industrial city gave him the ability to observe his surroundings and dissect the environment in which he was raised. By utilizing found materials, aerosol paint, performance, and concept-driven works, Wojtyla introduces questions about defining art and blurring the lines of what can hold artistic merit.

## STELLA WONG

Stella Wong is the author of *Spooks*, winner of the Saturnalia Books Editors Prize, and *American Zero*, selected for the Two Sylvias Press Chapbook Prize by Danez Smith. A graduate of Harvard and the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Wong's poems have appeared in *POETRY*, *Colorado Review*, *Lana Turner*, *Bennington Review*, *Denver Quarterly*, *LA Review of Books*, and more.

## YIXUAN WU

Yixuan Wu, a multidisciplinary artist, currently lives and works in New York. She received a MFA degree in Visual Arts at Columbia University and a BFA degree in Photography at Rhode Island School of Design. Drawing from the ungraspable yet familiar everyday situations, her works reconstruct and reconfigure vignettes of domesticities into substructures. Her multidisciplinary practice addresses the subtle gestures that endow the objects of sensual qualities, the incongruous systems, and the uncanny.

## TIANYU YI

Tianyu Yi was born in Little Rock, Arkansas, and graduated from Davidson College. She is currently the Wiley Birkhofer Fellow at the NYU MFA in Creative Writing. Her work can be found in *The Missouri Review*, and is forthcoming from the *Mississippi Review*. She also serves as Assistant Poetry Editor at *Identity Theory Magazine*.

## SIMONE ZAPATA

Simone Zapata is a poet and educator from San José, CA. Her work has been featured or is forthcoming in *Foglifter*, *The Quarterless Review*, *Tiny Spoon*, and *Reed Magazine*. She serves as a poetry editor for *MAYDAY*.



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