

2026 | TEMPER AND TESTIMONY

VASSAR | REVIEW

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REVIEW

2026

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2026-2027 • Issue 11 • Temper & Testimony

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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. 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 for full submission guidelines.

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TESTIMONY

2026

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“I’m not that interested in recreating reality. I’m interested in recreating an emotional truth.” —Guillermo del Toro

“Poetry is, above all, an approach to the truth of feeling, and what is the use of truth? / How do we use feeling? / How do we use truth?” —Muriel Rukeyser

Dear Reader,

For the eleventh edition, the *Vassar Review* seeks to address the importance of bearing witness. We believe 2025 was a year of seeking and bearing truth. As we see it, our desire for truth frames our thinking about the world, while our subjective truths frame how we experience it.

Today, however, we live in an economy of believability, where testimony is not taken at face value—it must be maintained through forms of labor. A testimony can give voice to experiences of injustice; and thereby, as Cuban author Miguel Barnet articulates in his theory of the testimonio, reveals an urgency to make an event or a situation of oppression public. Simultaneously, the believability of one’s testimony can also reflect their power and resources; it can reflect the ability to wield affect and emotion in one’s favor.

Temperament both constructs and deconstructs truth. We ask ourselves: can one’s temper strengthen testimony, or render it obsolete? How are temper and emotion facets of writing and art which can distort, establish, or influence truth? The juxtaposition of temper and testimony allows for a robust discourse about how emotion and truth are expressed in our world—in politics, personal narratives, jurisprudence, or the pursuit of social change.

Just as glass and steel are tempered, we looked for art, prose and poetry that both encouraged and interrogated the formation of truth. And, as with the process of tempering, we are curious about how emotion can strengthen one’s chosen artistic or literary medium. In this edition of the *Vassar Review*, we celebrate the pursuit of truth, which is, after all, the closest we get to a global recognition of what is real.

We have found so much joy in creating and curating this issue, and feel grateful to have been able to place these truths together where, now, they have become one.

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

With immense gratitude,
Carina Cole and Emma Goss
Editors-in-Chief





Amber Lelli, *Green Head*, 2024

WIND PHONE

Elizabeth Kuelbs

In Japan, before the tsunami, in a hilltop garden
near the sea, a man installs a booth with paned glass,
a little peaked roof, and an old black phone
to call his dead cousin.

Now a wooden sign says *kaze no denwa* in blue writing. Now
widows come, and widowers, grandsons, sisters. They lift
the receiver to share news with wind. The connections
blow far. In Washington, a man nails a phone to a cedar. I

watch videos of people carrying bright umbrellas
under dripping branches, buoyed from talking to lost ones.
I want to call my wasn't baby, the one who left my body
in a torrent of red stars. It could have been

my kids in that forest. Are we really doing this?
Medieval parking lot hemorrhage? Unimaginable
limbo agony? Telling women, *Suffer!*—

You can dial a night heron

outside a restaurant in Maryland. A mourning dove,
a red-tailed hawk, a wood duck, a rooster, and O
for migration assistance. Everywhere, you can call
707-8PEPTOC to hear the advice of children.

NOBUYA

Karen Tei Yamashita

I phoned the UCLA Asian American studies bibliographer, a consultation about my research. In our conversation, she apologized to say she could make no promises to meet me as she was busy flying between Los Angeles and New York, collecting Yuri's archive. She explained that Yuri had suffered a stroke, was recuperating, though alone in her apartment. Her granddaughter looked in on her; her sons and daughter in California hoped she would move, but she refused to leave Harlem.

My acquaintance with Yuri had been a brief afternoon thirty-five years ago, but the bibliographer assumed that if I were in New York I could look in on her, see if she needed anything. Groceries, trip to the doctor, help around the house, mailing, accompany her to meetings. My research had nothing to do with Yuri, but something compelled me to consider reliving what was my first visit to the United States. A visit that changed my life. I didn't think she would remember me; after all, my acquaintance with her was a brief afternoon thirty-five years ago. But I discovered that Yuri wanted to remember everyone.

*

545 West 126th Street, Broadway and Harlem. Apartment 3-B. I knocked on the door, surprised to find it slightly ajar. *Hello? Hello?*—and entered to face a long corridor, entries and doorways to either side. Was it the same? I tried to recall. To the left, the kitchen. To the right, the living room. I set my backpack down, slipped from my shoes, and walked in stocking feet down the hall. Family photographs and political posters covered every inch of wall. I peered into an open door—next to the bed, a walker with tennis-ball feet, and huddled under the covers, the small lump of person, sleeping.

Slipping away, I continued my sleuthing. In one room, piles of papers, books, albums, posters, correspondence, manila folders, and memorabilia covered the floor and tables. The organized chaos the bibliographer had described—metal file cabinets and boxes lining the walls; in the far corner, printer and fax machine. A broom and dustpan against the wall. Why not? Moving in and around and under the stuff and furniture, I swept exposed parts of floor. From room to room, collecting a small pile of debris. Congregated trash from cans into a single plastic bag.

In the living room, an ironing board had apparently become permanent decor, for at its square end was a dial telephone and spiral notebook, every caller, time, date, and phone number carefully inscribed. I sank into the sofa, rearranging the crocheted cushions and a multitude of stuffed bears surrounding, tried to recall that room crowded with people. Had it been this small? That day, moving between Japanese and English, interpreting questions and answers—polite, tentative, respectful, curious talk, I was too overwhelmed to notice. Beneath stockinged feet, dark wood floors, burnish of use, scuff of wear.

I wandered into the kitchen. The table seemed familiar—vintage fifties, vinyl cushioned chairs styled over chrome. On its Formica top, envelopes, sheets of U.S. postage stamps, more spiral notebooks and Rolodex noted meticulously with names, addresses, and mailing dates; a letter in process with anticipating pen. No, mustn't touch anything here. The envelopes were already addressed, to person after person in such-and-such correctional facility or state prison. She was an inveterate letter writer; no one in prison should be left alone or forgotten.

Jammed over kitchen counters, the usual condiments, medicines, cereals, snacks, peanut butter and jelly, fruit, coffee maker, radio. I snatched paper towels, found a bottle of Windex under the counter, swished and wiped over and under everything. Moving to the sink, I picked up the sponge, pooped a dab of dish soap, got the water up to temperature and washed the dishes, left them clean in the dishrack. Then, I scrubbed around a pot of soup cold on the stove. Sounds from the street. Voices. Play. Inside, the silence of sleep.

If counted in every guestbook, hundreds of people of every creed and politics had been invited into this home from 1960 until that moment, had entered this home of a family of eight. They had crowded into the small kitchen and every crevice—ate, drank, played, argued, pontificated, created, strategized, plotted, spied, acted out, recovered, got on their feet, found solace, hung out, took advantage, slept, laughed, hugged, loved, wept, howled—yes, the list was even longer, but simply told, they had lived in messy revolutionary times.

I filled the kettle with water and set it on the stove to boil. Chose a mug from the rack—WORLD'S GREATEST DAD—dipped and lifted the teabag. Crossing back to the living room, mug and dust cloth in hand, I scanned the walls with framed photographs. Stopped to study a small black-and-white photo, my own name typed in the caption, followed by the parenthetical title: interpreter. I paused on the youthful faces of the Writer and the Reporter, and standing behind, taller by a full head, the man of honor on that day. I gripped the mug, hugging its warm ceramic to my chest. A tiny splash of hot tea whipped up onto my shirt; beneath, a drop of skin burned.

On the ironing board, she'd left a stack of scrapbooks, a yellow sticky note on top with my name. I set down the mug, wiped a thin film of dust from the album's cover. The subtle must of degrading paper fluttered from each page; I turned them, one by one.

*

I believe it best to begin with events that anticipated that day, but where to begin? Would it be August 6, 1945, at 8:15 in the morning, the date and time the atomic bomb dropped on Hiroshima? It was also the date of my own birth, a fact, as it seemed inauspicious, I did not care to

share. John Hersey wrote the stories of six survivors, one of them Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto. The continuation is that Shigeko Niimoto came to ask Reverend Tanimoto if he would support her and a few young hibakusha women. Girls at the time of bomb, their faces and bodies disfigured, they craved common community but were uncomfortable sharing their stories with outsiders and men. Eventually their group included the twenty-five who arrived in New York City on May 9, 1955, for reconstructive and plastic surgery at Mount Sinai Hospital. How and who created the moniker, I have often wondered, but Shigeko and her companions became the Hiroshima Maidens.

Over their year-and-a-half-long stay, the young women were housed in Quaker homes with the support of philanthropists, among them Norman Cousins, editor at the *Saturday Review*. Along with the American Friends, they received support from organizations such as JICUF, the Japan International Christian University Foundation, and the New York NSO, Nisei Service Organization, largely veterans of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. Yuri's husband, Bill, worked for the JICUF and helped found the NSO, so this was how their family became involved in supporting the maidens. In numerous letters, Yuri is thanked for her visits, for bringing Japanese food and gifts. She must have also remembered birthdays and festival days. The family Christmas newsletter the following year reported that the 442nd veterans sponsored a ball in their honor, inviting maidens to dance. THE HIROSHIMA SEQUEL: SCARS DIMINISH AS LOVE MUSHROOMS.

On May 11, 1955, Reverend Tanimoto appeared on national television, an NBC show hosted by Ralph Edwards, *This Is Your Life*. At the time, I was only nine years old in Tokyo, but years later, I watched footage of Edwards turning the pages of Tanimoto's life, from witnessing and surviving the bomb to sacrificing his life to serve his Nagaragawa congregation of Hiroshima hibakusha. Two maidens revealed in silhouette behind a gauze curtain, followed onstage by his American missionary teacher, his college friend at Emory, the copilot of the *Enola Gay* who dropped Little Boy over Hiroshima, and finally, to complete a happy picture, Tanimoto's wife and three children. Who in America had not watched this early version of reality TV? In the distance of time, I confess, witnessing Tanimoto's life as spectacle churned

nausea within me, but no doubt he understood that show as part of his commitment to peace.

In 1959, Shigeko Niimoto returned from Hiroshima as the adopted daughter of Norman Cousins, and in the same year, the NSO regaled her as Queen of the 442nd at their annual dance. NO MORE HIROSHIMAS.

Two years later, at Shigeko's entreatings, Yuri and Bill added a ten-year-old Japanese boy to their brood of six children. Hiroshi, a burn victim receiving a series of ten reconstructive surgeries from the same doctors at Mount Sinai, lived with the family for a year. This was the year after the move from midtown to Harlem, to this more spacious apartment in the Manhattanville project.

Harlem: home to Black art and culture, the Renaissance itself, political, historic, and social center of civil rights and resistance; it was impossible not to be stirred by its activism, revolution. By 1963, Yuri had joined the Harlem Parents Committee and participated with her children in the Freedom School, just across the street and a block down. Here she read W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon, got schooled in Black history. She befriended Freedom Rider James Peck and joined the campaign to elect African American Progressive Labor Party candidate Bill Epton to the New York State Senate. And in July, she joined CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, to protest unfair labor practices at the Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn, disrupting construction to force the hire of Black and Puerto Rican workers. She and her teenage son were arrested when they laid their bodies down to block construction vehicles. In August, following the March on Washington, the family boarded a train to Birmingham to visit churches, lunch counters, meeting places, the city where Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his famous letter from jail. A week after their visit in September, the 16th Street Baptist Church was bombed, killing four girls. On October 16, at the courthouse trial of Downstate protestors, Yuri met Malcolm X, an encounter and date she would never forget. In November, John F. Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, and Malcolm X made his controversial statement that "the chickens had come home to roost." That year, the family announced they would not celebrate Christmas. In a matter of three years, Yuri and her family had fully joined their lives to the Harlem community and its movements.

Yuri's scrapbooks recorded this family history and transformation in newspaper clippings, photographs, letters, postcards, newsletters. I turned the pages of a story that preceded and made possible my visit to this home in 1964.

*

I stood up again to look at the photograph on the wall, wiping the glass carefully. The date: June 6, 1964. I stared at my face nearing twenty, its softness, an almost dreamy quality. I was too young to understand the significance of that day. Even much later when I discerned its meaning, I did not feel comfortable inserting myself into that story. I had been an observer; I was occupying a role, but thinking back, it was more complicated.

The Writer wore a printed shirt, the rest of us formally white-shirted in suits with thin ties. They were my sempai elders by at least ten years. My small power was that I spoke English fluently and had been in New York already one month. I saw that the Writer's brows were slightly pinched, his demeanor serious; he looked away from the camera, other images in his vision. The Reporter, on the other hand, wore a shy smile. The photographer was Yuri herself. I suppose the Reporter tried to accommodate her cajoling. I think it was a simple Kodak Brownie. She had to wind the film forward and might have even said *cheese*. But none of us showed teeth, all our thoughts held closely within captured surfaces. Now it occurred to me a kind of curated serendipity that Yuri in this apartment in Harlem made this photograph possible.

I had arrived in New York that summer on an internship at the JICUF. As I said, Yuri's husband Bill worked at JICUF, and I had just graduated from ICU, International Christian University in Tokyo, and this would be my first trip beyond Japan. That summer I lived in a dorm at Columbia, just a few blocks' walk to the foundation. My job was to translate correspondence and eventually to interpret for visitors, Japanese to English or English to Japanese, depending on the circumstances. My schedule was not fixed, and I was encouraged to explore the city, to learn the subway system, to find my way to museums and tourist attractions such as the Statue of Liberty or the Empire State Building. Eventually, I would be asked to take visitors to these sites and to explain their

historic significance. I had to learn everything quickly, become an expert, as if a real New Yorker. True, my English was exceptional, and I'd even become somewhat adept at American slang and colloquialism. I admit I read a lot of comics in those days. But I'd never employed my skills outside my university, outside Japan, and there was the matter of accent. For some reason, my professors and supervisors assumed that my language competence was all that was required to navigate life in America.

Nine years had passed since the visit of the Hiroshima Maidens. This year, the Writer and the Reporter were among twenty-five chosen for the Nagasaki-Hiroshima World Peace Study Mission. On the day of the bomb, they were little boys who survived. Now they joined a mixed group of hibakusha, among them teachers, doctors, housewives, labor unionists, and students, under the leadership of Dr. Takuo Matsumoto, who was, at the time of the bomb, head of the Hiroshima Girls School. Many in the delegation wore visible signs of disfigurement; they bore their status as bomb survivors with varying degrees of defiance and quiet dignity. Proposing a global tour of 150 cities, their stated purpose was to study peace, to exchange stories, to stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons. They were the living survivors of a cautionary tale. Setting out from Tokyo in April 1964, they would cross the American continent, then go on to Europe, the Soviet Union, and China, circling the globe. The mission listed sponsorship with names such as Norman Cousins, Bertrand Russell, John D. Rockefeller IV, Reinhold Niebuhr, David Riesman, and James A. Pike.

That spring, the New York World's Fair opened in Flushing Meadows in Queens, with 140 pavilions, an international array of exhibits and restaurants, spectacular water fountains, and an amusement park. Its theme: Peace Through Understanding. It was my job to usher our guests into the fair, especially to the Japanese Pavilion, where we could see the country's return to industrial capitalism, its exhibition of space rockets, high-speed cameras, automated ships, and an Electronic Travel Brain operating over a large map of the world, then transition through a sublime garden with kimono-clad women and a demonstration of flower arranging in a traditional Japanese house. I mention this because, days later, we were invited by our organizers to also tour the

World's Worst Fair, a response to that extravagant future unavailable to Harlemites. There we were guided through a rat-infested tenement house with backed-up toilets, broken windows, crumbling staircases, frayed electrical wiring, representative of impoverished and substandard living conditions right here in the U.S. of America. I understood my job was to interpret only, but I wondered what went through the minds of my Japanese charges, hibakusha whose lives had been irrevocably destroyed, for whom inhuman conditions, technology, and serenity had incomparable meanings.

I don't recall how many were in the peace delegation that day. The twenty-five had been divided into groups to take separate trips to other cities. That was how the mission would accomplish its promise to visit 150 cities. There was another interpreter, a young woman, also from ICU assigned to our group. She and I were the interpretive pair; she attending the women; I the men.

From the Harlem fair, we walked to Yuri's apartment in these Manhattanville projects, six twenty-story pinwheel-shaped buildings, public housing to replace four blocks of tenement slums, built in 1961. They were brick-faced mega-structures set in tree-lined green spaces with wide walkways. In 1964, the apartment was new, considered modern and international, more spacious than what I knew in Tokyo. We took an elevator up three floors and were greeted by Yuri and a large crowd, racially mixed, who'd organized this day for us—Harlem parents, Freedom School teachers, CORE members, Christian peace activists, Japanese American veterans. They had prepared a program of poetry and songs, and we snuggled together on the sofa and close arrangement of chairs in the living room to listen.

In the middle of this presentation, a knock was heard, and Yuri flew excitedly to the door. A tall, elegant Negro man entered, accompanied by two others. A stricken hush resounded, but then, as he bent to take Yuri's hand, the standing crowd in the hallway and kitchen surged forward, outstretched hands eager to touch, to shake the hand of Malcolm X. To be honest, I did not know who he was, but the Writer leaned toward me, nodded, and he and the Reporter rose to their feet. Ushered toward us by the ebullient Yuri, I introduced each of the mission

members as he shook their hands, inevitably matching our bowing gestures.

Malcolm X took center stage and began to speak. I thought I should interpret, but the Writer held up his hand. I understood my interruptions would be rude. I would simply have to recall everything he said. I could see Yuri with a notebook, like a student, writing everything down, but I had no paper, no pad, certainly no recorder. Now I wonder at what we did not bring to that day. I recall a man with a camera, but what became of his photos? Perhaps Yuri's memory and the fuzzy photograph are our only record.

At the end of Malcolm X's speech, there were no questions, only informal chitchat and the meditative absorption of the man's presence. Well, this was probably the case because the hibakusha could only have understood isolated words. What Malcolm X imparted in his talk was our common suffering; even if they did not follow the particulars of his politics, they could understand that much. Offering questions seemed foolish, at best banal. The sensibility that transpired between us could not be translated. Each person stood apart and deferential, respecting their own agendas for lives lived, destinies ordained.

But then, Yuri intervened, recognizing me as the interpreter. *Oh, she smiled with pleasure, your English is impeccable.* She asked me to point out the Writer and the Reporter in our midst. *They must meet Malcolm,* she exclaimed, then gathered us together for that photograph. At that moment, awkward words were exchanged, and the Reporter, as if suddenly realizing his responsibility, asked for the record, and I translated, *How do you believe we can achieve world peace?* Malcolm answered at length about the white first world and its stranglehold on third world people of color, that if we were given our freedom, we had no need for war. The Reporter stared up intently, in awe, then listened carefully to my interpretation. The Writer stood by nodding, then talked at me as if into a recorder and said, *In the last war, Yuri was imprisoned in an internment camp in Arkansas while her husband was a soldier in Europe. Nisei like Yuri's husband and Black soldiers fought in segregated units. Now segregation has ended. In this war in Korea, for example. Is this an improvement?* Malcolm seemed impressed with this question and

answered, *Just because colored people have the right to fight for democracy doesn't mean they enjoy democracy.* This was my only memory of translating anything of significance between the three men.

What this photograph showed and what it hid: deference to the other hibakusha who would not be photographed. Among Japanese the camera seemed ubiquitous, but among this group, even the Reporter refrained from taking pictures. And I did not ultimately know what he wrote about that day, although certainly he must have sent his reports back to his newspaper in Hiroshima. Similarly, I found no accounts by the Writer. Perhaps it was not so surprising. Yet, still I wondered if somewhere, surely in their journals or correspondence, they must have recorded their impressions of that day, of the yearlong travel, which was only beginning. Perhaps other events along the way occluded their trail, the road stretching forward with hope, the path left behind, like history, something that cannot be undone, only forgotten.

The women gravitated to Yuri and she to Malcolm; I have a memory of his tall benevolence among them. Perhaps their exchanges were more substantive.

Malcolm X left with his entourage, pausing at the threshold to grasp Yuri's hand, her face behind pink cat-eye glasses joyful and earnest. He bent toward her gently. *I promise from now on, I will write to you. I promise.*

*

We left the apartment, the group separating. The Writer, Reporter, and I headed north and east across St. Nicholas Park down 135th to the jazz club Small's Paradise. The Reporter, who followed American sports, hoped to catch a glimpse of the owner, the basketball star Wilt Chamberlain, and the Writer wanted to hear jazz played live in Harlem. We sat down for dinner and beers.

The Reporter pulled out a letter from his wife, sent to an address in New York. She was expecting their child. He confessed his anxiety, that the baby might be born before he returned. The Writer urged him to stop worrying. I deduced that this conversation was ongoing. The Reporter stuttered, *The bomb, the radiation. We can never know.*

Stop it, the Writer snapped.

I sipped my beer timidly while the two men smoked and drank. I waited for them to ask me what Malcolm

X had said, but instead the Writer settled into his beer, listened to the band onstage, slowly became voluble, reminiscing about the first time he'd heard the voice of Billie Holiday. He twirled his cigarette over the table and evaluated me; probably he was about my age then, he said. He'd saved his money to buy her record, played it over and over. He admitted he didn't know the words she sang. It was the timbre of her voice. He tried to describe it. Sweet and painful.

The Reporter added, *Shibui*.

No, the Writer said, *not so elegant. Raw*. Five years later, when he learned of her death, he was devastated.

Do you think she is here? asked the Reporter.

Maybe. We stopped to listen to the bass, thrumming his solo, demanding our quiet attention. When the band returned to full sound, the Writer said wistfully like a thwarted lover, *In those days, she lived with me in Hiroshima*.

The Reporter smiled kindly, but the Writer snorted to cover his sentimentality.

The Reporter changed the subject. I could see that, traveling cross-country in the past two months together, they had formed a relationship, the gentle, anxious Reporter mindful of the Writer's moody exterior. *Ralph Ellison*—he suggested, as if an unfinished conversation. *Mienai Ningen*.

The Writer nodded and queried me. *Have you read it? What do you think of the translation?*

I had to admit I did not know the author nor his novel. I was schooled in the American literature of Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, and Twain.

The Writer sneered. *I would like to meet Ralph Ellison. Can you arrange it?*

I ignored his condescension and turned to listen to the saxophone. After a while, I asked, *How did you find Malcolm X?*

The Writer said, *Tell me what he said*.

I felt the beer clouding my mind and struggled to remember the salient points: One, America bombed us, and we have felt the scars of war; likewise, Black people have been bombed and feel the scars of racism. Two, Japan was not colonized because Japan has no extractive resources, and because of this, Japan became strong. Three, the war in Vietnam is a struggle against American

imperialism and colonialism, and we should support the Vietnamese people.

So, the Writer returned, *what do you think about that?* He turned to order another round of beers.

I hesitated but had no answer. Dumbly, I justified, I was only the interpreter.

He said with some disgust. *Isn't he correct? The atom bomb is the same as the bomb of racism. White Americans could not see our humanity, so they dropped the bomb on us. They would never have done so in Europe*.

The Reporter shook his head, the alcohol pressing on a pugnacious hidden part of his person. *The racism you speak of is also the Japanese nationalism that destroyed our country. This is mistaken thinking*.

The Writer thought about this. *Nationalism has been exchanged for other isms. Communism. Capitalism. Now we fight about which ism will win out. We are watching a bomb tossed back and forth by two sides. Ready to explode. What kind of peace can we expect?*

The Reporter shook his head. *They call it a cold war*.

The Writer smirked. *Cold war. What do they know about hot wars?*

The Reporter said, *I thought we would meet Martin Luther King. I only learned recently about Malcolm X. He is not known in Japan. They say he is against Reverend King's pacifism. I am not sure I understand his position. Today, I did not see a violent man. Is it possible to make peace with race hatred?*

The Writer spoke with frustration. *We keep asking: How we can make peace? But peace can't come until people are free. It's armed revolution or nonviolent revolution. Which do we choose?*

The Reporter said, *It is not so simple is it? That's the contradiction of our methods. How do we make peace from war?*

The Writer pouted. *Did you notice his bodyguards? Do you think they were armed?*

The Reporter looked surprised, then sheepish. He asked, *How was our visit arranged today?*

The Writer shrugged, *They*, he pointed in the air, *arrange and schedule everything*. He looked at me. *Arranged for him too*.

But perhaps today was different. The Reporter was thoughtful.

The Writer continued, *I have been thinking about Ellison's novel, the relationship of good white liberal people and colored people. Right here in Harlem. We are really here.* He perused the people and tables, waiters and entertainers, all Black except for us. *Do you remember that character? Brother Jack?*

The Reporter nodded. *Brother Jack who, finally, is really exploiting the narrator.*

The Writer puffed, pointed his cigarette. *How is our situation any different?*

What do you mean? asked the Reporter.

Sometimes I am not sure why I am here. There are times I feel I am in a circus.

What are you saying? Don't you believe in our peace mission? The Reporter's voice rose in agitation.

Of course I believe in our peace mission. Calm down.

No, you have come with the wrong attitude. I understand. We have come to the home of our former enemy, but—

The Writer inserted, *It is also the home of our saviors.*

That's not what I mean.

Then what do you mean?

The Reporter pushed himself away from the table.

The Writer said flatly, *We are invisible. Can't you see? You should go home to your wife.*

The Reporter hung his head.

You are the lucky one. I have no one to return to.

I turned away from the two men, confused by their argument. In any case, I had ceased to be there. I tried to concentrate on the wail of the saxophone.

*

So many years later, the historic day of Malcolm X visiting Yuri's home had for me faded, but the biting words of the Writer and the Reporter still crystallized as yesterday. Perhaps it was a casualty of being the interpreter, English passing through my mind—ears, mouth—as a sieve. I see now that big history encompasses little histories, overshadows and encumbers. The small matters of small individuals become invisible, pass into oblivion.

What became of these men, I don't know. I know not if they completed their mission or if they returned to Hiroshima.

In the days following our meeting in Yuri's Harlem apartment, the Peace Study Mission left New York for

Europe, and Malcolm X began what would eventually become his pilgrimage to Mecca. The following year, he was assassinated at the Audubon Ballroom, his last breath cradled in Yuri's arms. After his death, with riots in Harlem and segregated cities across America, the possibility of a peaceful movement for civil rights came into question. His words were prophetic.

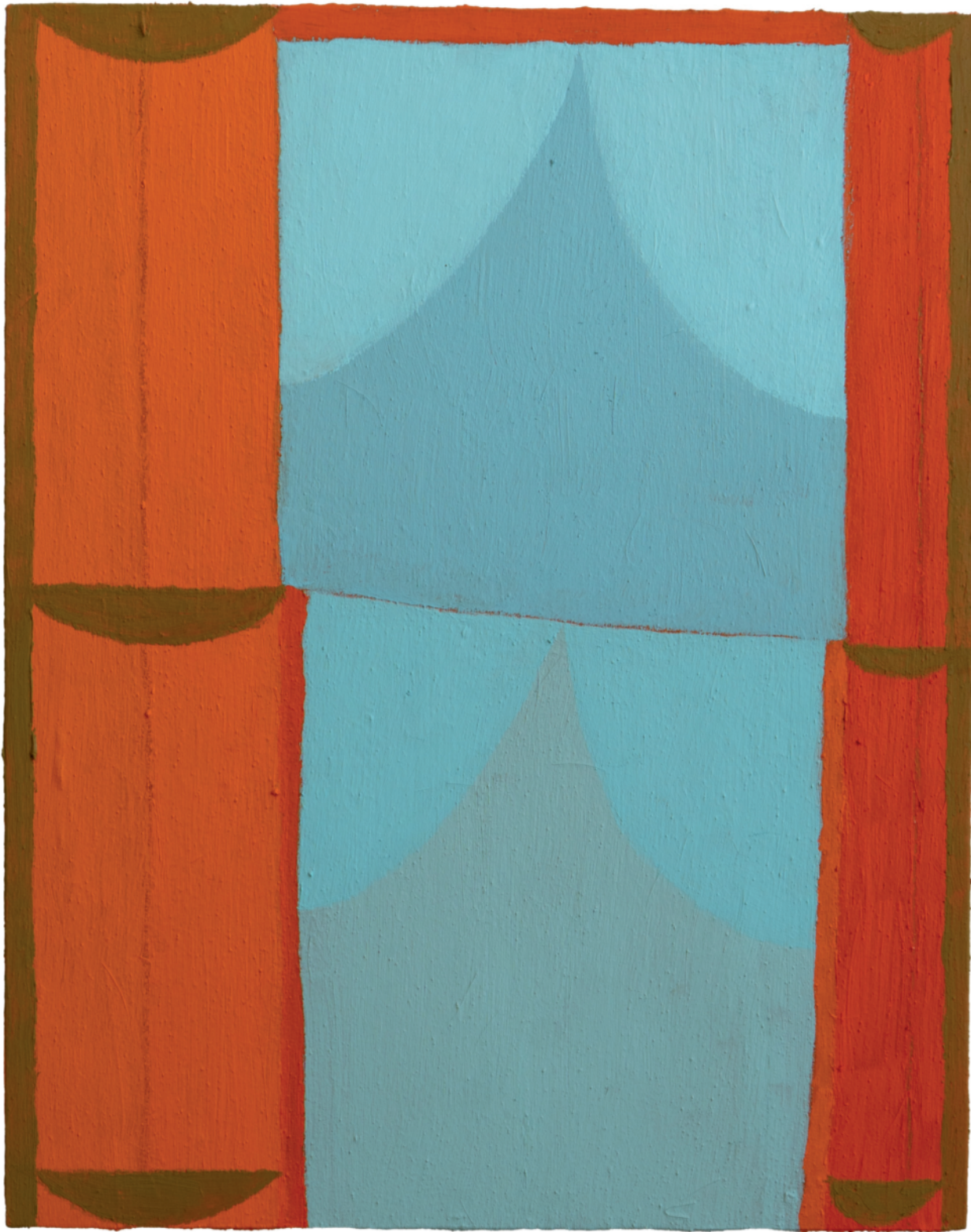
*

I turned away from the photographs and collected the scrapbooks, gently replaced them on the ironing board. I finished dusting and sweeping the rooms, scrubbed the toilet and bath, mopped the kitchen floor, shoved a soft duster with polish over dark wood floors. Finally, I unrolled my sleeves, pulled on my jacket, remembered to pull from my backpack a small bag of Japanese manju and rice crackers. This I left on the corner end of the ironing board.

Standing for a moment at the threshold of apartment 3-B, I listened for the soft silence and promise of sleep. Passing through, I pressed in the button that would lock the door, this time firmly.



Andrew Hildenbrand, *Round Lights*, 2025



Andrew Hildenbrand, *Perforated Proscenium*, 2025

EATING THE ORTOLAN

Megan Cartwright

Napery turned mock spit-hoods the diners
roost, force-fattened fowl, placid Pavlov's dogs
drooling at the cymbal-clink of the cloche.
"The Ortolan," voice of a Gaul assigns
plates to the seated sightless. Sharp inhale
before the grasping hands and greasy maws,
snap-crackle-pop of beaks, and feet, and claws.
Final taboos have been endorsed. Exhale.

The deed complete, the guests remove their shrouds,
hold aloft splattered cloth like bridal sheets.
Supreme impunity; God disavowed
now they have suckled at the devil's teat.
They call for dead King's cognac, puffed-up proud
patrons, use tiny bones to pick their teeth.

HOMING DEVICE

Abigail Chabitnoy

Nesting rebar late summer grass.

Shorelines here don't fix. I dream
most often of large houses full of
echo. I've never found a mouth that didn't hold some other body.

The good doctor let me keep the bit
of whalespine washed on the beach
big enough to eat from

it sits in my chipboard china cupboard
in the city where I dream improbably of waves and because we are ready at any
moment to abandon and because the walls are not sound
there are no dishes besides
no echo besides evidence of small teeth
passing

and again I am finding myself asking
can we not sing the world down this time.



Mira Goodman, *Cowboy Christmas*, 2025



LO!

Caitlyn Waltermire

1. JULIA HOLLAND

At 5:30 p.m. on a muggy June evening, Julia Holland's piano lesson ends. She says goodbye to Kevin, the music minister, and shouts goodbye to his wife, in the nursery with their three-year-old and the new baby. When Mrs. Holland pulls into the Stacy Avenue Baptist Church parking lot, Julia is not there.

Kevin and his wife, their baby on her hip, meet the police officers outside. They pass through a cloud of gnats. His wife drags the back of her hand across her lip gloss.

"She wasn't upset," says Kevin. "She's learning Prelude in C minor for her school recital. She likes piano lessons. She wasn't upset." His wife touches the small of his back, a gentle, masculine gesture.

"It was 5:30 sharp," she says. "Oh," she says, "oh my gosh," and her knees falter. The female officer swiftly grabs the baby, who hiccups, and watches his mother bend over.

2. THE PREP

Sunday morning, bleeding into afternoon. Stacy Avenue Baptist Church, set in a Bath County meadow, less than a mile from the new Burger King. The church ladies are in the kitchen, popping lids off cobblers and blondies and Hubbard squash pie and chocolate cake with pink frosting roses piped last night through a snipped Ziploc. Gluts of whipped cream cling to fingers, and Toni Keller's shortbread balls burst like bombs when they hit the floor. Donna is here, bent over the counter, labeling index cards in cursive as she has done for thirty-five years. Two teenage girls are here, born in the late nineties on

this silver kitchen island—then slippery, now covered in pastry. Shelby is here, too. She hasn't always been but she is now.

"Time?" says Shelby, running her hand along the black interior shelf of a cabinet, over crumbs and the backs of dead roaches.

"11:46," Donna says.

"Flyin," says Shelby, pitching something easy to agree with. She can't find the good plates. "Flyin," she says louder. Linds, one of the teens, sweeps by with a layer cake, frosting loaded with grated carrot and cinnamon. Shelby is seventeen and never had a cake so nice for a birthday. This last one in July, it was Cosmic Brownies and a Fireball shooter from Melissa at the Fontaine Circle K. That was days before the Lord found her by way of gorgeous, earnest, frosted-tipped Drew Caudill at See You at the Pole. She'd walked over before first period, choking on a lifetime of sin, her dead grandma's hymns beating through her head like a migraine. Drew took her hand and they prayed. God's been softenin' your heart to break it open, he said. Now He's with you always, even unto the ends of the earth. Drew's girlfriend, Sarah, saw them from the other side of the flag and grinned with genuine goodwill. She pumped her fist in the air and mouthed yeah! Shelby realized her cigarette had stayed lit in her other hand and she took a drag with wet eyes.

Donna sees what she's found in the cabinet.

"Oh honey, we're not settin' those out. I need plain white Styrofoam. These've got holly all over 'em."

"There ain't any plain."

"Yes, there are."

"Nope."

“There are.”

“I looked everywhere.”

“We’re not gonna serve on Christmas plates in March. Go through that cabinet, baby. That cabinet. Wipe em with a wet paper towel.”

Tamra, the other teen, opens the cabinet to see the good plates front and center.

“How many?”

“Three dozen or so,” Tamra says.

“Dirty?”

“Not too bad.”

“Wipe em anyway.”

Donna winks at Shelby, who shouldn’t have offered up holiday plates at a spring function but that was a minor error, rooted in being raised-trash. Shelby returns to the main table. “What about these weird little cheese balls with the green stuff,” she says. “Who brung a salty thing to this?”

“I made those,” Donna says. “They’ll be a relief after all the sugar. The green stuff is diced jalapeño. She says to put them with the cold items; they’ll be auctioned first and eaten on the spot. You pop the snickerdoodle ice cream sandwiches in the freezer soon as they got here?”

“Yes ma’am, I did.” The congregation murmurs outside like their mouths are pressed to the door. The women in the kitchen swish with purpose. A thrilling time to be alive and redeemed alongside other Christians. A kid shrieks—sounding no more than seven—and Shelby prays that this very plate of cinnamon rolls will usher him into Camp Joshua and that he’ll meet Jesus on night one and so, skip a decade of godlessness that feels like groping through a room, sharp edges lights off. *Thank*

you I love you I love you, she thinks and she is known and held for certain.

Donna is suddenly right here, brown bob tilting in one piece. Something like weed smell comes off her hair, underneath the Maybelline powder and lotion tissues. Shelby doesn’t know yet what the Bible says about weed.

“We’re lookin’ good, you think? Serve-warm accounted for, comin’ up one short on refrigerated. Where’s Deb’s trifle? Dark-chocolate-banana trifle, crystal-lookin’ bowl. Where’s that?”

“It’s in the freezer.”

Donna grins with good little teeth. “Baby, I ain’t laughin’.”

“I put it in the freezer two hours ago.”

The teens go stock-still.

“The hell,” says Donna, “you put a *trifle* in the *freezer* for?”

A novel, sweet surge of self-righteousness. Shelby doesn’t curse anymore. If she wouldn’t say it to Christ’s face, she doesn’t say it at all, usually.

“Scuse me?”

“You like a bite of frozen trifle, Shelby? You like when a trifle gets all crystallized and chewy, and the banana slices break your teeth like rocks?”

“Trifles are cold.”

“They’re served chilled. Oh-h-h- you have really . . . mm, I’m not gonna be the one to tell Deb.”

Shelby goes to the freezer. When she returns with the trifle, Donna taps a banana slice with a spoon. It clinks. “This is the star of the show,” she says.

“Lemme nuke it.”

“No, that’ll make soup. You got to warm it up slow and redo the peaks with Cool Whip from the fridge.”

Shelby sets the trifle in a sunbeam. She wraps it in a hand towel and rubs it like a puppy found in a snowdrift. Tamra draws bubbly flowers on the label cards in Sharpie. Linds types a text message on her Nokia with a silver charm. They’re both one year under Shelby in school. Linds has nails chewed ragged, and Tamra looks to have done her right-hand nail polish with her left hand. Maybe Shelby could offer press-ons at a discount. She has a question for them, but they’re never alone together.

Teresa enters, with a platter in hand. She’s in her forties, wearing a yellow wrap dress with a chunky statement necklace. Her husband does all the electricity in all the houses, so her highlights always touch her scalp. “What’s she doin’?” Teresa laughs. “Girl, what’re you doin’ over there?”

Shelby tugs down the back of her shirt that’s ridden up over her belt.

“She put the trifle in the freezer,” says Linds.

“Lord,” says Teresa, “who’s gonna tell Deb?”

“How’s it lookin’ out there?” says Donna, not looking to over-punish.

“Any minute now. Just waitin’ on Pastor.”

“What’ve you got?”

“Lemon bars. They are powder-sugared to oblivion and the platter is gorgeous, pink and gold.”

Donna comments that she’d never bring anything on a dish she’d miss.

“Well, I’m not gonna miss this old thing. It’s from the *Provinciale* collection they had at K Mart in ‘97, ‘98.”

“Martha Stewart,” Shelby says. She has a recurring dream where Martha Stewart is her mother and she wakes up in a guilty flush. Her actual mother received a

Martha by Mail jadeite lamb butter dish from a boyfriend, and when she threw it at him a few weeks later, it didn’t even chip. Felon or not, Martha means quality.

“No, no, this was a nobody, some chef’s wife. I’ve got two dinner plates left from a twenty-four-piece set. They buy the lemon bars and the plate comes with, they’re welcome to it.”

“What’s the time?” Shelby asks.

“11:53.”

She rubs the frozen trifle with renewed vigor. Teresa makes room for her lemon bars on the table and stands in the middle of the room, rummaging in her purse, a marble column in whipping wind. “Nice service today,” she says.

“Wasn’t it?” says Donna.

“It was. I just think it looks so nice when the pastor’s family is fillin’ that pew. The whole family.”

“Jon was there, right next to his mama.”

“He’s a good boy.”

“He is.”

Linds looks at Tamra, and Tamra looks at Shelby.

“Never takes a Sunday shift at work,” Teresa says. She’s found Chapstick and loads it on while she talks. Good for other young men to see that.

“Lookin more and more like his daddy every day.”

“Jackie though.”

Sweat slithers down from Shelby’s bra strap. A mayfly beats against the window next to its crunchy dead brother. Shelby dips a finger into a tiny pool of whipped cream. Donna frowns at a cherry pie. Teresa zips her purse shut and says, “Ya’ll make sure Marlene’s at the piano and the mic’s set.”

Banishment; grown-up news. Something’s about to pop. The teens hover like wasps over pool water.

“Go on now,” says Donna. So they do.

Donna says, “You see her on that cellphone? Like she’s glued to it.”

“I hate it,” says Teresa. “Seriously, I hate it. Tell me why I found out about that poor little girl in a couple of sentences with no punctuation.”

Shelby is still rubbing the trifle bowl. “The glass is sweatin’, y’all,” she says. “Bananas gettin’ shiny.” Jackie, Jackie is hitting her ear like a gong. She wishes they’d stop saying it. The warm damp seat of her jeans makes her shiver.

“... and tell me this: why’m I seeing text messages on my little girl’s phone about Jackie promising the teenage boys “favors”?”

“Her daddy the pastor of the church too. There’s a naughtiness to it, that’s gonna pull on them.”

“If Jackie’s a virgin, I’m Miss Universe,” says Teresa.

Shelby asks what the text said.

Teresa looks at her like she’s a water pitcher on the countertop that just started talking. “It was,” she says, “one of the girls telling Sarah that Jackie told Alex she’d do things to him that Sarah’d never do.”

“What’d it say exactly?” Shelby asks.

“I have put it out of my mind.”

Donna mentions that she’s not looking well, either.

Teresa picks up a buckeye, pinches it to break the chocolate shellac, and pops it in her mouth. “Atrophy is an effect of sin,” she says through peanut butter. “The heart pumpin’ poison all through the body.” The buckeye is melting. A long drip of chocolate slips down her wrist. Shelby’s metal table radiates like a playground slide in the summer. The sun coming through the window rests on her neck like the flat side of a hot knife. Shelby looks down at the trifle. Banana slices bob in brown liquid swirled with white. A gnat with clogged wings is dying

in the center. Donna nods absently, wet shadows under her arms. The kitchen feels like hotboxing in Shelby’s cousin Amanda’s busted Corolla, but wetter, teeming with moist multiplying cells. Dog-breath heat, like the painted cinderblock walls are spongy with taste buds.

“So did she say she was gonna suck him off or what?” Shelby asks, and the teens re-enter.

“Lord-uh,” one of them says, flapping her blouse away from her chest to air it out.

“Whatcha need?” asks Donna.

Tamra says, “Oh he’s been ready for like—”

“Ages,” says Linds.

“GO,” says Donna.

3. THE DESSERT AUCTION

In the beginning, there is peace like you’d find in a hole on the moon. It’s dry and cold and Kevin isn’t in the service. The Pastor passes through and now he stands onstage, in the sugar cloud between dessert tables. Someone has given him a corded microphone with a yellow foam head. His hair bears the stiff glossy tracks of a comb and his eyes are Jackie’s eyes, blue-laser beaming back at him from the second pew. His wife—glasses, curls, and blouse exchanging translucent ivory between them as though connected by vessels— holds their daughter’s hand. *Bear with me now*, he says to himself and to Me and to the empty leather seat diagonal to him on the stage. *Bear with me, bear with me, bear with me, Ya’ll, bear with me now. See, this isn’t what you hired me for. This is a newly acquired skill. I’m improvising.*

He isn’t guaranteed a roar of delight but they will chuckle and titter and jab elbows. He can count on that like rain in April. He does a little stay-in-place jog. A couple of Rocky air-punches. Kevin isn’t here.

“Breakin a sweat, ain’t done nothin yet! It’s just I don’t often get to look out at these faces when I’m not puttin’ em to sleep so I’d like to tell you what I see: a crowd of brothers and sisters poised to spend a hundred dollars on a plate of cookies. In fact, I am using my X-Ray vision to determine that Wayne Clement brought two hundred dollars with him today. I see (the Pastor is allergic to almonds and its sick cherry smell is everywhere) good church. A city on a hill (the itch in his nostrils is climbing to his brain). Alright, forgive me. Tell you what, let’s, let’s—and he’s granted energy divine, a sped-up cassette tape that passes understanding—*LE-E-E-E-ET’S SEND OUR KIDS TO CAMP WHADDYA SAY?* First up is a pineapple upside-down cake from Becky Watts. You don’t want to miss out on this, people. I can smell it with the lid on. Bidding starts at fifty dollars, fifty dollars, can I get fifty dollars from Don Whitaker in the front row? Sitting duck, people. Thank you, Mrs. Whitaker! Can I get seventy-five dollars—seventy-five—man oh man, *does this cake look good!*

Linds and Tamra and Baby Jasmine take up mics—
blue, red, purple—and they sing, 3-part harmony:

*Give me oil in my lamp
Keep me burning burning burning
Give me oil in my lamp I pray*

“Seventy-five and just like Mama used to make, *Give me oil in my lamp* Fifty-dollar bid going on seventy-five. *Keep me burning burning burning* I need a seventy-five-dollar bid, *Keep me burning till the break of day*

need a seventy-five-dollar bid for this

Pungent
Cake.

Maraschino cherries on top!

Looking for seventy-five, seventy-five.”

He points. His arm extends twenty feet.

“Thank youuuuuuu, brotherrrrrrr! Can I get a hundred? One hundred? One hundred dollars for this pineapple upside-down cake, heavier than it looks, people, **HEAVIER THAN IT LOOKS.**”

*And I will sing hosanna sing hosanna
Sing hosanna to the King of Kings
Sing hosanna sing hosanna
Sing hosanna to the King of Kings*

“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also, brothers and sisters. Where’s your treasure, Bud? Is it in a shiny brand-new 9 iron or in little Owen Coombs? Don’t you leave without this cake, Bud Murphy.”

The congregants open their wallets and take up the purchased desserts, slicing, scooping, and passing paper plates. The body of two hundred hands scribbles red marker up the whiteboard thermometer until mercury spurts out of the top. Marlene pounds the piano joyfully. The kids are going to camp.

4. CHURCH CAMP

It is with reverence and reticence, with fear and trembling, that Linds and Tamra and Baby Jasmine decide Alex is the only hot guy in youth group. They sit in the grass outside of Yellow Cabin—yards or lightyears from Blue Cabin, where Alex and Jake and Tommy are shooting hoops—and whisper sour-gummy-worm-whispers to each other. Tamra is painting her toenails, the soft blue shellac nicked by blades of grass when she squeals nooooooo and curls her feet. Linds braids the dark blonde hair of Baby Jasmine

(who is actually thirteen), attempting tight cornrows that file backwards from the forehead. Baby Jasmine wants to look “sick”. Jackie sits with them but she’s not there. She bites the two-colored worms in half and mashes together new combinations—watermelon cherry and lemon fruit punch. She drops them back into the bag.

“What would you say then,” says Linds. “If he was right there in front you? You’d be like uhhh.”

“I’d say *hi Alex*,” says Tamra.

“Hey Alex,” says Baby Jasmine, “owwwww.” But Linds doesn’t loosen her hold on the hair.

“He’s on his way to band,” says Baby Jasmine, “he doesn’t have time to talk right now.”

“Sorry,” says Tamra, “I know you’ve got band. You were really good Wednesday night, by the way.”

“They should let you play more,” says Linds.

“Sorry, but . . .” says Jackie. They wait patiently. The thing is Alex, is you’re the only hot guy in youth group.”

The girls scream.

“YOU CANNOT,” says Tamra. She sucks her thumb wet and rubs blue polish off her foot. “YOU CANNOT JUST SAY THAT.”

“Oh,” says Jackie, “he wants to know about Jeremy because Jeremy’s *all* about Linds. He wants to know what Linds thinks about Jeremy.”

The girls scream again.

“Jeremy’s busted,” says Linds.

“Don’t even say Jeremy’s name right now. Sorry, I know he’s your friend, but Alex. It’s just youuuuuu,” Baby Jasmine says.

“Alex,” says Tamra.

“There’s only you,” says Jackie.

“And you movin’ here is like how did this even happen?” says Linds.”

“It’s a God Thing,” corrects Baby Jasmine. “Owww!” she says. Linds does a punishing jerk of a braid.

“Do you wanna look sick or not?” she says.

“He’s from Chicago,” says Tamra, like it’s Japan.

“Humboldt Park,” says Jackie.

There is a stilted silence.

“How do you know?” says Tamra. “Have you heard him say hahhht dahhhg?”

“His accent is sooo stupid,” says Tamra. A successful rescue.

“So which of us is her?” says Linds, and the bugs stop chattering in the trees.

“I haven’t kissed nobody yet,” says Tamra.

“Me neither,” says Baby Jasmine.

“Duh,” says Linds. Jackie says nothing.

“Wait, what if he’s—oh crap, oh crap,” says Linds.

“Oh yeah he might be,” says Tamra.

“Might be what,” says Jackie (she’s elsewhere).

“Savin’ his first kiss,” says Baby Jasmine.

“Jesus never said to do that,” says Tamra.

“He can’t do that. What if his spit tastes weird? What if his arm hair feels like pettin’ a dog?” says Jackie.

“Okay,” says Linds. “Well you gotta know what your husband’s spit tastes like before you set him as a seal upon your arm. You gotta know that before you wash his boxer briefs. Bright blue American Eagle when he plugged his guitar in the amp. One of us has gotta kiss him. Promise one of us’ll kiss Alex on a Sunday night in February in the back seat of the church bus headed back from winter conference where Lambslain played Snow Song that we listen to on repeat and think about him.”

And the girls are gone, save Jackie. And Alex is here. He brings the pine trees with him, and all their little bugs licking the sap. Alex has a chipped canine and pimples on

his forehead. He plays color war with the kids during the day and guitar for worship at night. He has three t-shirts in rotation. Alex is life.

Walkin' back to the camp counselor dorms, in the air that smells like lake, while I'm trying to forget how you looked at that girl with the pink-dipped hair from First Baptist Ashland. The girl with the pink hair whose church lets her wear a tank top. Who doesn't just do what she's told and eat a chili dog to chokin' on a dare. She would have said uhhhh yeah right. She'd have kept her shit on ice. Why can't I keep my shit on ice for one hour? Do I really talk like that now? Was I a better Christian last year? Why is my skin so bad this summer? Is it because I was a better Christian last year? Why does petroleum jelly as eye shadow look good on everyone but me? Why am I funny around everyone but you? Am I ever funny? Be funny, then. What if you kiss me and touch my boob and it's TOO SMALL? What if you kiss me and I taste like chili dog? What if you kiss me and Kevin sees? Where is Kevin? Where's Kevin? Where's Kevin?

Jackie says none of this out loud. But earlier, when she was someplace else, she was here. The night before Tamra painted her toenails blue and Linds braided Baby Jasmine's hair. They were all asleep and Jackie was here, with Alex, in the air that smells like a lake. Jackie has two secrets. One is blessed. They both wrap around her heart and squeeze like hands.

"I kind of don't believe in sunscreen. There's nothing natural about it," says Alex.

Jackie is thinking, *I wanna be married and you said you do too. We both wanna cleave to the person we love forever, which sounds body horror, it does.*

And it sounds divine.

Alex has a second-degree sunburn that spans his shoulders. It's bubbled up, filled with yellow fluid.

"I'm peeling this off in one big piece when I get back."
"Don't," says Jackie.

"It's ready," says Alex. "Feel. It's got a pulse."

Jackie presses. It gives. She wants to kiss it.

Alex turns to her, face close. "Hey, Jack."

She smacks the blister hard.

Alex's shoulder weeps juice onto his tank top.

Jackie says, "When I was a kid, I spent the whole day with my older cousin Brenda. It was a perfect day, and when she hugged me goodbye, I bit her shoulder for no reason."

Alex groans.

"I don't know why I'm like this about shoulders, I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Is it busted?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry."

"Is the skin coming off?"

"Yeah, it's hangin' there."

"Okay. Just peel it."

"You said you wanted to."

"I can't see it."

"Hold still."

They sit down on the road. Foreheads yellow from the street light. Jackie situates herself behind him and starts to remove the dead top layer. It droops from her fingers like wet toilet paper.

"I can't get to this part under—"

"I can take my shirt off."

Alex does. The peach fuzz on his back stands up straight. Somewhere, a loon calls.

"Hey," says Alex. "When you housed that chili dog . . ."

A joy, to be seen. Jackie grins. This is the last time she'll ever do that.

"Had to, they dared me."

A joy to see her. “You’re crazy,” Alex grins. He’ll do so for the rest of his long life. “Is it gross?”

“Nah. It’s just peelin’ an orange.”

He turns to face her, scraping his knee in the process. Cicadas chatter. Alex pushes her hair off her collarbone and over her shoulder. Her face is shiny with old sunscreen and naked in the light. Jackie feels her pulse in her bottom lip and they kiss. She grabs the crotch of his basketball shorts.

Alex pulls back.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Alex, what?”

“Nothing. That was just—”

“I’ve never kissed anybody before.”

“Yeah you have.”

“I’ve never kissed anybody.”

“You have. You’re lying for no reason.”

“How can you even tell? Like you taste somebody?”

“It’s how you did it.”

“So show me how to do it.”

“You know how.”

“Show me what you want.”

“See, that right there. Why are you talking like that? Show me what you want. What is that? What do you want? You grabbed me, Jack.”

“You’re my First Kiss.”

“No I’m not and that’s—look I’m not mad. I’m just not your—”

“You’re my first kiss and it was special.”

Alex tries to take her hand.

Jackie shoves him back onto the blacktop.

“YOU’RE MY FIRST KISS YOU’RE MY FIRST KISS.”

She hits him across the face, once, twice.

“Say you’re my first kiss SAY IT!”

“Stop it, Jackie.”

“SAY IT!”

“Stop, please stop.”

A mini golf putter slides across the ground. It stops at Jackie’s feet. When she looks up, Alex is gone.

5. MINIATURE GOLF

The only miniature golf course for fifty miles is owned by the McMurtrys, Brad and Jenny. Stacey Avenue Baptist invested several thousand, and so, the course is Old Testament-themed, with the 18th hole being “Classic Carnival”. Many congregants protested Jonah and the Whale culminating in tapping their balls through a gaping clown mouth, but Brad had given in on several items by that point and the clown remained.

When Shelby was three years old, she crawled inside the giant head and tucked herself further and further away from grabbing hands. The fire department had to lift the head with two car jacks so she could be reached.

She rehearses this story a few times in her head before deciding it’s not great. She will not tell it to Jackie and the Pastor, standing with her at the very hole, having been kind enough to pick her up from Camelot Park today. “You gonna wear those goddamn shorts,” said her mother as the Tahoe pulled up. Shelby tugs at them now.

Shelby likes Jackie, who keeps her prize Breyer horse (Full Moon Rising Thoroughbred with Western Show Bridle) in her locker at school. She hopes Jackie likes her, but she got the sense on the way to the course that the invitation was more the Pastor’s idea. He rolled the windows down and blasted Air1 on the radio while the wind whipped chunks of Jackie’s hair into her mouth. She didn’t fish them out.

“Who’s up?” asks the Pastor, looking like Dan Aykroyd with his spiked black hair and blue Bermuda shorts.

Jackie looks around like the course just sprang up out of nothing. She chews on her fingertips. Her cheeks are sunken in like a Jack-o-Lantern in November. Shelby wonders if she caught mono from the water fountain. Jackie’s so soft and dreamy, she might not know that everything at school’s crawling with jizz and microbes. You have to catch the stream at the crest. There are several facts of life Shelby could share with her. This would be prime sleepover conversation. She’s heard the pastor’s family has an above-ground pool and she brought an XL tee to wear over her two-piece just in case.

“You 38, me 29, Jackie . . . 63 or somethin.” She feels like a traitor. But it’s not her fault Jackie’s fumbling the putter like she’s never seen one before. Her little taps on the ball look painful.

The Pastor bops his putter on Jackie’s foot. She pulls back like she was bee-stung. “Come on, babydoll. I’ve been braggin’ to Shelby ‘bout how good a golfer you are.”

“Cause I’m the best,” murmurs Jackie. A jolt under thickening membrane. Heat, lightning.

“Shelby, you haven’t been doubling strokes, have you?”

“God—GOSH NO,” says Shelby. The clown leers over Jackie’s birdlike shoulder.

“There’s a lot of responsibility inherent in that little pencil. A lot of assumed integrity. That’s why it—”

“Doesn’t have an eraser,” says Shelby.

The Pastor looks up from lining up Jackie’s ball. “Now how’d you do that?”

“Been listenin’ to your sermons six months now. Bet I could write you one.”

“Believe me, I wish you would. Tee up, we got the Murphys on our tail.”

Jackie’s tongue is rooting around in her mouth like it’s pulling food out from between two teeth but they haven’t eaten yet.

“You got me pegged.”

“Announce your points up front so folks’ minds don’t start wanderin’.” The Pastor smiles—a real one but strange, eyes only. Yet they wander still. “Alright, Jack. You’re up.”

Jackie spits something into her palm. The Pastor flicks his eyes away, like she took out a maxi-pad or something. Shelby looks closer. It’s a molar, filled with a bit of silver. Jackie looks at Shelby with her pale blue eyes. Most of her eyelashes are missing. Shelby feels like Jackie’s talking to her but it’s in Portuguese. Jackie pockets the tooth. There’s a bruise blooming on her foot, where the Pastor tapped it. It looks like a pansy.

“It’s the crusty jokes, Dad,” says Jackie. “Lookin like you cut ‘em out of a Reader’s Digest from 1790.”

“My jokes kill. I’m sorry but they do.”

Jackie plants her putter and leans on it. A faint exhale of exertion. “So kill me. Right now.” A cold bit of wind hits the standing sweat on Shelby’s skin. She shudders.

“Can’t. You’re expecting it. And we gotta keep movin’. The Murphys are closing in.”

“So what?” Jackie says.

Shelby would take a palm to the side of the head if she talked to her mom like that. Sometimes it seems that faint, skinny, pretty girls can say whatever they want. And she didn’t know there was another family behind them. She hasn’t seen anyone. But now—she hears the crunch of Astroturf underfoot and a man’s laugh. She looks, but there’s nobody there.

“So you don’t need to be stressed-out talking when you’re not feelin’ good.”

“Maybe I wanna talk to ‘em. Why’d you bring me out if I can’t say hi to nobody? I wanna talk to ‘em. I wanna talk.”

“You ready, both of you?” The Pastor is suddenly animated. “Ready to be killed? The other day, my ex-girlfriend got hit by a car. Startled by the news, I put the car in reverse and hit her again.”

Shelby gawks, then laughs. The Pastor makes a finger gun and shoots her in the face. She sends her head back in slow-motion. *POW.*

“Go on,” says Jackie to her dad. “Use the pink ball.”

“Can’t be usin’ the pink ball.”

“Go on, Daddy.”

The skin around his eyes smooths out. He hits the ball. It sails through the clown’s mouth and presumably comes out the other side. He runs after it.

Jackie’s small hand grips Shelby’s arm so hard that the fat bubbles between her fingers.

“Shelby,” she says.

Shelby imagines if she were to brush Jackie’s hair, it would fall out. She seems barely attached to her body anymore. Like her wet connective tissue is drying up.

“Shelby,” says Jackie. “I lifted a test from the CVS. I took two actually.”

“Oh God,” says Shelby, and it’s a pure prayer.

“I’m pregnant.”

“Was it Alex?” asks Shelby. She’s heard a thing or two. She hopes to death that it’s sweet, earnest Alex with the pimples and the guitar. Alex is a good guy. Shelby can smell a bad one from a mile off and he’s got no scent on him. Alex would still be a sin, but a fixable one. Shelby’s cousin Liz got married at 16 to Sheldon Gray and they’re ten years happy.

“No,” says Jackie. And the world is dim and slow. Shelby’s got a name in her mouth that’s leaking a bitter taste like aspirin. Jackie sighs and her breath is bitter, too.

“You gonna tell your daddy? You gonna tell somebody grown? I can’t do much for you. Really not anything, I don’t think. When it’s born, I could maybe be like its aunt or something, like my Aunt Cheryl. She’s young and she buys me shirts from Florence Mall. I could be like that to your baby.”

“Somethin’s wrong, it’s swimmin’ around in my belly like a fish and I feel like I’m dying and I don’t think I gotta say more if you just think about it. Don’t make me say it.”

Shelby does touch Jackie’s hair. She puts it behind her ear and a little black chunk of it comes off in her fingers. She releases it into the wind.

“Tell me what you mean.”

Somebody is laughing, but every time Shelby looks, the hole is empty.

“Don’t you make me say it.”

“Five strokes!” the Pastor shouts. “Five is the number to beat.”

He comes around the clown and his face lights up.

“*Bud Murphy!!* Shouldn’t you be home mowin’ that lawn that’s taken over half the county? you’ve got me wantin’ to start some kinda vigilante HOA or somethin . . .”

The miniature golf course is gone—maybe it never was—and it’s Sunday morning. Shelby sits in the pew, hair stiff with chlorine from Jackie’s pool.

“Bud, you catch me with hate in my heart as good as murder when I see that unkempt jungle—I believe, in this case, you’re allowed a fraction of pride. Bud, we are charged with a certain number of unavoidable responsibilities that we’re to count as joys. We’ve got to be good stewards of our families and of our little dogs . . .”

6. THE NEXT SUNDAY

“... And of our cars and of our good shoes and of creation of this green earth green indeed you're a green machine Bud Murphy—oh it is *QUIET*!”

The congregation doesn't move, not even a slip of sweat down a temple. But the room is not quiet. A housefly crawls over Missy Thomas' knuckles. Another is trapped behind the lens of Don Kirschner's glasses.

“Not the sober quiet wherein the lord makes himself known,” says the Pastor. “It's hushed, wouldn't you say? It's so quiet I can't hear a thing. There's no place on earth exempt from the curse, is there? As a preacher, you build your house on the rock but you build that house outta glass so's to be beyond reproach. Everything in plain sight.”

The Pastor's wife wants him to stop talking.

“We are workin' to satisfy you. Attendin' to every murmur and complaint. Brother Kevin is on sabbatical. He needs your prayers, church. His wife, Catherine—she needs your prayers. Matthew and Lizzie need them too. Their daddy's not up here leadin' worship and they don't know why. Do you know why? Do you *know*? Would you be willin' to stand up here, three feet closer to god, and say it into the microphone?”

The buzz of flies, on the Pastor's cheek, on his Bible. He swats.

“I am missin' the music, brothers and sisters. I'm missin' the window to heaven flung open wide.”



Amber Lelli, *Premise Seven All Grown Up*, 2022

REHEARSAL

Carol Durak

Let's start with Ray and Mel—both of you flat on the ground, side by side. Ray, turn sideways facing Mel, your left ear to the ground. Point your elbow, carefully, against Mel's jaw. Lou, as you lay across Ray and Mel, twist your left arm, now elbow-lock Ray's thigh. Think entangled—tackled. Maria, from the opposite direction, belly down across the others, right knee into Lou's back, grasp his waist with your right arm. Jasmine, by the way, the red shirt—it's perfect, now stretch out across Maria so your face pushes against her hand, your foot to her shoulder. Good. And Zoe, climb across Ray's shoulders. Crush in closer, that's right, so your left leg, no, foot, reaches Jasmine's face. Hang your head upside down, and clasp Ray's leg. Use your elbow to help prop yourself, now, curl up so your foot reaches Maria's head.

*If I could turn, break codes,
get sobbing in the social air.*

Good—next time, a bit louder.

*Who are you? We hear you—
Keep this human enterprise going.*

Good. And remember, we're elemental here:
you, the other guy, all of us.

Let's try it again.
Keep this human enterprise going.

We need one more voice—to cry out—nothing
can appease it—nothing's settled—

Maria, imagine the flute's shrill plea.
Remember, even though this knot
is staged, if no public grief, no change.



Laurel Nakadate, April 30, 2010, 2010

LAUREL NAKADATE IN CONVERSATION: ONTOLOGY, PROCESS, AND GRIT

Katherine Bernstein

Laurel Nakadate is an American photographer, filmmaker, and performance artist whose works have appeared in The Guggenheim Museum, The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA), and in the college collections of Harvard University, Rhode Island School of Design, Smith College, and Vassar College. Her first feature-length film, *Stay the Same Never Change* (2009), premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, while her second feature, *The Wolf Knife* (2010), was nominated for both a Gotham Independent Film Award and an Independent Spirit Award. Nakadate is currently the Director of Graduate Studies and a professor of photography at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University in Boston, MA. All thirty of her April photos from the 2011 series *365 Days: A Catalogue of Tears* are held in Vassar's Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center and depict the artist crying every day for a year.

KB: Building on this year's theme, "Temper and Testimony," I would like to consider art as a form of testimony to explore the relationship between artistic interpretation and truth. Do you feel that critics, colleagues, and museum goers' varied interpretations of your work distort your personal "truth?" In other words, do you worry that your artistic testimony may get diluted as people analyze it?

LN: In many ways this work serves not only as a time capsule for one year of my life, but also as an anchor for a moment in internet history that is already gone. When I first decided to embark on this year-long performance, social media served a very different purpose than it does now. User-generated content fell more within the category of holiday greeting cards, with a polite smile, than the current landscape of branding and commercial collaborations with influencers. I wanted to complete a performance that pushed on the edges of how we were experiencing public and private lives online, and by showing the work, I understood that I would be pushing it into a space between personal vulnerability and voyeurism. I knew there would be a wide variety

of reactions to viewing the work, as all humans have different experiences that they draw from and then bring into the exhibition spaces. I don't believe that work can be diluted or used up by viewer consumption; rather, I believe that the life of an artwork only expands over time. The work now, in 2026, is perhaps from a lost world, and yet it still feels important to exhibit it and to allow the work to catch onto all the new ways humans interact with images both understood and still to be discovered.

KB: What interests me most about *365 Days* is not the formal artistic elements such as composition, but the ontology of this body of work. I found myself thinking of Tehching Hsieh's work, specifically of his year-long performance in which he takes a photo of himself every hour. What inspired this project? How did the experience of crying every day change over the course of a year, both in terms of your relationship to your work and the emotional act of crying itself?

LN: When I first heard "selfie" sometime in 2009, I knew that I wanted to make work that grappled with that new word, which was both noun and verb. I have in my

work often embraced popular culture and found ways to transform that culture into performance. I wanted to participate in sadness each day as a counterpoint to the manicured version of the internet wave that we floated upon in 2010. At first it was hard to make a photo each day, to find something sad to cry about, but then it got easier, and by the end of the year I was crying because the performance was ending. The performance kept me company that year, as I travelled all over the world to do screenings and press for two films I'd recently completed. The camera was my witness and companion in rooms and towns I never imagined I'd travel to. The performance was a daily reminder that the process of making the work is the work, and for me, being able to be in that space of making each day was a transformative experience.

KB: Did photographing moments of vulnerability and pain change how these emotions felt, or was it natural for you as a photographer? What was it like to photograph these moments as they occurred during your days, and were there particular moments when you felt especially compelled to turn on your camera?

LN: Sometimes I'd make the day's photo when moved by the world around me, an especially beautiful sunset or a cityscape in front of me for the first time, and sometimes the assignment was harder and I had to remember the challenge that I accepted long before I understood how hard it would be. The world is moving, and the challenge of making a daily photograph was never a burden, though some days of the performance were harder than others. I saw those days as a reminder of photography's ability to teach us.

KB: Photography is often understood as a medium of mimesis, valued for its ability to capture reality and, by extension, convey truth. Do you see your own photography as aligning with this way of thinking?

LN: It's been a very long time since we've believed photographs to be "real," yet there is the hope that some viewers bring to the gallery, and approach the

work with, which is a longing for a world in which reality might keep its promises. I've always seen photography as a performance of sorts, a promise breaker that wrestles with what it can say more loudly and perhaps more times than we originally thought to be necessary. The repetitive act of making photographs, after all, is its own embodied performance. My impulse to participate in sadness each day for a year came from a sincere and vulnerable place, a place inhabited and made real through the repetition and insistence of the performance.



Laurel Nakadate, *April 20, 2010, 2010*



Laurel Nakadate, *April 27th, 2010, 2010*

FEELINGS BEINGS

Gabriela Halas

The head of Esther Perel floats above the grocery check-out aisle. She has the same streaked blonde bob I see on her everywhere. Sharp. Revelatory. Her voice bubble, on the cover of the celebrity mag I'm reading: *Esther Perel's Pearls of Wisdom*, pg. 23. I've been googling Ms. Perel's advice for the last couple years (incapable of bringing her books home) and read her newsletter when it arrives in my inbox. *Change the sex*, she claims, *and watch it change your relationship. Talk about your grief. If you want to be right, you'll end up alone.* Last month's questions prompted the concept of *feeling beings*; readers were urged to answer: *What scent reminds me of my first date with my partner? What does the air smell like where we live? What do I smell like? What do I taste like?* My lip twitches. One part sweat from yesterday, one part sweat from today. Unshaven. Residual twenty ounce vanilla steamer. I like the sound of *feeling beings*. I mouth the words silently while reading. Feeling. Beings. As I look to the basket at my feet, I realize I'm forgetting something. Something my husband asked me to bring home.

Ma'am, I hear a tired nasally voice. I know I should probably buy this trashy waste-of-trees, (you touch it, you buy it, signs like to remind me everywhere), but I cram it back into its wire shelving. In that timed grocery slink, I close the space between myself and the young man in front of me. *Six feet*, I hear. The magazine article has the same 'pearls of wisdom' listed as I've seen strung together on the internet, recycled and reproduced 'content' on various blogger sites and news agencies. I read them anyways, looking for something I may not know, or haven't tried, or haven't thought about trying until I look at my husband and decide, *no*.

There is clearance, finally. I step forward.

My husband is tending the tomatoes (again) when I arrive home. I see his blurred outline through the greenhouse glass, the slight hunch he has formed over the years. I don't, anymore, care to know how many are in there, what heirloom varieties, or how long each has until harvest. The entire gable-peaked building, trimmed in gold stained hardwood, is filled with their reaching green arms, their fragrant soft leaves. I used to go in there and select a few for salad. I stopped when he said I wasn't picking the right ones, the ones that were ready to be eaten. I'm still not sure what I was getting wrong. Thick strings draw them to the ceiling and bamboo stakes support their fruit-heavy limbs. I care for the results, not the process, as is increasingly unpopular these days. Their juice on my chin, each seed encased in its own gelatinous universe. I like to press down on the seeds and watch them leap from under my fingertip across the kitchen island. I like their weight in the palm of my hand. Some roll like dice, while others are stone-heavy, and still others bob like a testicle as I bounce them up and down.

He's been in the greenhouse since I left. It's Sunday and the girls made us breakfast, and by the time the activity had died down, he was drained. I could see it on his face. I blinked twice. *You can go now*—we've developed code-speak for his need to get away. *To be whole again* (his words). I shuttled the girls to their friend's house (our bubble), and myself to groceries, the drive-through window of the Bean Scene, and then a guilt-driven power-walk along the lake. I don't blame him, never have, but I wish I had the same excuse; I wish I could label myself something so I could slip away and receive only an understanding nod for my absence. My husband is a true introvert, not even, as some would describe, an introvert disguised as an extrovert. He is the real-deal; he

feels the wholeness of himself start to divide, crack and undo, the longer he is required to deal with others. Even his daughters. *Like parched ground*, he once described, *I start to fracture. You don't know what it's like.* I don't counter. Not because I don't agree with his *inner-most-self* (another claim), but because I find his use of *parched ground* mildly offensive, his use of this simile a brash attempt at saying, *I require more to live more than you.*

When we used to have guests over, he would give me that look not long after everyone had settled into twos and threes, near plates of bruschetta and bowls of bright red homemade salsa. He would turn to the person closest to his elbow and make an awkward show about how he forgot to water the tomatoes in the greenhouse, and off he would go. This display only worked for newer friends, people I might not even call friends. Those I'm friendly with or those I'm still deciding on. Time is too precious to waste. But for those who have known us for years, and have been witness to my husband's consistent methods, I see them smile into their plates.

Then he would return, as the last guests were leaving, and offer another clumsy explanation about how there was so much work in the garden, and does anyone want a few black zebra's to take home? He thinks explaining like this is having manners, being present for my sake. He doesn't see that they dote on him like they do our daughters when they perform their little show and tells. His voice projects oddly, like the teenage Hutterite boys at the farmer's market.

I watch him for a moment as I carry the groceries from the car to the kitchen. I see his delicate hands, up and down, as he brings them to his face. He rubs thumb and forefinger on their leaves, inhales their pungent oils. He stands still—except his hands—for so long I wonder how it's possible: no shift, no hip jut, no tilt to his body. He rubs again, then plays his fingers along their soft-haired stalks. I once joked to our mail carrier Ruby, it's why I keep him around, when she saw the basket of multi-colored tomatoes on the porch. His green thumb. *Must be the greenest!* she exclaimed. I filled a bag for her, and let her select each by touch and smell. She used her cheek as the ultimate test and, blushing, confessed it's what her mother had taught her to do (she didn't elaborate). But I wondered later about what I had said. About keeping him

around. The thumb that only once found my clitoris years ago, when I convinced him to go from behind. His hand started exploring, and then the thumb found me. It was the way he held it there, waiting. Then slipped it in, next to himself already inside of me. I gushed a torrent of clear, odorless liquid into his cupped hand. He pulled out of me with the same haste I remember first as lovers when we skirted the confines of birth control. I had soaked the bed; we slept in the guest room that night. He avoided my clit after that. I knew the whole scene had disturbed him. The single time we talked about it, he referred to my *peeing the bed*, and despite whatever I said to assure him I hadn't pissed all over myself (and him), he never trusted my own assessment. My own body. To be fair, I never saw him as a man with a cock. He never treated it that way. He was far too gentle and mild. But God forbid, he's not a wiener man. I can't say how he thinks of himself. It's a penis, I think he would say, if pressed.

We started sleeping apart a few years ago. Something had spurred it, though I don't remember what. A new work schedule? The time he landed in the hospital with a severe pneumonia? I don't recall. We became disembodied. Time and circumstance. Spurred by domesticity, I suppose. Is Ms. Perel domestic? Does she ever just get bored (is it not ok to be bored)? I've thought of clicking 'reply' to the newsletters I get, though I know they will automatically bounce back. Yet over the last year or so, in a bi-monthly ritual complete with candles, his laptop movie subscription, and a wine selection he chooses from online reviews, we attempt to become bodies again. It's his doing, all these proclivities, so I let them be. I smile brightly. His large doe eyes watch me undress. He churns away underneath me, like a vat of slow-food butter, eyes closed with a blissed-out expression on his face. I think about the novel I want to write, notes I jot down in the last few minutes before sleep claims me. Some nights I get up and write until the horizon gives shape. As black becomes navy. Some nights I listen to his deep, serene breathing. He's happy, I give him that.

With my head in the fridge, rearranging, consolidating, I hear the front door slam and the voices of my girls bounce like wind from wall to wall until I feel them behind me. I'm enclosed in gangly arms and whipping hair. Mom, they practically yell, *guess what?* And they proceed to

explain the last few hours of their lives to me, the hours I was elsewhere but still with them. I love to hear the drama of their extracurricular innocence. Soon, I know, it will change. They will say less, hide more. Not, I think, for fear of reprimand (I've been an open non-judgmental mother), but from new-found shame and humiliation discovered *out there*. Desire, too, will start to cloud what they might think is right and decent to tell me. We are honest now, the three of us, but something unspoken will start to shape the hours they are away from me. I won't be there to protect them, so in turn they will protect me. Some strange reversal preempting the years ahead, when (I hope) they won't stick me in a nursing home. Instead, they'll be there to aid in my last days of becoming a child in front of them (double hope).

The eldest twin slinks a hand into the fridge and comes out with a greenhouse cucumber. She inspects it for residual dirt and chomps it like an apple. Zinnia, the bold one. We're always finding something to joke about. I smile and start compiling a passable mid-afternoon snack. She gives me the half-cucumber back and I grip it in my hand on the board. And there, as I hold it, I remember an old boyfriend from university. We had been adventurous. We were always laughing. And when he came to my apartment one day and gave me a large, forest-green penis-shaped dildo, he was thrilled. I laughed. The corners of my lips strained so wide, I couldn't fit it into my mouth. I feared it would look like I was screaming; the corners of my lips straining uncomfortably.

That's ok!, he quipped, and I went on to use it on him, which is what, I think, he wanted all along. The whole thing was sexy, like having a third person with us. We stayed together until the end of that school year, incorporating more strange and wonderful acts. In the spring he went to volunteer with an ornithologist along the estuaries near Galveston. He transferred to Texas A&M in the fall. I missed him dearly, but he was so joyful about the waterfowl his professors studied, I couldn't be upset. We wrote letters, as people did back then. I posted a few to Alaska, where he went on with more schooling, more ducks. I remember learning their names. Lesser scaup. Canvasback. Northern shovelers. Eventually, as the years do, past and present split like a fault line. And as having children does, time subducted like an earthquake.

You look up from where you were staring at your feet as they rumbled underneath you. You realize a decade (or more) has liquified. I looked him up on Facebook a few years back. His beard showed streaks of gray. His hands gripped the antlers of a caribou. The antlers were still in velvet. The plants around him cropped low. It was the tundra, underneath him. It's a curious thing, what happens to us. I still have the letters, of course, downstairs.

My husband comes in the kitchen. Says hi to the girls. *Hi dad*. He rinses tomatoes in the sink and places them on a towel to dry. Zinnia chatters, asking him questions. She knows the names of the varieties but asks him anyways; this delights him. She picks up the fruit, one by one. Gently pulses with her hand and brings one to her face. She inhales the seeds behind taut skin. Rose is quiet, but alert. Takes the last cheese cube and holds it in her mouth. I look at her and squint. Draw up the corner of my lips. She gives me a smile so furtive, my heart grips. There is something more between that muscle and my lungs. I know it by looking at her. At her sister. The four of us stand around the island. The cucumber disappears.

My husband moves with a gentle precision. I can predict each step. His hand gestures and under-the-breath murmurs. The girls politely pile dishes to the side of the sink. Each goes to her own room. I usually find them together later. It pleases me to see them drawing in the same room or weighing down the twin hammock outside.

Did you remember the eggplant? My husband asks, as he straightens the pillows on the sofa. It's then I remember he had plans for moussaka.

That's ok, he says, before I have a chance to answer. *I'll go to the store later*. The mid-afternoon light has begun to slant through the blinds. Like dust motes, his thinning hair floats above his head.

I'm sorry, I say. I got distracted.

He announces a nap. My husband's naps have become more frequent. He says, *I'm getting older, I'm tired*, and I don't disbelieve him. I kiss him below the temple, where the curls of his graying hair meet the tighter ones of his beard. I wrap my hand to his other cheek and will him to sleep for hours. To wake up less *aged*. I silently vow never to become old and tired. I think of my father. He paces and writes lists: *take out trash, vacuum, move 2x4s from*

shed. I wonder what Esther would say about neutrality, to feel neither love nor hate. *Beings who feel*. Feel this being, feel that one. Affection is the new love. Did I read that somewhere?

The sun in the kitchen exaggerates the dust. Cat hair deposited on every surface. The tomatoes shine like a bowl of hearts, as the light sinks into their orbs. I do love them, I think. I have a deep fondness for the way they burst. More than their names, I know their taste. I hold one to my throat. Roll it across my eye sockets. I select a sungold and crush it in my mouth. The membranes coat my teeth, and the seeds slide in between. I find a nice-sized Black Krim. I walk down the hall towards our bedroom. As I pass the windows I see the girls, out on the grass. I wave anyway, even though they are reading. My husband is sleeping over the covers in only his underwear, boxer briefs from several Christmases ago. He looks peaceful, of course, he's sleeping. I see the shape of one testicle resting on his inner thigh. The other one rounds out the upper bulge. I place my hand on his ankle. He doesn't stir. I gently cup one testicle in my hand and eat the Black Krim with the other.



Will Fice, *Frontman*, 2024–2025



Will Fice, *Blue Almond Room*, 2024

A HAT IN WINTER

Nathaniel Lachenmeyer

In the killing months of that fateful year,
strangers reported that you always wore:

a thin beat-up army jacket,
a blue Oxford shirt, stained gray slacks,

and a pair of cracked broken-laced boots.
Racing toward warmth, they saw you

on that bench day after day, gloveless,
writing in a thick spiral notebook.

Some recalled a wool hat,
while others said your head was bare.

A student at UVM resolved the discrepancy:
he heard you writing out loud on the wind

on a day too cold for even your fingers—
“They stole his hat! The only thing

that kept him warm!” Which suddenly
brought back to me a forgotten memory

to add to my small and childish store:
how you told me once, when I was little,

that a person loses 30% of their body heat
from their head, and that is why

it is important to always wear a hat
in winter. All those years later, I was still

learning from you; in that moment,
so long ago now, that there are times,

even after it is too late, when a little
of what has been lost can yet be recovered.



Magdalena Prado, *Construir una trama*, 2024

GISÈLE PRASSINOS' ENCHANTMENT OF GHOST AND HAIR

AN ASSEMBLAGE

Simone Muench and Jackie K. White

What is the price of a jug, of swallows?
the girl in the armoire with the moldy hair asks

the ghost with an umbrella and a film
reel. Without an answer, she puts

papier-mache in the sugar bowl.
She walks the antlered desert, the scent

of grapefruit crackles. In her hand, a knife
and pink fragments. To revolt

against Istanbul and the Parisian
face telling time is nothing when poppies

sprout from her footprints in the fluted
dunes and she sips cacti through a glass

straw. Once, both father and fiance saw
her as a white calf, just a girl with a glow-

worm in her hair, a reddening ballerina,
not the scorpion breaking through sutures,

xxing a gash in their happy ending,
opening the story into battlefield.

MANSOUR WIRES A TELEGRAM FROM THE AFTERWORLD

Simone Muench and Jackie K. White

*I think too often
of funerals*

of flared nerves rimmed
in gunpowder

and taxidermied words
translated into rubble,

the way an autopsy can
be oil-slicked into code.

After the war, the dead's daggers
unsheathed themselves,

but left disjointed bones to do
their own begging.

Other bodies spread out
in copper intaglio.

Mourners nightshades effigies
in wax. What else to say?

Here there are more stones
than earth.





RUNNING

Anna Sones

The car horns woke me up. It sounded like a big fuss, but it didn't last, and then it was just the chug of the engine, the rush of the tires. There was white daylight on the floor, and when I got up and pulled the curtain back, I saw your head leaned back on the headrest. The hair on the back was fluffed. It looked like goose down. I smoothed it with the back of my hand and asked, "Was that you?"

And you said, "Honking? No."

And I said, "No, did you get honked at?"

"You just got up and that's what you're asking me?"

So I let it be and pulled myself into the passenger's seat, and watched some little community slip by on the side mirror and told you, again, how these are my favorite times of day. Sunrise and sunset, when one of us is fresh, and one is at the end of an eleven-hour shift, and it's no longer enough to read billboards or look at the clouds or make fun of vanity plates. In here there's nothing remarkable except the clock ticking down on the tablet, the souvenirs dangling from the mirror, the photographs taped to the wall with peeling stickers. Nothing new except this month's air freshener and the last meal's trash. The only really interesting things in the cab are us. So we turn to each other. We've got to. I tell you jokes that annoy you enough to stay awake. And when you get up just before dark, you always see the obstacles when the sun gets in my eyes.

But that morning I looked at you, and I saw that your eyelids were falling over your eyes and the pupils were snuggling up under them. They weren't closed. Your back was still straight, your hands on the wheel. You weren't sleeping. But sleep was waiting for you like a bear trap. I almost said your name, but instead I just brushed my fingers against your arm. Even with the A/C on you were

in a T-shirt, and the skin was warm and soft. Recently I've been noticing how soft. I don't notice so much the wrinkles or the spots. Mostly I just love how it feels like a puppy's belly. Sweet and warm and soft just like you.

Anymore I look for chances to touch those arms, or your cheeks or the back of your neck. You might not have noticed because I sneak it into jokes or stories, or to laugh at something funny you say. It's not new that I'd want to touch you, but recently I've felt so drawn, like you're an alpaca fur sweater. I haven't told you any of this.

*

At my touch, your eyes popped open and you jumped a little. You'd stayed straight on the road. Your speed had only slipped a little. You looked at my fingers not quite back in my lap, and then we both looked out the windshield.

You've always driven at night. The lights never give you headaches, you never miss an exit, you never lose focus. Except that was the second, maybe third time this has happened recently. The only times in forty years. I'm not sure you even notice it, and I haven't mentioned it. I will. I just haven't yet. I'm still working out what to say. I don't want to make you feel like you're getting bad at your job, which I know you still love. I don't want it to sound like I think you should quit or retire, because that's not what I want. I really don't want that. I've spent so much time thinking about how to say it, but I still can't hear what it would sound like. For some reason I can replay all our recent conversations, but I can't hear what I'm going to say. And besides, every time I start practicing in my mind, I get distracted by your cheeks, which are still perfect, and by the deep blue of your eyes, which I can't always see

when the cab's dark but always know are there. "Truck's running good?" I asked.

And you said, "Truck's running good. We had some delays. Accident or something coming into Dallas."

I sort of remembered that. The start and stop during the night. I didn't wake up, though. The traffic hasn't bothered me in a long time, or the chuckholes that bounce the twin mattress, or the engine sounds. It's like white noise to me. Like a lullaby.

"Well, it put us back," you said. I saw the GPS said we were still in Oklahoma. We had a 5 p.m. appointment in north Nebraska to pick up our next load. I knew I'd have to run hard for the next six hundred miles, and I could feel the empty starting to sway in the wind, but I thought I could make it and I told you so.

It won't be like this when we're owner-operators again. We'll make our own appointments. We'll pick our own loads. We won't have a carrier telling us where to go or how to get there. And once we get our own authority, we can buy more trucks, have our own fleet. We'll be good at that. We make a good team.

"It's times like this I wish we still had a CB radio," you said.

"What, so we could hear the idiots shooting skip on nineteen and I could get called a seat cover by guys driving by?"

"Don't give yourself too much credit."

I think you knew that stung, and you said it was just a joke, you hadn't meant anything by it. But it was pretty mean for you, so I asked, "You tired or something?" You said you weren't.

I thought maybe some food would fix whatever mood you were in, and the tablet was suggesting a fuel stop right up the road. You said, "Whatever the tablet says," which is the sort of thing you say a lot anymore.

I said, "Breakfast for dinner?"

"Breakfast for dinner for who?"

"For you!"

"And you?"

"Well, it'll just be breakfast."

"We don't have enough food, Wendy."

"Sure we do."

You said you were going in anyhow so you'd get a carry-out. But I said we'd spent money on that food, and

on the inverter and the skillet and all that, and you said, "Maybe we shouldn't have."

I pulled out the folding table. "You just settle down and let me cook you something." I didn't add how I wish you'd just trust me to come through on a meal. Or how I wish there was room in the sleeper for a bigger table, so we could see each other while we eat. That's why I twist around in the passenger's seat to face you. But you wouldn't even glance my way that morning, just stabbed your fork into your egg and let it run. So I put my sausage down and asked, "How are you this fine morning? I'm just asking because you look tired."

"You keep asking me if I'm tired."

So I let us eat.

While I cleaned up in a plastic tub of hot water from the kettle, you got up and stuffed your backpack with fresh clothes and a towel.

"Why don't we go together?" you said. "Save on time."

I wanted that. I miss renting one shower and brushing my teeth while you towel off and put your wet arm around my shoulder. But anymore I just don't want to leave the truck alone. Don't want to take any chances.

So you went by yourself. When I went out to dump the dishwasher there was a plains wind rolling through the parking lot. When I'm out there I always like to walk around the rig. Look at the tires. Check for any kind of damage, leaking oil. Then I like to step back and just look at the Peterbilt. The paint is still glossy like a well-fed cat. It looks way younger than it is, unlike us. It runs that way too. That's what comes of taking the truck in for maintenance more than we take ourselves to the doctor. Not like it's easy making a doctor's appointment when your permanent address is an RV park in southeast Texas, where you only go twice a year to pick up your junk mail. But it's worth it, because this truck is going to last. We already lost one rig to a repair we couldn't afford, and that was almost, but not quite, as painful as losing an actual home.

I got back in and passed the time looking at the photos on the wall. You and me in Chicago. Miami. Las Vegas that one time we got a little taste for gambling. Through the windshield, I spotted you talking to a man outside the truck stop, smiling and shaking his hand. I thought you must have known him, but it turns out you didn't

even know his name. I wish you knew what you look like fresh out of the shower. Your clean hair already drying duckling-soft. Your cheeks rosy. Still smiling from talking to strangers. But after you pulled the door closed against the wind, you looked tired again. I fished my shower shoes out from under the bunk and walked to the truck stop. The floor was still wet from the last shower. Somebody else's hair was in the drain. I was glad to get back in the rig, but the curtain was already closed. I could tell you weren't asleep by your breathing. I thought about going in to check on you, asking one more time if you were alright. Instead I sat down in the driver's seat, turned the music on low, and drove. Instead I decided to trust you.

If we couldn't trust each other like we do, I don't think we'd have been sure enough to marry at twenty, and start running team at twenty one. It took a lot of trust to buy that old Kenworth and agree to 7,000 miles a week. We didn't have any expenses except the truck, but then, the truck was all we had. And each other. The truckers before us, I think they had more of a community, but by that point the CB radio was mostly just for 10-33s and bear traps. But we liked the chat and the camaraderie, especially you. Sometimes when we would go through big cities you would pick up the receiver and give somebody a 10-4, or call breaker just to hear somebody answer.

*

When I stopped the truck in the yard in Scottsbluff, you got up and said sort of stressed, "What the hell time is it?" I told you not to worry, that we were all checked in and still waiting. But you pointed out that there was hardly anybody in the yard to wait on.

You said, "Somebody else got our load," and got out your cellphone to call dispatch. I folded myself up in the driver's seat and watched you rub your face while you said, "Well, listen, can't you get us something else?" I watched you pick at the vinyl on the armrest. I wanted to take your hand to stop you, but the seats were too far apart. You put the phone down on the dash.

"We've got to wait."

"How long?"

"Hours. Long time."

"They can't get us anything sooner?"

"They wanted us to deadhead all the way to Boise."

"Well, we can do that."

"In this wind?"

Terry, I've seen you run in wind strong enough to rock the cab off the freight. There were no trees in the yard to gauge the wind, just a styrofoam cup dancing on the asphalt. But you'd already told them no. I don't know if you noticed that I got up and swiped the back of my hand across your forehead, quick, without telling you I was checking for fever. Your face was cool, the skin more tense than it looked. You had just slept six hours and you still looked tired. So I said okay, let's just land for the night, and checked the parking break and the doors.

I've never told you this, but sometimes I'm glad the top bunk is loaded up with suitcases and plastic tubs of stuff we never use. Normally it doesn't matter, since only one of us sleeps at a time. But now I got to shimmy out of my sweatpants and press into the twin bed beside you.

I love driving. I love running all the more miles we can. But once in a while, I just like to be in the same bed as my husband. To watch you sit on the corner, take off your shoes and socks, stretch your toes, and lie down.

I didn't want us to sleep yet, so I wrapped both my arms around one of yours and said into your neck, "Don't you just wish you had one of those king-size mattresses we dropped off in Oklahoma?" You said you kind of did, so I told you again about all the conversions I want to make. "You've seen people build their bunks out like a double? I think we should do that. And I want to get one of those slide-out toilets. We're getting too old for truckstop bathrooms, don't you think? It'd be nice not to have to go out."

"It'll cost money."

"Yeah, but once the truck's paid off, we'll have the money. The routes will pay better. And once we've got our own authority, we'll make even more."

"And what are we going to do with it?"

"With what?"

"All that extra money."

"I just told you. Fix it up in here. Travel some. What else would we do?" I fell asleep waiting for you to answer.

*

When the job finally came in on the tablet, there was daylight.

“Bobtailing six hundred miles to Iowa,” you said. “I burnt out my clock waiting for something better and that’s what they give us. Worse than deadheading. I feel like these people mess us around.”

I was surprised to hear you say that. Our carrier’s not that bad compared to some. And I know you know pulling nothing is safer than an empty trailer swinging around. But you said, “Yeah, but nothing’s going to anybody.” I couldn’t help but mention how this is the sort of thing that won’t happen when we’re owner-ops, but you said, “That’s really what we’re talking about now?”

So I backed off and pulled up the job details on the tablet. When I saw that load in Iowa was going to Cleveland we looked at each other a while, and I thought how it had been some time since I’d had a good look at your eyes. Still such a pretty blue. But anymore the colors are breaking up a little, whitening out, and I wonder if it affects how you see.

You know, I considered turning that job down, making some excuse. But you shrugged and said take it. So I did.

You ever wonder why we chose a carrier out of Kansas? I don’t think it’s just because Kansas is far away from Ohio. I think we chose it because it’s the center. I think we thought somehow that the way to keep escaping the country was to go to the heart of it, to have an equal chance of going anywhere, or of not going there. Still it’s strange when we get sent back to Ohio. The big cities aren’t too close to where we grew up, but even Cleveland is like the name of somebody who died a long time ago.

You decided to go back to bed. I sat down and tried to settle in. I plugged the shipper’s address into the GPS. I turned on the engine and sat back to let it warm up. But it sounded different that morning to me. I knew you were trying to sleep but I couldn’t help asking you, “Do you hear that, Terry? That sound.”

You said, “Sounds fine to me.”

“Are you sure? We’ve still never done the rods and mains.”

“It’s holding good oil pressure. There’s not really any blow-by.”

“No, but if it is—engine stuff is expensive.”

“If it needs done, we’ll just do it.”

“It’s just I really don’t want to put these last payments off, you know?”

“It’ll be fine, hon.”

“I’m just saying, the reason we lost the last one is we didn’t address the problem soon enough.”

You were quiet a long time before you spoke again. “It’ll be fine.”

I could have said more. Wanted to. About the unfairness of not owning our rig but paying all its expenses. Not owning where we spend nearly all our time. I wanted to say that they could take our home from us for missing one damn payment, like they did your family’s farm, just one harvest after we took it on. Like they did that same year to three of our neighbors too. And at that point there’s nothing you can do. We wrote the governor. We wrote the president. We went to the protests and the meetings. Nobody helped. We felt betrayed by the state of Ohio, by the whole country. Our home felt like a parent we could no longer look in the eye.

I really wanted you to know right then that after that happened, the only thing I could trust was you. You made it so easy. As easy as asking, how are you this fine day? If I couldn’t trust you to give an honest answer, I wouldn’t be so sure that driving suits your needs just like mine. Not just the need for money, but for a life we can be proud of. And this life is a lot like farming, in some ways. Where we live and where we work are the same. We have a little control over our schedule, but we’re at the whims of weather and land. We get challenged with new things all the time. The work never stops, and people depend on us, even if they don’t know our names. Since the start, I’ve thought of myself as a sort of farmer still, delivering little harvests with every load.

I let you sleep. Sometimes I miss you when you’re sleeping. Once in a while, when the road is clear, I look over my shoulder at the curtain. I want to peek behind it just to see you. Sometimes I do. That morning you were on your back with your hands resting on your chest. Your lips were parted. Your lashes fluttered in dreams.

But I have my ways of being alone. I watch the gauges and hone my gas mileage. I practice changing gears like a musician pressing the keys. I take swigs from a gallon jug of water, and wonder what kind of hawk that was on the telephone pole.

Sometimes I wish you could see me drive. I hit Des Moines at rush hour, and that part of town was narrow

and bad for cornering. But I leaned out the window to see and honked my horn a couple times to remind the four wheelers who they were dealing with. It was still windy when I turned into the shipper's yard, but I jackknifed in between two other rigs. I whistled with the radio while I did it.

We checked in at the next shipper early and let the sun set. You ate the meatballs and green beans I made you without comment. Then you took the wheel and backed up to the trailer. You pulled into the middle of the yard and we got out to shut the door, and I saw you looking at the trailer, loaded with galvanized steel stock tanks. I couldn't say nothing, so I leaned against your shoulder and said, "Isn't it funny it's the same brand we had?"

"I'll do the hoses," you said. I reached out for your shoulder, then changed my mind, and crawled under the trailer to check that the truck's locking jaw was secure around the trailer's kingpin. Then I took one more look at everything, which is when I saw it. I went and sat down quiet in the cab.

"Hon," I said, watching you prod the coordinates into the GPS while sipping on an energy drink. "You didn't hook up one of the taillights."

You set the can down in the cupholder and some of the liquid hopped out. "Yes I did. Did I?"

I shook my head, and you pulled the parking brake and reached for the door. You looked so caught out, and I felt bad. I said it was all fixed, looked like we were at 42,000 pounds, a pretty good load. You sat like that for a minute, leaned towards the door, one hand still on the parking brake. Then you slapped the truck into drive. Alls I could think to do was kiss your temple and go curl up on the bunk to sleep.

*

I could hear the stock tanks clank and wobble in the trailer. It kept me awake. So when the lights from that truck stop casino you pulled into got under the curtain, I got up. Still a couple hours to the Ohio border. The casino parking lot was full of old pickups and beat-up sedans, even on a week night. You said you were hungry, so I jumped up and made us each a PB&J, but you just let yours sit and clutched your head. I wanted to touch your arm, but you looked as tense as a slingshot.

I offered, "How are you this fine evening?"

"To be honest, Wendy? I kind of just wanted a restaurant. Get out of the truck, go sit at the bar." I said I was just saving money, and you said, "For what?"

"What do you mean for what? For our authority. For retirement. For travel." "We've had days off in pretty much every city in America, Wendy. Where else do you want to go?"

"There's always someplace, Terry. We haven't seen everything. I mean, we'll see, okay? I just want to get the truck paid off."

"I don't have to tell you how many people—"

"I don't want to hear that, Terry."

"I mean, you and I have both known plenty of folks who wanted to buy their trucks and failed."

"Well, we're not going to fail."

"No? Okay, well. How about how many miles this thing's going to have on it? We'll have paid more for it than it's worth."

"I don't agree with that. Trucks are hard to find. Value's going up, not down."

"Depends. Depends on how we run it. Depends on what the boss decides. Depends on how many hoses I leave off between now and then. On if they think they can trust us." I was sideways in my seat, looking at your profile. You had pinched holes in your sandwich. You were chewing your soft lower lip.

"You're good at your job, hon," I said. You leaned your head back and let your arm droop over the armrest. Orange light from the casino signs kissed your neck. I looked at your fingers, uncallused for so long now. I wanted to take your hand, but I didn't. You stayed looking out the window. "You ought to go back to bed."

So I did. I shut the curtain and closed my eyes, but they popped open. I heard you put the key in the ignition but you didn't turn it.

"Do you ever wish . . ." That was all for so long that I thought maybe that was the question: Did I ever wish? Did I still have wishes? And I wanted to say, I wish every day that the coffee is hot and not bitter. I wish for new places and different birds. I wish that we could get this rig paid off finally, so that we'd be sure.

"Do you ever wish," you said, "that you could just go home after work?"

I didn't open the curtain but I sat up. "Aren't we home all the time?"

"No, Wendy. We have a home."

"No we don't. Not for a long time."

"Yes," you said, "we do. We've got your sisters, we've got my brother, we've got nieces, we've got people. If we wanted . . ."

"We're home all the time. Our own home. That was the whole point."

"That wasn't the point. That was the opposite of the point."

"Well, that was what we decided."

"A long time ago. When we were young. When we were fresh people, you know?"

"You're good at your job, hon."

"Maybe I was. And maybe that's not the point."

"What's the point?" I was leaning towards the curtain. "What's the point, that you . . .?"

"Maybe I do. I don't know. But maybe."

The strain from leaning out towards you began to ache, and I pulled myself back into the bed. "What if I don't?" I tried to see through your silence like it was a windshield onto a sunny road. You just turned the key in the ignition.

I didn't tell you, but the way you did that, hon, the way you just stopped the conversation, I only ever felt that cut off from you that time five years ago, and that was the one time we almost split up. And it made more sense then, since we were in real trouble. I'm still not sure how it happened. Burnt out brakes like that mostly happen to rubber duckies who are running too hard and not balancing their jakes, but I always thought we were better drivers than that. Alls I know is the brakes failed on Loveland Pass, and we shot downhill in the dark until that runaway truck ramp.

Yeah, I guess you turned a little too hard onto the ramp. But who cares? You avoided a wreck. Nobody was hurt. We got on the radio and called break one nine. We tried a 10-33, and when that didn't work, a Mayday. But nobody answered. Finally it was some couple in a four wheeler that saw us and went for help.

It was awful giving that truck up, but what else could we do, when on top of the busted brakes, we had torn

lines and a busted radiator? Plus the towing. We didn't take the radio.

But the real damage was done to you, hon. In the motel where we argued for a week after, you told me thirty-five years is a long time for the economy. It must have recovered, and there would be protections for farmers. We didn't have to go back to Ohio if we didn't want, but we should go somewhere. Someplace. A place.

It took everything I had to convince you to get in a big rig again. Especially since you knew we didn't have the money to be owner-operators like we had started out. And after an accident like that, no carrier would hire us on as company drivers. I know it rankled that alls we could find was this carrier in Kansas, who said if we leased a truck and drove just for them for a few years, we would earn enough to eventually buy it. I know that some weeks, when paychecks are due, we owe them money instead. But I'm not going back to farming. I wanted the farm as much as you did back then. But I love you more than anything, even this job, and I don't want you to love a piece of land more than me. So I'm jealous, I admit. But only to myself.

*

Dashes of light from the highway got in around the curtain and splashed onto one of the photos on the wall. The one of my new husband and a heifer. Half of that familiar brand logo peeks in on the stock tank in the corner of the frame. Your arm is tossed over the heifer's neck like the shoulders of an old pal. Your ears are sunburned. Your smile open-mouthed and pink.

We had been cleaning the stock tanks, the metal making that same rippling sound coming from the trailer, and when they were cleaned and filled again, the cows came strutting up for the fresh water. I made for the truck, but you stayed to greet them, and they bumped your shoulder and snuffled your neck, and you scratched their heads and scooped up handfuls of water to scrub dirt from their noses. And that one heifer, she just forgot about the water, and kept putting her wet nose on your face, and you kept loving on her and scratching between her shoulderblades, and finally I took out the polaroid and called to you, and you looked up, both of you, and you were smiling, smiling. You didn't even need to say cheese.

*

And then we were gliding, slipping, drifting through the night. I sailed off the bed and through the curtain and saw the street lights and the taillights dancing. The north star went off center, and then we hit the rumble strip, and the sound of the stock tanks hit a new pitch. The radio was singing you a song from another generation, so quiet, like a lullaby. I looked at your eyelashes resting on your cheek, waited just another second to see if you would lift them on your own. And when you still didn't waken, I reached out for the steering wheel, put my hand over yours, and pulled it towards me.

FROM THE ARCHIVES

“Hay algo muy poderoso en nuestro ser que es la lengua, lo que no sé nosotros, you know (tu sabes), saquemos de nuestra boca, puede ser bien poderoso, o puede ser bien destructivo.”

—Victoria McDermott

“Oh yes, many people say, ‘You transported me back to my country,’ to Honduras, because of the food.” These are the words of Doris Martinez, who works at Roatan Honduras Restaurant on Poughkeepsie’s Main Street. Martinez was one of seven Poughkeepsie locals interviewed for “Somos Vecinos,” an oral history project facilitated at Vassar College by Assistant Professor of History Daniel Mendiola as well as students Daniel Duque Hernandez ‘27 and Karla Evangelista Vasquez ‘26. Beyond the food, Martinez herself holds memories of Honduras close, and there is an openness about her that invites others to experience them. She voices stories from her childhood in day-to-day interactions with restaurant patrons, one of whom happened to be Professor Mendiola. A frequent customer of Roatan, Professor Mendiola’s conversations with Martinez served as the impetus for “Somos Vecinos.” “I had an experience,” he told the *Review*, “where [Martinez] came out and she was just, like, telling me all these stories from her childhood.”

Starting an oral history project had been on Professor Mendiola’s mind since his time at NYU, where he did academic work on the Hemispheric Institute’s “Ecologies of Migrant Care,” a living archive of over 100 audio and video interviews with individuals involved in migrant support networks, including immigrants themselves, activists, and academics. The idea to focus on the voices of Poughkeepsie’s Latin American restaurant owners came from Professor Mendiola’s conversations with Martinez at Roatan and others of similar nature at various restaurants on Main Street.

“Somos Vecinos,” which translates to “We Are Neighbors,” was born out of these stories, beginning as a collection of six interviews with restaurant owners on Poughkeepsie’s Main Street, all immigrants from Latin America. Since its inception under the Ford Scholars Program at Vassar College, Professor Mendiola ran the interview project as a History intensive course in the Fall ‘25 semester, and plans to offer the course again next year. A primary goal of the interviews, in his words, was to capture aspects of the immigrant experience that are sometimes lost in academic literature. “When we’re talking about immigrants, it’s like we’re talking about a sliver of a human being, and even that sliver is distorted,” he said. “It’s about empathy.”

In this spirit, the “Somos Vecinos” team made efforts to eliminate constructed barriers between the interviewees and Vassar. Speaking with the *Review*, Daniel and Karla emphasized the importance of building genuine relationships with participants. “I think it took a little bit of us sitting there, eating their food, and building a connection before doing any sort of formal interview,” Karla said, noting that participants often expressed self-doubt, unsure if they had “anything to say.” Once participants began speaking, they realized they had a lot to share.

Ambioris Guerra: “Siempre Dios me ha dado esa . . . como esa . . . ¿Cómo te digo? Psicología en ver a las personas, porque hemos bregado con tantas personas, que Dios te da la sabiduría, ¿verdad?”

The team structured interviews in a manner that left much of the content to the discretion of the interviewee. They aimed to touch on three general areas in chronological order: childhood, the experience of moving to Poughkeepsie, and the experience of living in Poughkeepsie today. Beyond this basic structure, the conversation was in the hands of the participant. Participants were never explicitly asked about the circumstances of their immigration, but were free to discuss it if they chose.

A number of participants followed relatives or friends to the United States, or to Poughkeepsie specifically. Historically, Poughkeepsie has been a site of chain migration, and a notable example of this phenomenon is the sizable population of Mexicans from the state of Oaxaca. Two of the seven interviewees, Raymundo Ojeda Perez and Lorena Vasquez Zarate, are from Oaxaca, and incidentally Zarate followed relatives directly to Poughkeepsie.

The story goes that the first Oaxacan resident of Poughkeepsie, Honorio “Pie” Rodriguez, began the chain migration, and his restaurant, El Bracero, played an important role in building the immigrant community in Poughkeepsie and drawing migrant workers into the city.¹ During this period, the Oaxacan community was isolated from Poughkeepsie at large. Many of the first Oaxacans in Poughkeepsie did not intend to stay; rather, they sought work to put money towards securing a better life in Oaxaca. In his interview for “Somos Vecinos,” Perez describes saving money to build a house in Oaxaca as a primary motivation for himself and his peers at the time.

Even early on, however, the Oaxacan community was never completely disconnected. Immigration from Mexico contributed to organic urban revitalization in Poughkeepsie in the ‘90s. Along with restaurants like El Bracero, Latin-American grocery stores began to populate the city’s downtown. Among these was Casa Latina, a supermarket, which opened in 2001 and was

the only grocery of its size in the city at that time.² This speaks to the stake the Latin American community holds in Poughkeepsie, even if immigrants arrive without intentions to put down roots.

The oral history can illuminate history beyond the use of statistics, which do not tell a full story. For example, Perez, owner of Giselle’s Bakery, did not know how to bake bread before starting a business; in fact, he never quite learned until the baker he hired suddenly left. He got the idea for the bakery after noticing that the only fresh bread available in the area came out of a deli, and was only sold on weekends. His anecdote is simultaneously one of entrepreneurship, personal development, and community impact.

Success, however, never exists in a vacuum. Interviewees gave much credit to those who have helped them along the way. Ambioris Guerra, who owns Nelly Latin Restaurant on Main Street, speaks highly of Nelly, the restaurant’s previous owner. He did not know her when he entered the business, as she had already sold it, said she was frequently spoken of at the restaurant when he started. She called one day and expressed desire to meet Guerra; they had a good time and Guerra offered her business advice, describing her as humble and down-to-earth. The spirit of collaboration and mutual respect that characterizes Guerra’s story permeates across the interviews.

Poughkeepsie is a place for reinvention and growth. Guerra, like Perez, had little experience cooking before entering the restaurant business. Martinez pursued a number of jobs before settling into Roatan. Karla, in conversation with the *Review*, mentioned that some participants learned to drive in Poughkeepsie. The interviewees expressed gratitude to the city for the success they found here, and for the opportunities their children have that they did not have growing up. While historically the story of cities like Poughkeepsie illustrate the financial journey of immigrant families, the

¹Simon Lewis, “Entre Poughkeepsie y Oaxaca: Building Home and Place Connection,” 23.

²Jo Margaret Mano and Linda Greenow, “MEXICO COMES TO MAIN STREET: MEXICAN IMMIGRATION AND URBAN REVITALIZATION IN POUGHKEEPSIE, NY,” *Middle States Geographer*, 39 (2006): 80-81.

project of “Somos Vecinos” seeks to platform visions of personal development that its participants have found in Poughkeepsie, the place they now call home.

Raymundo Ojeda Perez: “No se me da mucho de . . . de hablar en micrófono, me da pena, pero . . . pues quizás. Pues más que nada quise compartir también parte de . . . es una pequeña parte, un pequeño relato de cómo sucedieron las cosas para . . . para llegar a Estados Unidos o poder establecerse o cosas así. Quise participar simplemente para poner un pedacito de . . . de parte de . . . de lo que he vivido, ¿no?”

Each interviewee shared a personal motivation for taking part in the project, or otherwise commented on the decision to accept the interview. Whether they expressed hope that their own story of hard work and perseverance might inspire another to push through struggle or were simply intrigued by the opportunity to talk about their life, their words were uttered with a desire to collaborate.

These vocalizations of life experience are a valuable form of knowledge. According to Daniel and Karla, many participants offered general life advice throughout the interviews; however, they just as often verbalized that they did not feel qualified to do so. Yet, it is clear from their reflections on participating in the project that interviewees believe that the words they offer may be of import to listeners; moreover, the profound impact that their stories had on interviewers reveals that such hope is not in vain.

“Somos Vecinos” invites listeners to go out and seek these experiences of connection. As Professor Mendiola told the *Review*, the project came about organically through conversations in an empty restaurant. There are people in the Poughkeepsie community who are eager to talk, so long as there are people who want to listen. “When we stop ourselves from having conversations with strangers, we’re stopping ourselves from learning so much,” said Karla, describing the disconnect between Vassar and the greater Poughkeepsie area. “We’re so busy, we don’t go out there, and we limit ourselves . . . It’s about being willing to listen.”

Lorena Vasquez Zarate: “[A]hora recuerdo que muchos alumnos del Vassar los domingos llenaban ese lugarcito, ahora . . . ahora que estoy haciendo memoria, ese lugarcito . . . El domingo se llenaba de puros estudiantes.”

The benefit was not one-sided. Although the team was concerned in the early stages that the project risked being extractive—simply taking people’s testimonies and putting them away in a library—the eagerness with which participants shared and the moments of connection during conversations support the contrary. Daniel and Karla emphasized the emotional nature of interviews: the laughter, the tears, and the banter. “Somos Vecinos” offered space for participants to reflect on experiences in the past that get buried by the responsibilities of the present. “At the end, they were visiting a lot of feelings and stories that they’re not necessarily thinking about on a day-to-day basis,” Karla said. The interviews “resurfaced a lot of feelings that were hidden . . . a lot of sadness.”

“You know it went well when people want to see you again,” Professor Mendiola told the *Review*. Connection often took the form of mutual gift-giving; in an effort to show respect for the participants’ time—and unable, thanks to red tape, to offer monetary compensation—the “Somos Vecinos” team gifted interviewees “swag bags” with Vassar merchandise; the gesture was reciprocated by interviewees with baked goods like *pan dulce*.

Lorena Vasquez Zarate: “Es algo muy característico de los oaxaqueños que se llama La Guelaguetza. Yo te ayudo y luego tú me ayudas, cuando tú lo necesites. Y si no, o sea, aunque tú no me lo pidas, yo te lo yo te lo brindo, lo que yo tengo.”

The Ford project culminated in an event called “Noche de Vecinidad,” a celebration held in the Villard Room with food, karaoke, and bingo. “It really did feel like we’d known each other for a long time,” Karla said of the event, and described seeing the participants feel pride for

having taken part in the project. Daniel called the night “truly unforgettable.” For many participants, “Noche de Vecinidad” was their first time on Vassar’s campus, and the event signifies a step towards breaking the physical barrier between Vassar and Poughkeepsie. As the project continues, the hope is for more bridges to be built between city and institution.

In their conversations with the *Review*, Professor Mendiola, Daniel, and Karla each emphasized the importance of the title. *Somos vecinos*. We, literally, *are* neighbors. These restaurants and stories are so close to the Vassar College campus, and yet few break the artificial barrier between the two. But there is so much to be gained from hearing another person’s story. The oral history, as fundamentally a project of empathy, brings back the dimension that can be lost in static historical records. The experience of the living is what renders the past so relevant; “Somos Vecinos” makes us aware that sharing these experiences directly, person-to-person, opens many more doors for understanding.

“I think it’s helped me rethink the purpose of history . . . How you like, pose a historical question in a way that

really embraces just like, the objective reality that we’re doing it in the present,” said Professor Mendiola, speaking of doing work centering the experience of communities in the present. “It’s also a lot of fun,” he added. “I do love dusty old documents, but it’s just not as, it’s not as fun as having a conversation with someone.”

Raymundo Ojeda Perez: “Entonces Poughkeepsie significa muchas cosas . . . Nada más que haciendo . . . reduciéndolo a lo que tanto qué significa, pues . . . yo creo que es el lugar donde estamos, donde nos hemos realizado como . . . como familia, como hogar, como . . . como padres quizás, ¿no? De alguna manera eso es lo que significa, Poughkeepsie para nosotros.”

—Zach Garipoli, Noah Duncan, Paige Hahn,
Annie McShane, Audrey Wood, with Ronald Patkus
Archives Editors

Note: Due to a lack of Spanish-language proficiency, all involved in the writing of this article read the PDF translation of the Spanish transcription of the “Somos Vecinos” interviews. At the suggestion of the “Somos Vecinos” team, we encourage those who are proficient to listen to the audio recordings available on the Vassar College Digital Library website.

DEEP TISSUE

Geneviève Mathis

Alice writes *casual, activewear, swimwear* under *WARDROBE* on her intake sheet and sits back to look around. Richie is next to her, bent over his paper like he's writing an exam. Alice studies the curve of his spine, noting the undue burden of a cantilevered head, the increased stress on the sub-occipitals and erector spinae muscles. It's why he gets headaches. Normally, Alice would find the sight of a grown man hunched like that pitiful, but she still admires Richie too much to think so. She'd recognized him instantly behind the bar at a hotel on Sunset a week ago, when she stopped in for a glass of water after an appointment.

"Richmond Sifer?" she said as he scooped ice into a glass for her. When he said nothing, she took the book of short stories she was reading from her bag and pushed it toward him, pointing at the author's picture. "Sorry. But you look just like him." She hated being wrong. And she wasn't.

"You just happened to be reading that," he said flatly as he placed the glass of water before her on a napkin.

"I usually have it with me. I must've read 'Beneath Me' fifty times. It's my top ten, top three short—"

He scoffed. "That collection is ten years old."

It always gave her pause when someone rejected a genuine compliment. "Still a good story," she said and smiled, hoping he would, too. "And you look the same." His face was blank. "What are you writing now?"

He turned abruptly to serve someone else, and she understood that it was an indecent question: his only book was this one (she'd searched); he didn't want to be recognized; and he was tending bar. She could have kicked herself. Of course a man who wrote such beautiful and sensitive things was beautiful and sensitive himself. She watched him. She'd imagined he was taller.

"You're really talented," she gushed, hoping to redeem herself when he returned. "And this water's pretty good, too . . . Mmm-mm."

He almost smiled. "So, you're a masseuse?" he asked, indicating her table leaning against the wall.

"Massage therapist."

"How much for a house call? Or hotel-call?"

She told him. "But I take men on referral only. Sorry."

He nodded thoughtfully. "I see. Can I refer myself?"

"You're funny. I don't know you, either—"

"Richmond Sifer," he said, holding out his hand. "Richie. You've read my work. I'm writing a screenplay. I tend bar. That's everything."

Alice didn't want to be disappointed, but who *wasn't* writing a screenplay in LA? "Alice," she said, and, just to be polite, asked, "What about?" quickly finishing her water, and packing up.

"It's based on 'Beneath me.'"

Alice stopped what she was doing and turned to him. "You're joking."

This time, he smiled. "Hold a sec," he said, and went to serve another customer. He wasn't *that* short.

When he returned he asked, "You work in a spa?"

She shook her head. "I'm building my own practice. Thinking I should sign up at Central Casting, get celebrity clients." She laughed because it was a joke.

But he stared at her, then said, "Let's go next week. On my day off. I can get my screenplay into the right hands, and you can get your hands onto the right people. It's perfect."

*

Looking around the room, Alice notices that its high windows are tinted with a transparent blue-grey film that

makes the bright, ninety-degree day look threatening. She shivers in the air conditioning and glances over at Richie's intake sheet. Under *SPECIAL* or *UNUSUAL TALENTS* he has written *rodeo (bull), trapeze, spelunking, courtroom sketching*.

"You can do those things?" She is freshly awestruck.

"It's called acting," he says, watching a skinny woman with breasts like volleyballs get her picture taken. "None of it's real."

"Okay, then, Mr. Sifer, what are my special and unusual talents?" Alice asks.

Richie stretches his back. It cracks audibly. "Happy endings," he smirks.

"Cliché," says Alice, feeling the first real pinch of disenchantment. "Thought you were a writer."

The next day, Richie checks the extras database, but after calling in and being turned down three times (she notices he calls in for under thirty-fives though he's a decade older), he gives up. "Like I need more rejection. I can get turned down without the fucking middle-man in between—"

"That's redundant—"

"Your turn," he says. "Here."

Alice wants to be turned down, too, but is not so lucky. "Well, I'm a doctor. On that hospital show. The serious one with the sexiest man alive." Neither of them has watched it. "I need to bring white sneakers." She buries her face in her hands. "Aargh!"

Richie can't stop laughing.

*

The Radford Studio Lot is a maze of hangar-like buildings, each with a giant show logo on its front and a number plate bolted to its side. Alice finds where she is supposed

to be and enters through a tall metal door that cuts off the daylight behind her. The entire far wall of the building is a cross-section of a hospital, including an 'emergency' entrance with an ambulance parked outside, which is still inside. She is nervous about being unfamiliar with the show and her kneecaps jitter as she clutches the box of sneakers she'd had to run to K-mart to buy. All she knows is that the star is unmarried, and is therefore rumored to be gay.

There is a tap on her shoulder. A petite woman dressed all in black and platform Doc Martens, with bleached cropped hair and eyebrows, stands behind her.

"Doctor?" The woman smiles. Her teeth are also bleached, large and white as paper. "This way," she says when Alice nods.

Alice follows the woman down a dim hall of metal lockers, across cables thick as tree roots, until they push through a thicket of rolling clothing racks into a carpeted hollow that is surprisingly quiet. In this hush, the woman looks Alice over. Alice, who is wearing a blue and white striped blouse, pegged navy pants, and red ballet flats, blushes at the scrutiny.

"I was told to bring these." The sneakers emit a cheap plastic stink when she opens the box.

The woman crinkles her nose and pushes them aside. "Nurses wear sneakers. You're a *doctor*," she says with a wink.

Alice is strangely flattered.

"Stripes are bad on camera, so keep this buttoned," the woman says, tugging a lab coat from its hanger. "Gives vertigo." She reaches under one of the racks for a pair of nude pumps with three-inch heels. "Red's no good, either. First time?" she asks, pointing to Alice's flats as she hands over the items. "Nine, right?"

Alice hasn't worn heels since she learned how they alter the spine's curvature and shorten the gastrocnemius muscles, not to mention the crippling force they put on the metatarsals and phalanges. But they are her size, so she nods and takes the shoes without a word.

"Extras holding is over there," the woman says, pointing at the 'emergency' area.

Alice, lab coat over her arm, heels in hand, passes a wall of doors, the last of which is slightly ajar. A blade of light cuts across the cement floor. She slows when she hears howls of laughter coming from within. A man with a shiny bald head is sitting with his back to the door, facing a mirror framed with glowing bare bulbs. A woman stands between him and his reflection and Alice cannot see his face, only that he is shaking with amusement. The woman is dusting his shiny head with a puff. Powder hangs in the air. The woman looks up and sees Alice and narrows her eyes. Alice hurries away.

There are three other extras: a nurse in pink scrubs and white sneakers; a patient in a hospital gown with a blanket around his shoulders; and a doctor wearing a white lab coat and, surprisingly, sneakers. They are clustered around a table with food: bagels, tubs of cream cheese stabbed with plastic knives, a box of donuts, single-serve bags of chips and pretzels, an acrylic bowl of loose Skittles, coffee, tea, and canisters of powdered creamer and sugar. The nurse stuffs a bagel into an empty chip bag and drops it into her tote. Alice wonders who would eat loose candy from a bowl.

"And here they said doctors don't wear sneakers," she says to the other doctor.

"I'm a surgeon," he replies, unsmiling.

Alice perches on the end of a bench and tries on the shoes. Her feet are too wide, the shoes too narrow. She

has to crimp her toes to make them fit. She's about to go back to wardrobe, but just then a man outfitted with a headset and clipboard strides silently in their direction.

"Background talent! Listen up." He flips a page. "I need two docs and a nurse."

The surgeon puts his hand up and asks, "You mean surgeon?"

"Yep," says the man, and marches off silently on his thick-soled shoes.

The nurse and surgeon immediately follow. Alice, alarmed, grabs the nude heels and catches up. They stop in front of the hospital corridor. The assistant director positions the extra in scrubs at the nurses' station, where there is already a nurse in scrubs, then turns to Alice and the surgeon. His eyes immediately fall on Alice's red shoes.

"Christ almighty," he says, rolling his eyes.

"I was given these, but—" Alice holds up the pumps.

"Put them on, please," he snaps.

She does her best not to wince as she pushes her feet into the shoes. Someone disappears with her ballet flats.

They are to walk from one side of the hall to the other, heads inclined in consultation. Alice is taller than the surgeon, which makes this awkward. The stars will walk past them, they are to cross the hall right after.

"After," repeats the A.D. "Not before. After. Got it?"

"Got it," nods the surgeon.

Alice nods.

"I need to hear you say it," says the A.D. mockingly cupping his ear.

"After," says Alice. "What, do we have to operate the exit doors in case of emergency?" she jokes to the surgeon when the A.D. strides off. "Like on a plane?" she elaborates.

"Shhh!" from the surgeon.

“Settle!” barks the A.D.

They wait in immobile silence while the dolly grip rehearses the camera moves and the focus puller completes a final check with the stand-ins.

After several minutes, the star walks onto set. He is wearing a white lab coat and the luxurious brown curls he’s known for, bounce. He has never drawn her eye from the covers of magazines, but in person Alice concedes he is exceedingly handsome. She thinks massaging him wouldn’t be the worst thing.

The A.D. says something to him, and when the star laughs, Alice recognizes his howls as those of the bald man in the dressing room. She catches herself staring at his superb wig when a second actor jogs onto set, an older man with thick, neatly combed salt-and-pepper hair, also in a lab coat, and also exceptionally good-looking. She wonders if he’s in a wig, too. He catches her eye and smiles. She smiles back, and tucks her hair behind her ear as she looks away. He’s electric. She can’t recall his name.

Fifteen minutes later they are back in extras holding, where there is now an old man with a bloodied face and a woman with her arm in a dishtowel sling. Both are snacking and laughing, pretending their injuries are real. Alice slips off the pumps. Bright red lines circle her feet. Her toes are angry pink rosebuds. The bloodied man rains a fistful of Skittles into his mouth. The surgeon is getting coffee. Alice rubs the kinks out of her feet. She should ask about her flats.

*

When the episode airs a month later, Alice has slept with Richie five times, worked his traps and scalenes for writing-induced headaches four times, and has not been an extra again. They are sitting on Richie’s couch

with a bowl of popcorn. Richie thinks it’s not a bad show. “A bloody soap opera,” he says, faking a British accent, adding, “Literally.” Alice cringes.

When the show goes to its last commercial break without her scene, Alice says, “After all that, I was cut.” It’s silly, but she is disappointed.

When the show returns from commercials, however, she sees the two nurses at the nurses’ station who appear to be talking, though in reality they’d been utterly silent.

“This is it!” Alice jumps up.

Richie squeezes Alice’s hand as the camera tracks the two actors walking swiftly, their faces in tight focus.

“There!” says Alice, pointing at herself as she crosses from one side of the hall to the other. Rather, a shoulder in a lab coat does, next to a second lab coat, moving across what appears to be a busy hospital hallway. The credits roll.

“You’re not a doctor but you—” Richie says.

“Segment of doctor,” she laughs, clicking off the tv.

“Could be the beginning of a beautiful career. Maybe a whole arm, next time.”

“Jesus, I’ve never been so petrified and so bored at the same time. And I bet those guys can’t even tell a quadratus lumborum from a quadriceps, or the acromion process from the integumentary system. And you can’t even see my feet!”

Richie pats her leg. “The thing about background is, you only notice it when it’s not there.”

*

A few days later, in the early evening, Richie and Alice are alone in the hotel bar on Sunset. A man walks in. Alice, about to leave, is arrested by his profile against the setting sun, but it is not until he is seated at the far end of the bar

that Alice recognizes the salt-and-pepper haired actor. She whispers as much to Richie. After Richie pours the man a drink and they chat for a few moments, the man gets up and approaches her.

"This seat taken?" he asks, gesturing to the stool next to her.

She smiles. "I was actually just heading out." She notices Richie's eyebrows fly up.

"Oh, no! Please stay. One drink. I'm Gus," he says, holding out his hand.

Gus McGivens, she remembers. It's his broad smile that captivates her. "I'm Alice."

"Strong hands," he says as they shake. "What would you like?"

Alice scrunches her face and checks the time on her phone. "Well, one, then. Thank you. Gin martini. A baby one," she says to Richie, indicating an inch with her thumb and index finger, and is pleased when Gus chuckles at *baby martini*. Richie never thought it was funny.

Gus asks, "So, what brings you to L.A.?"

"Oh, I'm not a guest here. I live in North Hollywood," Alice says. "I just like this place. And I know the bartender."

Gus nods and takes a moment to consider the empty room decorated in sunset oranges and purples. The bar-top is polished copper and their faces glow warmly above it. Gus smiles at Alice, then furrows his brow.

"You look very familiar," he says. "I know you from somewhere. You're an actress. Yes, you were in . . . What?" He scratches his head and Alice can't tell if this is him acting thinking or really thinking. Perhaps this is what makes him a good actor.

"Guess I wasn't memorable," she says, putting on her best sad face. "What about you? What brings you to L.A.?" She sips her drink to suppress a smile.

"Oh! I live here, too," he says. "Off Laurel Canyon. I'm also an actor." He says the names of several shows, ending with the hospital drama. If he is surprised at not being recognized he doesn't show it, but sits up straighter, faces her more squarely, perhaps to give her the best opportunity to recognize him. It seems unconscious and Alice briefly pities him for this need, but she betrays nothing.

"Sorry," she says. "I don't watch a lot of movies."

"Those are tv shows!" says Gus, amused and aghast.

Alice shrugs. "Sorry, don't watch a lot of tv, either."

"Well, refreshing to meet someone so . . . innocent."

"Oh, I just prefer to read," Alice says with a glance at Richie, who is drying glasses at the far end of the bar, and winks at her. "I read everything."

Gus studies her for a moment. "I shoot very near you, on the Radford Lot. I could help you, if you like. You're quite stunning."

Alice smiles. "Thank you. I'm flattered. But I'm not an actor—"

"Another round?" Richie asks as he approaches. Gus nods and drains his glass.

Alice shakes her head. "I should probably get going—"

"Alice is a massage therapist," says Richie, replenishing Gus' whiskey. "Best hands in the west."

Gus brightens. "Oh, man, I could use a good masseuse."

"Massage therapist," Richie corrects him, smiling urgently at Alice.

"Sorry," says Gus, beginning to knead his shoulder. "Massage therapist. Do you make house calls? I've got this—"

Alice shakes her head. "House calls only for women. Sorry." Richie shoots her a look that means, *Seriously?*

Gus frowns, deflating. “No, I get it. Men can be shits. Especially in this town. But I’m a decent guy. Promise.”

“Sorry,” says Alice. And she is.

*

A month or so after that, Alice waits on Richie’s front step for him to come home from work.

“So, Gus McGivens called me today,” she says, trying to control her irritation when he appears.

“Awesome,” he says as she follows him inside. “I gave him your number a couple weeks ago. I didn’t think he was gonna call. Did you speak to him?” He shrugs out of his jacket and kicks off his shoes.

“He left a message—”

“And?” He turns to her, his face eager.

“He wants a house call, Richie.”

Richie holds up his hands. “Now, hang on, hang on, Gus is a referral.”

“From—?”

“Me.”

She is momentarily speechless. “After meeting him once? Twice? Come on.”

Richie shakes his head. “He’s been in a lot. Every night for a while. You learn a lot about people as a bartender. He lives right off Laurel Canyon. I bet his house is incredible.”

“So?”

Richie raises his eyebrows at her. “I don’t get it. This is *exactly* why you did extra work, am I wrong? This is the *thing*. On your first try, even! I said three fifty and he didn’t even flinch. He’ll refer his rich friends, who’ll refer their rich friends. Why do you assume everyone is bad? He lives with his girlfriend.”

At this, Alice softens a little. “I don’t assume they’re bad, I just don’t assume they’re good, either. I can’t tell

you how many times I’ve been surprised by ‘nice’ guys. All women have.”

Richie frowns. “No, you’re right. My mistake. I just figured you’d be stoked!”

*

“I’ve been thinking. About Gus,” Alice says the next morning when he brings her coffee in bed. The sky is gray, the forecast is rain.

“You’re gonna do it?” he asks, hopping into bed beside her.

She puts a hand on his arm. “Let’s just say I’m in his beautiful house with its endless pool and dazzling view, and he turns over on the table and shows off his boner. Then what?” All she wants is for Richie to understand she is trusting him, and for him to be appropriately concerned.

Richie’s eyes, however, gleam. “In that case . . .” he jumps up and opens his desk drawer to pull out a stack of paper, “. . . you distract him with this!” He waves it at her. “My screenplay!”

Alice gasps. “What? Finished?”

“Mhmm. It’s good, too. Really good, I think. But you have to read it first. Make sure I’m not crazy.”

“Absolutely!” She reaches for the pages but before she can grasp them he pulls back. “What?” she asks.

“Well, if you like it . . .” He lets the words linger as he gets back into bed.

“If I like it, *what?*”

Richie’s whole face seems animated, but he says nothing.

Alice’s face goes slack. “You want me to give it to Gus? You’re serious?”

“He’s so perfect for it! It’s kismet!”

“Richie!”

“But only if you think it’s good. Only if I’m not losing my mind out of sheer desperation. Which I am, but I’m not—”

“I can’t do that!” she says, slapping the manuscript from his hand. “Give it to him at the bar if he’s there so fucking much.”

“I was planning to, but he hasn’t come in—”

“You said he came in a lot!”

“He did, until he didn’t,” he says, gathering the pages. “He said he’d be traveling for a while.”

“So, give it to him when he comes back.”

“Babe, come on. It’s so much better when someone else toots your horn, you know what I mean? This is opportunity knocking. He’s not a complete rando. This is how this town works. C’mon. It’s so perfect for him.”

“It’s exploitative—”

“You’re worried about exploiting a man with a thirty-million dollar bank account?” Richie says incredulously. “I looked him up.”

“You’re exploiting me,” she says, and pushes his hands away.

He is quiet for a moment. “Please? You think I want to be tending bar?”

Alice sips her coffee and stares out at the bruised-looking sky. She thinks for the first time she might prefer his writing to him as a person.

After a silence Richie sighs, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. Just do the massage and don’t even think about it. You were the one who worked the connection, after all, not me.”

Unbelievable, she wants her eyes to say when she fixes him with a look.

“Sorry. Sorry,” he says. “Just, please read it.” He kisses her cheek and offers her the manuscript. Alice doesn’t

take it. “Please don’t be mad,” he pouts, giving her puppy eyes. “You mad?”

“The fuck, Richie? What do you think?” she says, grabbing the stack from him.

They drink their coffee in silence as Alice skims the first pages and Richie stares out the window. After a few minutes, Alice puts the manuscript aside.

“Well?” he asks.

“I’ll read it later.”

Which she does. And falls in love all over again.

*

Gus lives half-way up Laurel Canyon, through a tall metal gate and up a steep stone driveway, in a house made of wooden beams resembling railroad ties. It is surrounded by a fringe of feathery grasses and a broad concrete moat. Calico koi swim slowly in the shade of the footbridge. Two round windows look out at face-level from the double front door. Alice takes a deep breath. She and Richie agreed she would not give him the manuscript this first time, so it’s just like any other massage. The door gong sets big dogs barking.

Gus’ smiling face appears in one of the windows. He opens the door with a thick white towel around his waist, his abdomen not especially defined, but trim. Like a normal person, she thinks. Two muscled, copper-colored pit bulls sit on a small rug rapidly swishing their tails across the floor.

“Hi,” he says. “Thanks for coming out.”

“Hello,” says Alice.

“Oh, here, let me take that.” He reaches for the massage table slung over Alice’s shoulder.

“Thank you,” she says, appreciating the gesture, alert to how secure his towel is. She looks at the dogs. They are

barely able to remain seated, dancing with excitement. They both have white blazes on their chests, and pink erections like unsheathed lipsticks poking from their bellies.

“Stay,” Gus commands the dogs. Then to Alice, “That’s Bogey, that’s Bacall,” pointing each out. “They’re friendly. They’re brothers. Rescues. But be careful,” he stops mid-sentence and winks at Alice, “or they’ll lick you to death.” He laughs. “We’ll do it in the great room. Come in.”

Alice follows Gus and is followed by Bogey and Bacall, who push their wet noses into her hands, sniffing. The house is somewhat as she has imagined it from the outside, though more modest. The floors are smooth concrete and it is spare and bright. The other side of the house is all sliding glass, and the glass wall in the great room is wide open. Beyond it, a pool in a limestone patio, with pink bougainvillea frothing at the edges. The moat, Alice sees when Gus invites her outside, is an actual one that encircles the house. She is happy for the fishes’ circular freedom. From the edge of the patio she can almost see the Radford Lot buildings far below.

Back inside, she unzips the table from its carry bag. As she folds the bag to stow it, Richie’s manuscript slides from one of the pockets and hits the concrete with a thwack! that makes Alice jump. She is instantly furious. Alice quickly stuffs the manuscript out of sight and takes a deep breath, shaking loose her shoulders. It’s not good to be tense. People, like dogs, can sense tension. Fortunately, Gus is standing with his back to her rewrapping his towel, and hasn’t noticed.

“Richie says you live here with your girlfriend?” she asks brightly.

Gus drops onto a chaise, and pats the cushions for the dogs to join him. “She moved out a week ago.”

Alice feels her shoulders tighten. Bogey, as he jumps up, snags Gus’ towel, exposing a dangerous length of thigh. “Shit,” says Gus, restoring the towel as Alice quickly turns away.

“Sorry about your breakup,” she says, keeping her back to him.

“Pfft, complete psycho,” scoffs Gus.

Not nice, Alice thinks as she finishes securing the table legs. “Do you go to Richie’s bar often?” she asks.

“When I’m not on hiatus, yeah. Richie’s a riot. I bet you two have a lot of fun together.”

Alice smiles but says nothing. When the table’s ready, she says, “You can lie face down, under the top sheet, your face in the face cradle. So, face down, under the sheet.” She always repeats the instructions. “Where can I wash my hands?”

“Down the hall, left . . . Go with Alice,” he tells the dogs, who jump from the chaise and follow her.

The dogs wait outside the half-bath. She can hear them panting, their nails clicking. The light is dim and the sink is a blown glass bowl with a waterfall spout. She lets the water get hot to warm her hands.

“Hi, guys,” she whispers to the dogs when she comes out. She gingerly pats their blocky heads before walking back to the great room. The dogs’ nails announce her arrival but she wants to be sure not to surprise Gus and calls, “All set?” from around the corner.

A handful of times, Alice has had clients—men, never women, which suggests it’s deliberate—who decide to lie naked on top of the sheet. Often prone, occasionally supine. *So sorry. I’ll give you a moment to get under the sheet. Lie on your stomach. I’ll start with your back. I’ll give you a sec. Jerks.*

“All set,” says Gus.

But Gus is not one of those men; he follows directions. Perhaps this is also what makes him a good actor. He is covered up to his nape.

Before revealing his back Alice does some compressions along his spine and finishes by cupping one hand against his occipital ridge, the heel of the other against his sacrum, gently pushing them apart. He moans; most people do. The dogs, who have reclaimed the chaise, lift their heads. She folds the sheet to what one of her instructors referred to as the T-O-C. It is terminology she does not like, Top of Crack, but thinks it nevertheless. She pulls the sheet up an inch to be safe.

Placing the heels of her hands on his shoulders she alternates pressing down to lengthen his trapezius and levator scapulae. "Is anything bothering you? Anything in particular I should work on?"

"Whatever sticks out at you," he says.

Alice is annoyed when men give suggestive answers to this question. There have been times during a massage when a man's hand slips off the table, just by accident, to stroke her thigh. A man might spread his legs wider as she tucks the sheet under them, and expose himself. He might turn over with an erection. He might say how great it feels, how beautiful she is, how he can't help it, and reach for her hand. He might stroke, and grab, and offer to pay. Cash. And because of this bullshit, Alice is always alert. She knows the exits. Her advantage is she is not naked. The wide open room.

But Gus does none of these things. He does not say or do much at all during his massage, only moans from time to time. The dogs tilt their heads, listening, then settle their muzzles between their paws. Hummingbirds hover around the bougainvillea. A fish splashes. Gus is in good shape and not overly hirsute, a pleasant body to work on,

and she enjoys the rhythm of her strokes, the patterned glide across his skin. Still, she bites her lip when she has him turn over, but Gus' groin is no more than a Ken-doll hump of harmless manhood beneath the sheet.

"This is hands-down the best massage I've ever had," he says.

She chuckles at his bon mot though she's heard it hundreds of times. "I'm glad," she says, cups the back of his head with her left hand, and slips a pillow beneath it with the right in a single fluid motion. "Comfortable?" she asks after gently lengthening his neck, then settling his head on the pillow.

"All I can say is, Richie is one lucky guy," he says, then closes his eyes. It is good when clients close their eyes. The creeps will watch.

Gus is asleep by the time she massages his face and scalp. His hair smells clean, and she enjoys the thick, grey brush of it between her fingers, the whorls her fingertips make as she works in small circles, drops of rosemary and sweet orange essential oils on her palms. When she is finished she wakes him.

"We're all done," she says softly.

He smiles at her. He is breathtakingly good-looking.

*

Gus sits on the chaise as Alice strips the sheets from her table. He looks younger in the way that everyone does, fleetingly so, after a massage. Smoothed out, little dazed and less troubled. Alice smiles to herself, no longer on edge, wishing only that he would put on a robe rather than lounge in his towel. Would it be the worst thing to mention the manuscript?

She says, "I was on your show, once. On the Radford Lot. As background. You smiled at me."

"I knew it! I never forget a pretty face. Ha! Just once?"

"Once was enough!" They both laugh.

After a moment he asks, "How'd you and Richie meet?"

Her heart speeds up. She makes a decision. What's the harm? "At a book signing." She hopes she's convincing. "He's a writer."

"Yes, you said you were a reader." Alice is flattered that Gus remembers her saying so.

"He's won prizes for his writing. He's kind of brilliant. Richmond Sifer?"

Gus is already shaking his head. "Sorry. I mostly just read for parts. And reviews, sometimes. But what do you think?"

"I think Richie's great—"

"I meant my body."

For a second Alice registers this is a come-on, but he is only asking about his muscles. She is the one being unprofessional.

"Oh, sorry!" she says, and demonstrates some exercises for him to do to loosen his shoulders and IT band. "Drink lots of water, especially today . . . and how about we do this again in a month?"

Gus smiles, too. "Are you kidding? I want you to come once a week!"

"Great—!" she says, instantly relieved; she can mention the manuscript then.

"But I can't for a while. I'll be shooting in London for six months, and then possibly Toronto for another four or five."

Alice's face drains. "Oh, amazing," she says, feeling now the unwelcome pinch of urgency.

"You should come with me," he says, but before she can say anything, his phone vibrates at his thigh and he excuses himself.

She continues cleaning up her supplies, then waits by the front door for Gus. He cannot have been serious about going with him. Bogey and Bacall lie on the rug looking sad. After ten minutes, Alice considers leaving a note to Venmo, but he appears from a hallway, seeming even more relaxed, smiling. He grips the towel around his waist with one hand, and gives her an envelope thick with cash with the other.

"God, so sorry to keep you waiting. That was rude. Anyway, all I can say is it's obvious you're not an actor: there's no faking that. Okay, I'm off to the sauna. The door will lock itself behind you." Almost as an afterthought, he says, "And think about London. I leave on Monday."

Alice's heart is pounding. She wants to say, "Thanks, I don't think so," but what comes out of her mouth is, "Thanks, one more thing," and before she can change her mind, she retrieves the manuscript from her bag. "So, this is Richie's. I wasn't going to bring it, not till I knew you better, anyway, but it's really one of the best things I've read lately. I'm not just saying that. Richie is super talented; and it's based on an award-winning story of his. You said you read for parts, and here's one that's perfect for you. So perfect. Truly. I'm not making it up—"

"Ah, I was wondering when you were going to give that to me," Gus laughs, waving his hand for her to stop.

Alice blinks. "What?"

"You think I can't tell the sound of a manuscript hitting the floor?" he chuckles.

"Oh! Haha! Seriously?"

He laughs again. "Well that, and I figured Richie'd get it to me one way or another. He was always going on and

on about his screenplay. It's kinda the reason I stopped going to the bar, actually. Sorry, no offense. I told him I'd be traveling. He gave me your card."

Alice is speechless. "Well, shit. Richie didn't tell—" She shakes her head, trying to control her anger. "I'm sorry. Forget I said anything." She slides the screenplay into her bag. "Keep my number for when you get back. It was a pleasure working on you."

"No worries," says Gus.

She is opening the door when Gus stops her. "Hang on. Hang on. I believe you. About the screenplay. You like it, right?"

Alice turns to him. "Very much."

"Okay. I think you're terrific. So, as a token of my appreciation, how about you come back inside and tell me about this masterpiece."

Alice's heart leaps into her throat. The dogs click ahead and jump up onto the chaise. Gus sits next to them. Alice sits on a chair opposite, takes a deep breath, and begins. After a minute or so, her eyes are drawn to the edge of Gus' towel, alerted to an almost imperceptible movement, to the darkness opening between his thighs until, peeking out shyly from under thick Egyptian cotton—no, not shyly, only *acting* shyly—she sees the tip of his cock.

But Alice likes Gus, and wants to believe it's a mistake, nearly warns him. But he grins and locks eyes with her just as the dogs jump off the chaise, and the towel falls away. Alice glances down just long enough to see his semi-erect, neatly groomed pink dick perfectly presented on a cushion of scrotum, like a delicacy. She looks just long enough to tell he is probably the most beautifully proportioned man she's ever seen naked. No doubt Gus is thinking the same as a confident smile plays across his lips. He still smells of rosemary and sweet orange, her favorites. He manspreads.

*

Alice squeezes the steering wheel as she drives back down the mountain, angry at the twinkling ribbon of brake lights ahead of her. Her eyes burn. She has to remember to blink. At the 101, she turns left instead of right and drives and drives until the ocean appears. The evening air is cool and calm and there is no one on the beach. She parks under a lamppost. Richie left a message but she does not want to speak to him.

She sits on the swings to watch the sun setting. The metal chains groan softly, a friction she feels more than hears, and she shivers in the closing light.

It is dark by the time Alice walks back to her car. She has goosebumps. The trashcan attached to the lamppost is overflowing and casts jagged shadows. Alice peers under her car and checks the back seat. She should call Richie. But say what? That she'd burst out laughing? That Gus immediately covered himself, his face and neck reddening, begging her pardon while making the lame excuse that he'd taken ecstasy? Say that he'd offered her some, and then asked her to London, again, and when she declined it all once more, say that Gus had good and truly shocked her, saying, "Okay. I'll read it on the plane," holding out his hand for the manuscript? Richie would be ecstatic. Alice had been speechless.

*

"Fucking assholes," she says as she yanks open the passenger door. "Both of you." The screenplay is splayed out in the footwell where she'd thrown it. She rips it to pieces before stuffing it down into the trashcan. Huddled in the car with the doors locked and heat cranked, she texts Richie, no-go. goodbye, and deletes him from her phone. After a minute, the dash begins to blow warm air and she puts her hands over the vents, and waits as her skin slowly becomes smooth again.





Emma Schwartz, *Allure*, 2025

DIARY OF A REFORMED DL LOVER

Pierre Ramon Thomas

Shards of my dignity passed for currency / Exchanged for palms and fingers sliding on skin / Firm squeezing / Fevered seeking / Bodies, in their *Davidic* state of undress / Dispossessing the indigenous emptiness / The silence. / Exorcising those haunting mind-demons who whisper:

Undesirable / Alone forever.

Can't forget Ahmed / Who swatted my hand away / As if it was a mosquito / As if public chin caresses carried West Nile / Him who I didn't leave when he dropped the *g-bomb* / I aided and abetted his infidelity / Because who else was going to Big Spoon me / Exclaim the enchantment of my face?

I wince thinking of Yohannes / Who patrolled each shoulder before speaking to me / Asking me why I haven't called him / After telling me I shouldn't be calling him during our last call / Yet the man knew how to manhandle a man / Knew how to make a 5'10"-er get on his knees / Show him his mouth tricks.

It pains me to recall Mike / Who peeked out venetian blinds and peepholes / Before seeing me out / His bodiless head jutted out the half-opened door / Ensuring no neighbor saw a fruitcake leaving / But I didn't care / No other man had twisted me around a chair / Stroked me so good I damn near blurted out my SSN.

Content I was—emphasis: *used to be*— / Being, to men, the secret they kept tucked behind their *venae cavae* / If it meant having their hands / Trace and re-trace the outline of my nakedness / Covert liaisons were my sustenance / Such food staved off starvation— / But what tastebuds crave for over time change / *Papillae* that once relished in fast food / Salivate now at even the thought of a home-cooked meal.

Same way a fiancée never passes up a chance / To show off her ring / A man needs to be just as ostentatious with me / Show *me* off.

Whether he calls me /

His lil' shorty / His lil' doo wop /

His main squeeze / His ol' lady /

Whatever he calls me / As long as he calls me it /

Publicly.

Gone are the days / Being the shushes men pen in / Index fingers on lips /

Gone are the days / When only the moon and stars know my name.

See this face? / *This* is not a face you hide / *This* is not a face you sneak in or out of your place /

This is not a face you confine to the night hours / A face like mine you introduce to the sun / A

face like mine you escort to restaurants and plays / A face like mine you take home to meet your

momma / And your daddy.

You French kiss a face like mine / In front of an officiant / Before all your family and friends and

mine / After vowing to love me / And I, happily, you—

Dearest Diary / Your dedicated writer / Confessor / Affirmer of the future I desire / Got carried away

again.

L A I D .

Sheema Holmes

I.

The first and last time I saw her, she was talking to the ground.

Not out loud or rambling, not in any way that would alarm me, although I should have been. There were at least two bull gates she had to climb over or under to get here, and a barbed wire fence in all other directions, each dotted with “No Trespassing” signs. I hadn’t come for a girl or ghosts. I’d come for a property line.

My father had said, “Boy, just go up there and take some pictures of the corner stakes so I can send them to the lawyer.” I didn’t even have any room left on my phone’s storage—screenshots of food reviews, dating profiles, and slightly blurry selfies of nights out cluttered my photos app. I didn’t have space for any more inconveniences, even if they were my birthright. The cemetery sat at the back of our land, between where the marsh started and the ground turned hilly and knotted.

If you didn’t know the graves were there, you’d walk right past it. Which, according to my mother, was the point.

“Let’s fix the problem before it becomes a problem,” she’d said. “Somebody trip back there, break they neck, they’ll sue us. And those developers are nosing around. Don’t need to give them a reason. I want our affairs in order. We not long for this earth.”

They had been *not long for this earth* for far too long for her threat to really incite fear, but it did occasionally, resentfully, inspire guilt.

So, there I was, in the damp heat, under a canopy of tulip poplars and oak that swallowed the sun and dribbled little drops of light down to the leaf-covered

carpet, looking for corner stakes and finding instead a young woman kneeling beside the grave of a stranger I might’ve been related to.

She had spread a thin sheet of paper over the headstone and was shading over the carved name with a stub of colored wax, a bright-ass blue. The motion was slow but attentive, the way you’d rub a glob of grease down a straight part on someone’s scalp. She’d already done three stones; the papers laid beside her, weighted with little river rocks, each one etched with a reversed ghost of letters. That striking blue and bits of black soil, black like our eyes, that stained her palms. I rest a quiet hand against the closest tree, a Paperback Maple, its skin peeling away from its trunk to reveal flesh so bright, I half expected my palm to be stained red when I pull it back. In my wake, a scab of bark falls to the floor silently.

The cemetery wasn’t much, just a scattering of tilted markers, fieldstones, and some proper limestone—all of which the moss and leaf litter slowly swallowed up. Honeysuckle and greenbrier drew tight knots between the graves. A copperhead slipped through the underbrush at the far edge, uninterested in either of us.

I should have called out something normal: *Hey. You lost? You know this is private property?* Instead, I just stood behind a massive, twisted beech tree and watched her.

She moved like she’d been there before, picking up faded silk flowers someone had left decades ago, plucking away bits of newspaper and a rusty mason jar ring like she was tidying up her living room. They might as well have been orphaned socks or discarded pajama bottoms. Once she’d finished picking up the trash, she deposited it in a grocery-store bag and pulled out a 40 oz. She uncapped it and poured a small circle at the foot of a

stone. The brown liquid soaked into the soil so fast you'd miss it if you blinked. All my eyes were wide open.

I'd been staring for so long, it would have been even stranger to introduce myself now, I thought. Did I know her? No. I would have known. She wore an oversized T-shirt with some half-faded university logo, bike shorts, and sneakers that had probably once been white but were now an aftertaste yellow, dark and bitter like nicotine stains. A torn piece of fabric wrapped around her wild spray of free curls, containing them. I was disgusted at how comfortable she looked in a place that was mine, even if I hated it. I took in all the details of her intrusion. There were notebooks stacked on the stump beside her, a battered tote bag spilling more supplies, and a crisp paper sack sleeving another bottle of beer.

I pulled my phone out then slid it back into my pocket. It felt wrong, turning her into a photo. Taking her soul. It felt wrong, too, that she was there at all. No one came to this cemetery unless they had a reason, and most of those reasons had been buried before I was born. I sighed and then chastised myself, like I was afraid of disturbing something. Which, to be fair, I was. A mosquito left her wrist and settled on the back of my hand, its needle legs spread wide across my knuckles, poised, and for a moment I relished the thought of crushing it between my fingers like a serviceberry—feeling the soft pop, savoring the small dark smear—but I stayed still instead, remaining myself I'm meant to be quiet here, and as long as I am, the little blood thieves would be safe.

I watched the woman finish the blue rubbing and switch to a mustard-yellow wax for the next stone, as if she knew each ancestor's aura. She didn't flinch at the mosquitoes. Every now and then, she just brushed the pests from her legs, transferring the dark fertile soil from her palms, leaving streaks on skin the same brown as mine.

I told myself I'd give her five more minutes before I said anything. Let her finish that stone. Let her pour whatever she wants to pour. I leaned my shoulder against the tree and watched gnats circle her head like a crown.

She didn't look up once.

I kept telling myself I wasn't the kind of person who did things—bad things, I mean. But the thoughts came anyway. Quick little stabs like pinpricks from the needles

jammed into mama's pincushion. I wished I could suture the chasm between what I knew I should do and what my brain insisted on muttering. It was stupid, really. I was only there to take some pictures, to get my head straight. But now that I was standing behind a tree, watching a stranger from the shadows, the thought burst forth again, fast and scalding: *Do it. Just do it and you'll feel better.*

I hated that voice. I hated how it sounded so much like me. Couldn't be. I assigned it to whichever predecessor passed down these proclivities. I cannot be the first to feel this way. Couldn't be. Sick blood. Must be.

I wasn't doing it. The voice couldn't make me. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe it was exactly who I was supposed to—

See, the thing about these thoughts was that they pretended they were helpful. They slipped into my back pocket like spare change and bounced around until I got used to the weight and mistook them for something I meant to carry when really, I should have let that shit go or tossed it in the money bowl with the bay leaves and cinnamon. I clenched my hands, inhaled, and unclenched them. Exhale.

I tried to breathe like my therapist said. He told me some dead guy said the mind was a house with many rooms. Fucking fantastic. Then why'd mine have so many closets? I pictured a black candle illuminating the dark eaves and corners of my interiority, my shame. But when I tried to breathe like my ancestors, my exhalation extinguished the flame.

I had almost convinced myself I wasn't *actually* here, doing this, but then she spoke. There was no turning back. My hand dropped to the waistband of my jeans, and my fingers clumsily started to work at the belt encircling my waist. I fumbled with the leather— twice as long as it should have been, since I'd had to make extra holes with a screwdriver just to fit it around my hips. Poke. Poke. Poke.

"You gonna stand there all day?" she asked, still facing the stone.

My heart stuttered in my chest and then made its way up my throat, choking me, drowning me. I gagged, trying to swallow it back down. I jerked back, heel catching on a root that had been there the whole time but tried to trip me now.

How slow falling could feel when your brain was focused on a silly thing like a trespassing girl. I lurched, then my foot slid, my entire six-foot frame tilted backward, the sky suddenly sliced between the leaves in a way I'd never seen. I thought, vaguely, that I didn't want to crack my skull on somebody's Poppop. Bad luck, I bet. I twisted and missed the nearest headstone. My shoulders hit the wet dirt, and my head followed a millisecond later, connecting with a half-buried rock that had probably marked someone's plot before the name wore off.

There was a white burst behind my eyes. Not a flash, more like the burn you get when you look at the sun and close your eyes, and the light still plays on the soft interior walls of your eyelids. I heard a small, faraway gasp from her direction. Everything narrowed to a white laser point, and then, to nothing at all.

II.

I preferred the underside of things.

Logs, mostly. Sometimes the cool dampness under flakes of bark, sometimes in the rich tea black beneath a canopy molded of forgotten bits of their existence that humans left to rot when they no longer served them.

Today, it was a cheek. Rather hollowed. Rather hallowed.

A human one, still warm but cooling, gone stone still. The skin was softer than bark, but not by much. There were thick hairs there, coarse and curled. It was still. My memory held a hundred bodies, even if I did not like the reverberations and shivers of the word cemetery.

I knew this concept by taste, by instinct. I knew what my progenitors had known. Just as my offspring knew what I knew and would know. Flesh. Ligaments pulled away like the threads of an old quilt. Bones appearing, smooth and bright, and I walked across them, feeling the faint grit where other insects had gotten lazy from binging all the supple fat and tender meat.

I had lived in and around these decaying houses the humans made for their dead. Some, they put them straight into the dirt. Others had crates that tried to separate what was a person from what would be soil. It never worked. Everything leaked eventually.

This particular human was lying in leaf litter. I could smell copper and salt. Blood.

I made my way along the slope of his neck, up toward the place where the hairline started. This part smelled of witch hazel and artificial citrus. It clung to his pores, but it could not hide the heady scent of hot iron.

As I reached the hollow just behind his ear, I paused. The skin was thin. I liked it there. I tucked myself into the crease, my many legs flexing, pulling me tight to the heat. The dirt below accepted the offering of his blood, sucking it up greedily as it seeped into the dirt.

There were footsteps, a series of light earthquakes rattling against my underside. Then her voice arrived—not sound, not really, but a burst of soft pressure in the air, a trembling in the air around me as her movements came up through the soil, crushed leaves and the body.

“Oooh, daahmmn. Iiii goot too gooo. Caaaaan’t foaaargeeet aeenythiing. Caaan’t leeeave ahh traacee.”

A shadow draped over me. The vibrations condensed. I froze, antennae tasting the humid air, the wax and moss drifting from her clothes. Then, the skin-ground broke away from me.

Her fingers pinched gently around my armor. For an instant, my whole body rang with the shock of being lifted—no skin, no soil beneath, no familiar leaf crusts. My legs curled tight to my belly as the world tilted, and her voice came again, close enough to wash over my shell like a thermal current.

“Heeeey, lieeeettle wuuuun. Caaaaan’t haaaave ouuuu geeettting squuuuished tooodaaay. Theem peeeople bee hurr soooon.”

She was careful, not just in the way I was nestled between her thumb and forefinger, but in the way she was speaking; the vibrations were quiet and precise, tuned so they did not overwhelm me. She set me down on a stone, made warm and slick by the summer musk, and I uncurled slowly, tasting quartz veins in the limestone with the sensitive hairs on my legs.

I didn't even shudder as she slipped away, little more than a shadow easing through the tree branches. I remained on the apex of the headstone's arc, the woods settling back into their own repose.



Kimia Ferdowsi Kline, *Leave a Light On*, 2025



Mandy Rogers Horton, *Face to Face*, 2025

URGENT

Jill Kitchen

the bee moves softly from one cherry blossom to another, pausing over each yellow-starred center. she is alone with the tree. i don't know whether to weep or rejoice for her and this moment alone with the glint of pollen. i watch her hazy dream of movement, the whispered magic of wings that carry her everywhere. the field is greening across the street, the foothills taking on a shire-like hue. all this color and bright fills everything with the swell-sting of hope. even the bee spills that same hope, however fragile. though her solitude makes me worry. maybe the rest of her tribe are only just waking into this colorado may after late and heavy snows. even the coyotes are beginning to rouse, their evening parties like the urgent chaos of teenagers in the park. the pups sample their voices, find their ranges—yips that hint at laughter, high-tinged howls that sound just like a woman screaming. each time, i rush to the window, squint my eyes into the blue-black, listen hard from throat edges, try to discern tragedy from jubilation. like when i lived in the city and lifted the window each night to untangle whether the cries i was hearing were drunken celebrations outside the bar across the street or that heart-haunting sound that so many women listen for, tense for beneath centuries of skin.



Caroline Schöner

PRENZLAUER ALLEE

Alexander Pham

On the way back from Kollwitzplatz, I saw a mother and daughter get on the tram. The seats were full and I considered standing and offering mine. (I wasn't sure of the etiquette—if there were a series of rules I didn't understand. In any case, I understood my fondness for a mother's devotion. In any case, it was too late.) The girl must have been five or so, balanced on pink rollerblades, swaying as the tram car cast her from side to side. Her mother held her hand tightly; I could see, from my position on a raised seat, her fingers interlaced with her daughter's, the skin of both hands turning bloodless from the grip. I was thinking a lot about love those days, especially motherly love, which I found exceptionally stirring. Around me, voices were sliding together in German. I had already traveled too far, I supposed, here on this tram, in Berlin, apart from all I knew. I thought of my own mother. I had not spoken to her in some time. How she used to carry me from the top step of the second floor to the bottom when I was young. And now, here I was in Berlin, a lone traveler. I could only look at the hands locked tight in front of me. At Mollstraße, the tram doors opened, and the mother stepped lightly off. Her daughter, clumsy in rollerblades, followed. Something fell, a sticker perhaps, some charm. The girl knelt down to pick it up, and then again when it slipped from her fingers. Her small hands scrabbled against the floor of the tram. Lights flashed, a voice came on to lecture. And as the doors began to close, the mother stepped half back on, her foot on the threshold to stop the tram from leaving. She stood this way for some time, watching her girl, saying nothing, understanding that she was weaving a safety net out of those gossamer strands of time. And then, as the girl scooped up what she had dropped, her mother pulled her to her feet and straightened the pink helmet that had slipped forward on her head. *Sehr gut*, she said, and the two of them stepped off. The doors shut, the tram spurred into motion. And out of the window of the tram I saw them, the daughter kicking her blades, sailing in wide strokes side to side across the pavement, down Mollstraße, and her mother a few steps behind her, arms crossed, watching her fly.

RUTH ASAWA AT THE MOMA

Alexander Pham

At the museum café, they sold “Ruth Asawa Inspired” cookies in the shapes of her wired sculptures, lobed and organic, center full of silky chocolate ganache. We had either half of a fifty milligram edible and took the escalators up to the very top floor where they were showing her retrospective. There, I stood for centuries in front of the first piece, a watercolor done at sixteen in the Rohwer War Relocation Center. The bayou, green and profuse, sunrays splashing like small darts across the water. Outside Rohwer, I read later, two Japanese-American internees doing supervised labor were shot by a nearby farmer when he came across them in the woods. *I thought they were trying to escape*, he told the press. *I called on them to halt*. Ruth was there for sixteen months before she was permitted to leave for college. *It is a terrible thing my government has done to your people*, her high school teacher said, driving her to the train station, *Do not look back on your life here*. The farmer’s crime would not go to trial. From a place on Earth I could feel myself slowly spinning. Somewhere far away, I heard you call my name. Sculptures hung from the ceiling, turning in on themselves, casting gridded shadows onto the white wall of the gallery. Bodies milled around and I could smell the slip of perfume through the air, clean and neutral. You had disappeared, and I was forced to continue alone. At the end of the retrospective was a glass vitrine with documentation to create a memorial. A proposal for a grant. The exact process: *A bas-relief tableau surrounded by the mons (ancestral emblems) of those interned*. I imagined her deft fingers pinching out the baker’s clay she had made for her students and children, forming the small figures of the internees to later cast in bronze. I imagined her daughters furiously typing up correspondence. *Enclosing the correct Sato mon*, a letter on display read, *Thank you very much for all you are doing for your mother. She is a very talented lady and we are all proud Ruth is doing the Japanese-American Internment memorial here in San Jose—Stephen and Sally Nakashima*. Something loud sounded. I looked up from the display, still wrapped in gauze. My throat was raw, my breath slow. A tremendous breaker of feeling had spilled over me, baptising me in its surf, and I realized later I was crying. Just then, I saw you by the exit, sitting patiently like a schoolboy, hands folded in your lap. You looked less high than I felt. *Did you like the show?* you asked when I approached, your face thoughtful, as it often got. A beautiful expression. What could I say? Yes, I did, very much, but I couldn’t explain it, not then, not directly in that moment.



Mira Goodman, *Empty Beds for Holy Boys*, 2025

THE CENTER OF THE WORLD

Thomas Beller

I.

It was the fall of 2007 and we had just moved to Roanoke, Virginia, a temporary posting. Elizabeth was pregnant. One day, while we were driving down the Blue Ridge Parkway trying to get familiar with the territory, I looked up and saw that the sky was filled with hawks. Not flying so much as floating. A tremendous sense of possibility came over me. Virginia, if you squint at it on a map, looks like a bird flying west. The extended wings are at the coast. Roanoke is at its brow. What most interested me was venturing towards the corner of the state, the very edge of the bird's beak.

II.

Our next trip was along the Blue Ridge Parkway, up a mountain to the town of Floyd, and then on to Abingdon, further West. Floyd is a tiny town on top of a mountain known for its blue grass music. In Floyd, I had the name of a local potter, Sylvie Gratinelli, and went to see her. She had lived and worked in Floyd for twenty five years, she told us in her studio. She had cool blue eyes, wore a loose sweater, and spoke with a North Eastern accent. A collection of Amy Hempel's short stories sat on her table.

"So many young people left Floyd after World War II that when the hippies started arriving in the sixties and seventies, they were thrilled. The whole tax base changed."

She said the town has retained its authentic flavor, even as organizations such as Roundthemountain.com and The crookenroad.com, seek to promote the area's musical and crafts heritage.

About the Friday night jam sessions at the country store she said, "The first time I saw the jamboree I was moved to tears. That was twenty five years ago, and it's still authentic."

I took notes, admired the ceramics, and cast my gaze at her large blue eyes. There had been a difficult divorce, it turns out; the husband was a potter, too. I had sensed this, clued not by an unresolved knot of pain so much as the frazzled part of life's string indicating where the knot had pulled tightest. I received the news with sorrow for Sylvie and a sense of satisfaction at my intuition. Her place had the ionized air of a life re-formed. In her eyes I saw the clarity of the day after a storm. Sometimes I think I am just a tourist of domestic pain.

Floyd, though a place I had never been, was a known quantity, somehow, an artists colony, a place of Subaru's, Volvo's, fair trade coffee, crafts from Guatemala. I wanted to be scared.

We headed down the road towards Hillsville. We had arrived in Floyd with its one stoplight feeling as though this was the edge of the world, or the top of it, but I left it as though it were the local cosmopolitan center, which it is, and further west was a kind of wilderness. Part of that feeling is what comes with every random perusal into unknown territory, when you follow the open road. Route 58 would soon turn into the Daniel Boone Memorial Highway.

The road was narrow, mostly empty. I thought of Flannery O'Connor, the terrible things that can happen on the side of country roads. The pavement no longer swerved left and right, as it did going up the mountain, but undulated up and down. A low mist came in with the encroaching dusk. Rolling meadows stretched out

on either side of the road. Cows stood in the meadow like ghosts.

Miles went by like this, hypnotic and lovely. We were high up and the sky had lowered to meet us. We passed occasional signs that read: "Crooked Road," a reference to the many historic blue grass and country music sights that dot the area, most famously the Carter Family Fold, which produced June Carter, wife of Johnny Cash. We rode the autumnal hills mostly in silence, pausing in front of old white farmhouses that seemed like an old sepia tone photograph before our eyes.

Darkness fell. The road became windy and twisty. We were hungry. We had a bed-and-breakfast booked in Abingdon. A light rain began to fall. I was speeding. I looked at my wife, her belly, and gathered myself, slowed down. We pulled into the town just in time for dinner.

III.

We met the man we came to call The Judge the next morning. He was sitting in a suit and tie amidst the tchotchke-filled dining room beside his wife, Jane, who wore a black dress with a diamond brooch. He was very still. Across from them were two place settings: one for me, one for Elizabeth. It looked like our hostess would not be joining us.

We were filled with trepidation about our hostess who, the previous night, had given us a history of the old house in tortuous detail. She followed us up to our room and stood there in the doorway going on about it. I finally began undressing in the hope it would end the monologue. I was unbuttoning my pants before she said good night.

At breakfast, we ducked into the dining room to find another couple, impeccably dressed and patiently waiting—Glen and Jane Williams. Glen, we quickly learned, had been a Federal Judge in Lee county, which occupied the tiny notch at the Southwest tip of Virginia, on the Kentucky border, for thirty years.

The Judge had a way of speaking that involved no facial gestures or hand movements. One eye wandered while the other stared vaguely off into space. He spoke in nearly a monotone that nevertheless sounded country. Its main quality was a flatness of affect, a kind of extreme

judiciousness, as though he refrained even from favoring one word over another with intonation. I told him we were on a journey of tourism and discovery, transplants from the North, and this got him talking, though it's possible "Good morning," would have sufficed. I hung on every word.

Our hostess, who it turned out was originally from a Northern state, and like many émigrés had assimilated the local color with a vehemence that exceeds many locals, jumped into the conversation often and with an overcharged ebullience I found a bit heartbreaking, and then, after a while, Hitchcockianly manic (as though being the solitary proprietor of a bed-and-breakfast had driven her insane). I thought she would take over the whole breakfast, but Glen, in addition to being an amateur historian, a gentleman, and also *a still active Federal judge*, had a keen sense of narrative and would not waver from the thread. He sat expressionless throughout each of our host's interjections. When she exhausted herself, he would resume: "About the ambush of Daniel Boone's son at Cumberland pass," and go from there.

He was very informative about the Cumberland Pass. It was where Daniel Boon had first looked out over the land that would become Kentucky, the state with which Boon is most affiliated and credited with discovering. But, the Judge told us, a terrible thing happened nearby on one of his expeditions—his adolescent son had lingered behind with some friends and been ambushed and killed by Natives, and Boone's wife had prevailed on him to turn back. The grieving Boone put off any further explorations for two years. We sat for well over an hour listening to him speak, and when we finally got up to leave I remarked, randomly and sincerely, that I wish we could continue the conversation.

"Oh come on and see us sometime," he said. "We live in a house on top of a hill above the town. Ask anyone where we live and they'll just point."

As mellifluous a storyteller as he was, as baroque and fascinating a source of history as he was, I might not have done anything about this invitation were it not for this image of a big house on top of a hill above the town, which seemed both heartwarming and sinister.

A week later we arranged to drive down and give Glen and Jane a visit. There are relatives one can

procrastinate going across town to see for months or even years. And there are strange gnomish people in an unfamiliar landscape for whom you will undertake a four hour trip in order to have coffee. It's one of the unfair things about life. But I was glad to satisfy this "life is elsewhere," impulse that autumn, aware that soon enough I would know exactly where life was. It would announce itself with screams and cries.

IV.

The day was bright blue and the air brisk. We took the interstate, about which I felt a bit guilty, but there was a lot of ground to cover. We could explore back roads on the way home.

Our one concession to tourism was to pull off at a random exit looking for a gas station; we saw a cute red building that served food and we stopped for coffee. At the next table over sat a slender man in a hipster ski cap, smoking a cigarette and eating a tuna sandwich while peering at maps of the surrounding state parks.

"You on a long ride?" I asked.

He was. He was from Queens, and was traveling from New York to San Diego by bike. In Southwest Virginia, in a rural restaurant off the highway, the two tables were occupied by a couple of New York expats and a guy from Forest Hills on a cross country mission. I found this remarkable. He told us of some adventures he had had, how often people had bought him meals, so, of course, at the end I bought his lunch. He blushed and told me he was worried something bad was going to happen.

"Why?"

"So many people have been nice to me," he said.

I told him not to worry.

We got off the highway at Abingdon, and switched to the Daniel Boone Highway. The road twisted and turned, vistas popped up that stretched for miles. The landscape changed, became more ragged and steep. We passed train depots, railway car after railway car heaped with thick black coal, absorbing the light into itself.

We arrived in Jonesville at three in the afternoon. As soon as we rolled into town we looked up. There, as promised, was a house on the hill. The awkwardness of

the situation—us visiting people we had barely met—was registering in full force.

The Judge was wearing a check blazer. Jane was less formal. In no time we were inside, chatting. Or, as was the case the week earlier, listening to the Judge. At first we sat in their den, where I noticed all sorts of poetry volumes, including Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. It turns out the Judge is known for peppering his decisions to poetic quotations. On rendering a decision on a bank fraud case, he told me, he led off with, "Oh, what a tangled web we weave."

There was a football game on in the den, but it turns out that neither of the wandering eyes works anymore and he is legally blind. Throughout the fourth quarter of the NC State-Wake Forest game—he was rooting for Wake Forest—I would occasionally do a play-by-play and tell him what was happening in the game. It was bizarre. I liked it. The Judge was a fount of historic knowledge and amazing personal history which included what he called "A sacrificial candidacy," for congress, running alongside Barry Goldwater on the 1964 Republican ticket.

His anecdotes about that campaign took us back through a looking glass when the dominant party in the south was the Democratic party. He told of bringing a congressman from New York all the way down to his corner of the state to speak on his behalf. "The congressman was known for his impassioned speeches about God," said the Judge, "but at the first rally, he chose instead to speak about taxes, which moved nobody."

"Our next rally was in Hungry Mother State Park," he continued. "We had a picnic. I said, 'Please, no more about taxes,' and we had a good old prayer rally there at the picnic, but there was hardly anyone there."

I enjoyed everything he said but mostly I was simply hypnotized by his flat, oddly unemotive voice, his formal cadence of storytelling colored by unusual country locutions, the stillness of his long jowly face as he spoke.

We moved into the kitchen for knick-knacks and coffee. At the end of the visit, we left in a hurry. It was getting late. The sun was hitting the tree outside of their house, and cows grazed in the green meadow in the distance. I insisted on a group photo. I took a couple of the Judge. At the end, he and Jane stood waving good-bye. He had said that losing his sight and his ability to

read was one of the great personal tragedies of his life. He listened to books on tape, and dictated his opinions to his law clerks, and sometimes Jane would read to him from the paper or from books. In addition to the flowers, I had brought along a copy of my first book, a collection of stories, and signed it to them both. Elizabeth and I drove away through the sun-struck landscape up and down over winding hills, rehashing all the things he had said, such as how he had been studying for a Monday morning exam in law school but on Sunday Pearl Harbor had been bombed and he “threw the books away,” because they were all going to war anyway.

I thought of the stories in my book that had somewhat explicit language, and pictured Jane with her regal bearing reading it aloud to the Judge. It was an awful image. I imagined her voice slowing. Elizabeth and I both cringed in horror thinking of how disappointed they would be, the way her voice would trail off . . . but then they have four daughters. They're grown ups. They are not naïve. They can handle it, we decided.

At one point Jane had offered that we stay the night. We were two groups of people with a common bond of humor and conversation, looking at each other across a chasm of generations and some unnamable thing, both a familiarity and profound unfamiliarity that made it a mutually exhilarating experience. “Come on back!” they had said when we left. It seemed like they meant it.

*

We got to Abingdon in the afternoon. The Martha Washington Inn. We went to the restaurant for dinner. There was a rowdy wedding party in the ballroom upstairs. At one point everyone, it seemed, piled onto the dance floor. The ceiling shook.

We came downstairs late the next morning, a Sunday. It had been exactly a week since we first met the Judge and Jane. The Martha Washington Inn was serving its Sunday brunch, a wild array of eggs benedict and shrimp and oysters with stands serving prime rib and omelets. It was abundance verging on gluttony, but the prim, dignified formality of the room itself, and of the people who filled it, dressed for the Sunday Matinee at the Bartle theater across the street made it feel like a special treat.

The room was suddenly flooded by teens in black clothes with awkward facial hair; a rag tag army of hipsters were now picking through the eggs buffet and walking around with orange juice. A few adult handlers were among them. It turned out they were a film crew, mostly from New York and Los Angeles, who had just gone ten days on location for a movie called *Grizzly Park*.

I asked a young woman in black what kind of movie it was.

“Low budget,” she said. “You know, boobs and blood.”

We walked into downtown Abingdon. At the Cave House Craft Co-Op, I came across *The Plow Reader*, an anthology of articles published in an alternative weekly published in the region in the late seventies. I sat and read for an hour or so.

This is coal mining country. There were accounts of the bitter strikes. There were also articles about the community fighting to protect their land from overdevelopment. And there were poems and personal essays about a love of the land and a terrible sense of its loss.

“Once a year, I get the urge to go back to the cool, hemlock-shaded creek and breathe the fragrant air,” Colleen Davenport Taylor writes about her grandparents’ farm. She describes visiting it one day and seeing that it has been sold. “The soil,” she writes, “is a medium for living things and lives itself and its strength can be killed by those not aware.”

V.

We took route 19, a tiny road that curves up towards the West Virginia border before slipping back towards the interstate. It went past Hungry Mother State Park, where the Judge had his picnic prayer rally in 1964. It was a last plunge into the hidden world before returning to what now seemed like the metropolis of Roanoke.

The land rolled out on either side of us, dropping into stunning views, or nestled in hollows; neat houses popped up here and there; some were trailers, some a bit more grand. The foliage was so dense. We saw a few cars, many cows. It was all quite haunted and hypnotic, and perhaps that is why, as we entered the town of Saltville, I took a random turn at a sign that said, “Old Salt Mill.”

In another life, this would have felt illicit. Finding the secret place of privacy with Elizabeth. But she was pregnant. It mostly felt reckless, inquisitive, a way to delay the return to the familiar.

We drove a couple of miles and came to an ancient looking wooden bridge that we passed beneath. We wound along a narrow hollow until I came upon a colorful assemblage of small structures in someone's front yard. It was dead silent when I turned off the engine. We stretched our legs and tried to comprehend what lay before us. Little railroad tracks ran through what looked like a theme park in miniature, dotted with tiny houses big enough only for a doll. Attached to every structure were various objects—a plastic bald eagle, a small diorama of Natives, pink flamingos. I took another step in the silence, and a horn blew loudly. For a second I thought I had triggered some kind of alarm system. But then the place sprung to life. Twenty different things had whirred into fluttering motion. After a moment it quieted. I stepped back, and then forward again, past some unseen motion sensor, and again it all erupted in motion and noise. This time I kept walking. It kept going for a while and then stopped. I was relieved. All that mechanical motion in the middle of nowhere was unsettling.

Here, I saw, was a tiny town. It was constructed along a single street, and its themes seemed to involve God and the railroad. There was a little school, a little jail, and even a little “hothouse” for unruly prisoners. There was a well, and a courthouse. There was a small house - one made for actual human sized people - set behind the whole thing. No one was home. I walked amidst this ruin as though it was Atlantis; it felt like an archeological dig meets Coney Island. I came to a piece of stone vaguely in the shape of Virginia, with the words “Virginia” pasted on it, and some plastic pink flowers in a vase beside it, and a little plastic horse and buggy glued onto it. On top was a

glass bell jar inside of which sat a clock. It was haunted and gorgeous.

We wandered through the silent little town taking in the manic, myriad details, engulfed in a kind of spirituality, as though I had come to a lost city. Finally I just stood in the silence and stared at this little monument to the state of Virginia with its westward explorers and the plastic pink flowers and the clock which, needless to say, had stopped.

Eventually, we hit the road again. We drove past a sign that read, “Saltville, supplier of salt to the Confederate Army.” We rose out of the hollow and up into the hills. The name, “Hungry Mother State Park,” lingered in my thoughts.

After eight miles of winding road, we encountered a country store. It was Sunday evening, dusk was falling, and the store was closed. I saw that someone had built a huge metal viewing tower next to the store. It didn't merely go straight up; halfway up you could step onto a very rickety platform held by cables that moved and squeaked beneath your feet. It was a platform because it went nowhere, but it was shaped like a bridge, like a gangplank or a high dive board that brought you to the lip of a ridge, beneath which the enchanted forest of Southwest Virginia seemed to unfurl. Not a single light glimmered in the rolling hills below. The landscape held such a serene Shangri-la feeling of undiscovered territory just then. I walked out to the end, while Elizabeth stayed back. It felt like the prow of a ship. Standing up there on the bridge with the sky a muted, deep blue above me and the rolling, orange hued hills spread out below, I felt like a pioneer. I felt a tremor of long ago discoveries course through me and felt the vertiginous feeling of anticipation about what, and who, would soon be born.



ELECTROFISHING FOR MY MOTHER IN THE BRONX RIVER (2016)

Laura Booth

Before these silver eels,
these pumpkinseed sunfish,
yellow and white perch seersuckering themselves,
flashing next to each other in the Bronx current,
before the single alewife
striving for a stretch of river long-since dammed—
there she was, walking out of the dry-out clinic,
saying: “Let’s celebrate with a drink.”

This is a life history of her addiction.

First, the mercurial evenings,
the spill from sun overhead to long shadows, tidal vitriol,
Caribbean warmth coaxing shards from the egg of the illness
which massed, which desecrated,
which would not be desiccated.

Next, the lost appetite,
no hunger except paranoia,
pushing pebbles into a perfect ring—
obliterating it again.

Then the shortening memory:
she asks me the same question repeatedly,
channeled by panic—
the exposure of gills when I flip a striped bass,
paralyzed but for a yellow eye, searching.

A quicksilver strand makes an eel elegant and
pitiful as it rotates, an axle of electricity.
The displacement of blame like the displacement of water;
light still filters calmly through it.

Let her shape shift, so that she might swim,
drinking toxins to clarify them through isinglass;
her newfound hatred for salt be just self-preservation;
and the numbness needling her limbs
be traded in for the frond-gliding of fins—

Let her shouting steel us for silence:
her inability, when shocked, to do more than roll her eyes or show her gills,
red with the indignity of physics, reflexes;
her incontinence only practice
for forsaking control to the ocean,
succumbing to the sea when no deity
had ever before subdued her.

This is divine, this is liquid,
this is the scale of my flesh, the scale of my memory
relinquishing to better suit her new taxonomic rank:
Teleostei, the ray-finned fishes. Pisces.
Cancer, but not death, yet.
No one will find her bones submerged at depth,
but radar might detect her in the Sargasso Sea,
succoring glass eels—first elver, then silver,
making their way downstream.



Veronica Evanega, *Reykjanes Awakes*, 2024



Grace Buckles, *Momma in the Cabin*, 2025 | Conspiritu Winner



Harriet Forman Barrett, *Meditation*, 2020

DINAW MENGESTU IN CONVERSATION

Carina Cole and Emma Goss

Dinaw Mengestu is an Ethiopian American novelist, short story writer, educator, and Vassar College's 2026 Writer in Residence. All four of his novels—*Someone Like Us*; *All Our Names*; *How To Read the Air*; and *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*—are all *New York Times* notable books. His first novel, *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, was awarded the *Los Angeles Times Book Prize*, among

The *Vassar Review*'s Editors-in-Chief, Carina Cole and Emma Goss, sat down with Mengestu in the warmly lit

VR: We are so excited that you agreed to chat with us about your 2024 novel *Someone Like Us* and your writing practice at large. Our theme for this issue is *Temper and Testimony*, both words that seem to sit right in the marrow of your work. Your writing heavily incorporates flashbacks, such as in “An Honest Exit” and *Someone Like Us*. How do you approach writing flashbacks? Are there specific ways you engage with writing memory that differ from writing present narratives in a story?

DM: Yeah, I guess it's sort of like the relationship between memory and imagination, and I think that it's oftentimes really deeply connected. I mean, memory is flawed. It's vulnerable; you know, every time we recount something, we kind of alter it a little bit. But in fiction, and when you have a character who's about to go into a memory or a flashback, there is kind of this capacity like time travel, and so much is actually possible in that moment. And I think for a long time, I thought of it like you have only a certain amount of space which you can go back into the past, and then you need to pull yourself back out, and kind of do an oscillation. Now I actually think you can go into the past and tell a story, and that

other awards. His second novel, *How to Read the Air*, won the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence. Mengestu is a 2012 MacArthur Fellow and recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship. He is currently the director of the Written Arts Program at Bard College, the director of the Center for Ethics and Writing, and the president of PEN America.

Rose Parlor in Main Building here at Vassar College to discuss his work.

story can connect to another story in the past, and that you might be able to build memory upon memory. And then each memory, whether it's true or not, the collective body that you are able to assemble, can actually reveal a kind of a truth that's probably more true than any sort of fact. It becomes a way to kind of understand that part of how we understand ourselves and the people closest to us is through the stories we tell. And whether those stories are true or not probably matters less than the stories in their own right . . . There's a sort of a veneer of factual permanence that we can assign to memory that's not real, and that can also make things seem as if they've happened and they're over, when, in fact, things that are important are rarely ever really over, right? We kind of live inside of them for a very long time, and sometimes they connect to other things and are wanting to create a narrative that can maybe sort of connect and reflect that.

VR: That sort of reminds me of a quote from the French writer Anaïs Nin: “We write to taste life twice, once in the moment and once in retrospect,” and I think that what you're getting at, or at least how I interpreted it, is that truth can live both in the memory and on the page,

and that truth can exist both in the recollection and the internal truth. But of course, the writing won't match the source material, but maybe that's not always that important.

DM: Yeah, I think in part because we need to relive the past multiple times, and we go back to it and we alter it and we change it, because we need that truth at that moment. The truth itself isn't a fixed state. It's a very malleable one, and it needs to be, because our needs change, our experiences change, and the way we understand our past changes. It goes back to this question of if things happen in a very particular way when they don't. They actually are really slippery, and the past is incredibly resistant towards being fixed and towards being understood, and trying to kind of think about fiction as a way not to try to solidify the past, but to try to mirror its dialectical relationship with our present.

VR: This is a similar sentiment, but we were also wondering how you approach writing testimonies of your characters, such as the narrator's father in "An Honest Exit," especially if they're not entirely true, and what role truth plays in fiction?

DM: I think, more and more, when you testify you're offering something up, and that something is expected to be true, and there's a desire for that knowledge to have that certainty, like, did that really happen? And I know sometimes readers have said: Well, did that really happen? What's real? And I saw, well, it's all fiction, so none of it is real. But obviously there's a more important question about that, which is our need sometimes to be able to fix meaning onto things, and our need to have a clarity that

tells us what happened and what that experience means. And I think most things in life are probably a little bit too difficult, a little too complicated to be clearly resolved. And I don't think of fiction as the space for resolution so much as the space for continuous interrogation. So when a character might offer a testimony and they're revealing themselves, I think a lot about that character's relationship to the people who are hearing that testimony, and what that relationship might do and say about how they're able to communicate. So if I'm testifying, and I know there's an audience who is very similar to me, that will make my testimony feel different. It will bend towards that knowledge. If there is a community that knows nothing about me, then the testimony will bend, perhaps, towards what that expectation might look like. The only way around that is to offer multiple narrations, and to give the reader and the listener a space to determine the veracity on their own . . . I can tell you these things, but you will have to decide if you care, and you have to decide what meaning you choose to make out of them, and what meaning you choose not to make. But I also don't want to make my characters feel like they have to expose themselves in order to be real, right? That in order for you to understand them or care about them, they need to tell you something really private or really personal as a means of understanding them, or really traumatic or really difficult. I think they might do that, but they might do so in a way that requires a little bit more time and patience.

VR: I have another question, which kind of goes back to your lecture. You discussed the role that empathy plays in fiction, and we were wondering if you could elaborate on how you think empathy functions in fiction, and how

constructing characters actually creates a distance from readers that can be both productive and important?

DM: I worry about the idea that fiction is supposed to create empathy, because oftentimes we talk about it as like, well, we should read about other people's lives so that we can be empathetic towards them. And the empathy is dependent upon an othering of that. So, those foreign experiences, I can care about them if I read the fiction, and the fiction then gives me insight into those people, and those people I now know. And the idea of empathy and knowledge, or empathy as a form of knowing, is equally problematic, because knowing something or someone is really hard . . . I don't need to know you for me to care about you, nor do I need to know you in order for me to empathize with you, because I see you right there. You're real. You're human. That isn't dependent upon how much of your life you tell me. Making that a priority for fiction means we start unintentionally creating characters who are trying to be understood, not by themselves, not by the people around them, but by us, the outside reader, and that runs the risk of turning those characters into performances. I like the idea of having characters who are as strange and weird and complex as the people closest to me. Those people are not people that I would ever say I understand, because I know just how complex they are, and to create characters who can give us a sense of who they are and the distance that might separate us. And that distance is how I understand that they are human, because I respect that distance as a fundamental value of your existence. You're not me, but I get to understand you better because of that.

VR: Again, going back to your lecture, you referenced Susan Sontag on [Francisco] Goya's *Disasters of War*, which I thought was really interesting. You talked about how Goya created a collection of paintings with the note that not just one of the paintings could ever fully capture the disaster of war. And you related this to your depictions of certain communities in your fiction, and how one fragment of life within fiction can't represent a full community or a full story. I was curious if you thought that it's possible to create a full narrative arc about a community in just one piece of fiction, or, do you think that's something that comes after an entire career?

DM: I think you can certainly create a really interesting and complex narrative that does a lot. I think I worry that you have to be conscious that what you are unintentionally doing is perhaps creating the narrative of that community, because there's only one or two other ones, and that people will sort of use that as a framing device, or say, well, now I've read about that because I read that book. That was something I would try not to say I needed to care about when I was first writing. But now I think it actually is. And I think it's a question of being thoughtful about representation from a larger sort of perspective, and understanding what you might be doing is kind of unintentionally colonizing a space of meaning. And what does it mean to create a story in which you do represent these people, and you represent their lives and give them as much complexity as possible, but you also are trying hard to make sure that what you are doing is not trying to create a totalizing experience, that you're not trying to say: This is who they are. Instead, you're trying to say, like the Goya paintings, this is a version. This is one possible

narrative, and that's the narrative I can make now, and hopefully that narrative brings people to life, but it also doesn't feel like it's trying to say everything. The only way I could think of doing that is how characters might not let themselves be fully known, how characters can reside a little bit beyond our understanding, and that space is what reminds us that we need more.

VR: I think that's a perfect note to end on.

ARTS

FERN T. APFEL

May 1878 Diary, 2024
Acrylic and pen on wood panel
20 × 24 in. (50.8 × 60.96 cm)

Letters Home to Mother, 2020
Acrylic and pen on wood panel
24 × 24 in. (60.96 × 60.96 cm)

GRACE BUCKLES

Momma in the Cabin, 2026
Digital photograph
4 × 6.5 in. (10.16 × 16.51 cm)

VERONICA EVANEGA

Reykjanes Awakens, 2024
Oxidized steel, copper, and painted rivets
24 × 24 × 1 in. (50.8 × 60.96 cm)

KIMIA FERDOWSI KLINE

Leave a Light On, 2025
Acrylic ink and oil pastel on Egyptian papyrus
95 × 71 in. (241.3 × 180.34 cm)

WILL FICE

Frontman, 2024-2025
Oil on linen
31½ × 23⅝ in. (80 × 60 cm)

Blue Almond Room, 2024
Oil on linen
40 × 27 in. (101.6 × 68.58 cm)

HARRIET FORMAN BARRETT

Meditation, 2020
Bronze on wood base, limited edition of 6
14.5 × 12 × 3 in. (36.83 × 30.48 × 7.62 cm)

JOÃO GABRIEL

Untitled, 2024
Oil on canvas
88½ × 28⅓ in. (225 × 170 cm)

MIRA GOODMAN

Cowboy Christmas, 2025
Oil, acrylic, wood, wire, sculpey polymer clay, sculptamold compound (clay, plaster, papier-mache), paper, nails, and necklace chain on canvas
52 × 72 × 3 in. (132.08 × 182.88 × 7.62 cm)

Empty Beds for Holy Boys, 2025
Mixed media and oil on canvas
35 × 72 × 5 in. (88.9 × 182.88 × 12.7 cm)

ANDREW HILDENBRAND

Perforated Proscenium, 2025
Oil on panel
14 × 11 in. (35.56 × 27.94 cm)

Round Lights, 2025
Oil on panel
16 × 12 in. (40.64 × 30.48 cm)

AMBER LELLI

Green Head, 2022
Glass and bronze
14.5 × 8.5 × 8.75 in. (36.83 × 21.59 × 22.23 cm)

Premise Seven All Grown Up, 2022
Stone, plaster, and bronze coating
13.75 × 10 × 7 in. (34.89 × 25.4 × 17.78 cm)

LAUREL NAKADATE

April 30, 2010

April 27, 2010

April 20, 2010

from *365 Days: A Catalogue of Tears*, 2011

Chromogenic prints

40 × 50 × 1/2 in. (101.6 × 127 × 1.27 cm) (each)

Gift from the Podesta Collection, Washington, DC,

in honor of the class of 2020, the Frances Lehman Loeb

Art Center, Vassar College, 2020.9.1.30, 27, 20.

Courtesy of Tonkonow Artworks + Projects, New York

MAGDALENA PRADO

Construir una trama, 2025

Oil painting and cutouts on paper

70 ½ × 49 ¾ in. (179 × 126 cm)

DIGITAL MEDIA

Línea recta, 2018

Image projected onto 150 rods, and hand-

modeled in papier-mâché on wire

126 × 126 in. (320 × 320 cm)

MANDY ROGERS HORTON

Face to Face, 2025

Acrylic on cradled panel

60 × 120 in. (152.5 × 304.8 cm)

GINA RUGGERI

Whisperers, 2025

Acrylic on cloth

33 × 59 in. (83.82 × 149.86 cm)

Sacrifice, 2025

Acrylic on cloth

42.5 × 98 in. (107.95 × 248.92 cm)

CAROLYN SCHLAM

Otherworldly, 2024

Oil on canvas

40 × 30 in. (101.6 × 76.2 cm)

EMMA SCHWARTZ

Kiss Her Feet, 2025

Oil, canvas, embroidery thread, polyfil, modeling clay, nail,
polish, vegan fur, Swarovski crystals, and rhinestones

10 × 15 × 2 in. (25.4 × 38.1 × 5.08 cm)

Allure, 2024

Oil, embroidery, polyfil, and canvas

21 × 20 × 9 in. (53.34 × 50.8 × 22.86 cm)

CONTRIBUTORS

FERN T. APFEL

Fern T. Apfel is a painter whose work explores memory, language, and the passage of time through meticulously rendered compositions that reference letters, stamps, and printed ephemera. Her work has been exhibited widely in solo and group exhibitions throughout the United States, including presentations at Morgan Lehman Gallery, Troutbeck Gallery, the Woodstock Art Association & Museum, and the Arts Center of the Capital Region. Apfel's paintings are held in numerous public collections, including The Hyde Collection, the Tang Teaching Museum and Art Gallery, the Albany Institute of History & Art, SUNY Albany Museum, and the Art Students League of New York. Apfel lives and works in the Hudson Valley.

HARRIET FORMAN BARRETT

Harriet Forman Barrett is a multidisciplinary artist with a background in fine art and decades immersed in the New York art scene. Her bronze figures, infused with movement and emotion, reflect the universal journey of self-discovery and connection. Her pieces invite viewers into a meditative space, where human forms transcend weight and limitation, embodying the pursuit of balance, unity, and higher consciousness.

THOMAS BELLER

Thomas Beller is the author of six books including *Seduction Theory*, *The Sleep-Over Artist*, and *J.D. Salinger: The Escape Artist*, which won the New York City Book Award for Biography/Memoir. His most recent book is *Degas at the Gas Station: Essays*. He was a founder and editor of *Open City* and of Open City Books. He is currently publisher of MrBellersNeighborhood.com; a longtime

contributor to *The New Yorker*; a professor and director of creative writing at Tulane University; and a recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship and a Robert B. Silvers Works-in-Progress Award.

LAURA BOOTH

Laura Booth is a biologist working in the San Francisco Bay Area. She hosts an open mic at Black Bird Bookstore in the Outer Sunset neighborhood in San Francisco. Her work has appeared in the *West Marin Review* and *Emocean* magazine.

GRACE BUCKLES

Grace Buckles is a sophomore at Vassar, majoring in Biochemistry. Her art focuses on intimate spaces, family, and vulnerability. Grace is passionate about exploring different mediums to convey moments of closeness, including photography, acrylic, fiber arts, and pencil drawings.

MEGAN CARTWRIGHT

Megan Cartwright is an award-winning Australian poet. Her writing has appeared in print and online journals and magazines around the world.

ABIGAIL CHABITNOY

Abigail Chabitnoy is the author of *In the Current Where Drowning Is Beautiful* and *How to Dress a Fish* (Wesleyan 2022, 2019). She teaches at the Institute of American Indian Arts low-residency MFA and is an assistant professor at UMass Amherst. Abigail is a member of the Tangirnaq Native Village in Kodiak.

CAROL DURAK

Originally from Michigan, Carol Durak lived for many years in Maine where, as well as writing, she owned a book restoration business and also worked in book conservation at the Bowdoin College Library. In 2019 she left the East Coast and lives in northern New Mexico. She is the author of two chapbooks, *Hymn Postponement*, published in *Three Chapbooks / Three Poets* (Flowstone Press, 2024) and *Breaks and Interruptions*, Bottlecap Press, 2025. Her poems have appeared in the *Antioch Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Laurel Review*, *New Letters*, *Permafrost*, and other journals.

VERONICA EVANEGA

Veronica Evanega works as a Neo-Constructivist Sculptor & Multidisciplinary Artist, having spent the bulk of her years investigating the interconnectivity of how materials and shapes intertwine their relationship to our industrial evolution and connect to our present-day lifestyles & behaviors. Much of the work displays earth-based ecological, structural and cultural ideas. Veronica holds a BS in Visual Arts/Urban Planning with two AAS degrees in Architecture and Construction Technologies and is pursuing Public Art, along with her fine art practice here in the Hudson Valley.

WILL FICE

Will Fice is a British artist based in Leeds, UK. His work explores themes surrounding self and manhood, working from found images to piece together semi-autobiographical and social narratives. He graduated from Leeds Arts University in 2020 and has since had solo exhibitions with Patrick Davies Contemporary Art and Monti8, Italy. He has also exhibited in London and the US.

JOÃO GABRIEL

João Gabriel (1992, Leiria, Portugal) is a painter whose work explores erotic male figures suspended between figuration and abstraction. His ethereal nudes depict intimate gestures, such as kisses, embraces and subtle moments of closeness. The artist's paintings engage with desire, loss, and nostalgia, contributing to the visibility of queer and homoerotic narratives in contemporary painting.

MIRA GOODMAN

Mira Goodman is an artist born in New York and working in Guatemala. She received an Honors visual arts degree from Brown University. She was a resident at Wassaic Project and Monson Arts and has been featured in various exhibitions.

GABRIELA HALAS

Gabriela immigrated to Canada during the early 1980s, grew up in northern Alberta, lived in Alaska for seven years, and currently resides in BC. She has published fiction in *Room Magazine*, *Ruminate*, *The Hopper*, *sub-Terrain*, *Broken Pencil*; poetry in the *Antigonish Review*, *Cider Press Review*, *Inlandia*, *About Place Journal*, *Prairie Fire*, *december* magazine, among others; and nonfiction in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, the *Whitefish Review*, *Grain*, *Pilgrimage*, and *High Country News*. She won first prize for her poetry chapbook *Bloodwater Tint* from Backbone Press (2025). She lives and writes on Ktunaxa Nation land. She holds an MFA from UBC.

ANDREW HILDENBRAND

Andrew Hildenbrand is a Brooklyn, NY based painter. Relying on a polychromatic palette and repetitive, improvisational compositions, Hildenbrand communicates to the viewer through his abstractions.

SHEEMA HOLMES

Sheema Holmes tells speculative stories, always questioning whether the present truly exists and to what extent it can be trusted. She often draws inspiration from Black Americana and her ties to the Chesapeake Bay region. Sheema is currently pursuing an MFA in creative writing from American University.

MANDY ROGERS HORTON

Mandy Rogers Horton is an artist living and working in Nashville, Tennessee where she is an Assistant Professor of Painting at Belmont University. Her work was recently included in the exhibit *In Her Place: Nashville Artists in the Twenty-first Century* at the Frist Art Museum.

JILL KITCHEN

Jill Kitchen is a poet living in Washington, DC, though her heart can still be found in Colorado, New York, and London. Her work has been nominated for Best New Poets and Best Small Fictions and appears or is forthcoming in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Asterales*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Four Way Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *North American Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Split Lip Magazine*, and elsewhere. She is at work on her first collection.

KIMIA FERDOWSI KLINE

Kimia Ferdowsi Kline earned an MFA at the San Francisco Art Institute and holds a BFA in painting from Washington University in St. Louis, where she was awarded a full-tuition Danforth Scholarship. She has mounted solo exhibitions at Turn Gallery (New York), Marrow Gallery (San

Francisco), the Elaine L. Jacobs Gallery at Wayne State University (Detroit) and 68 Projects (Berlin). Select group shows include *Ceysson & Bénétière*, the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, CANADA Gallery, Vanderbilt University, and The Drawing Center. Guest lectures and teaching include Yale University, Vanderbilt University, Tyler School of Art and Architecture, SUNY Purchase, the Fashion Institute of Technology, Brooklyn College, Wayne State University, and Chautauqua Institute.

ELIZABETH KUELBS

Elizabeth Kuelbs writes at the edge of a Los Angeles canyon. Her work appears in *Scientific American*; *The Nature of Our Times: Poems on America's Lands, Waters, Wildlife, and Other Natural Wonders*; *Lily Poetry Review*; and elsewhere. A Pushcart Prize nominee, her chapbooks include *Little Victory* and *How to Clean Your Eyes*.

NATHANIEL LACHENMEYER

Nathaniel Lachenmeyer's first book, *The Outsider*, which takes as its subject his late father's struggles with schizophrenia and homelessness, was published by Broadway Books. He has forthcoming/recently published poems with *The American Poetry Review*, *Poetry International Online*, *North Dakota Quarterly* and *Red Rock Review*. He lives outside Atlanta with his family.

AMBER LELLI

Amber Lelli is an interdisciplinary artist whose work explores identity, material language, and the space between structure and vulnerability. Working across sculpture, marquetry, and printmaking, she approaches her studio like a laboratory, selecting materials that best communicate the emotional and conceptual questions driving each piece.

MAGDALENA PRADO

Magdalena Prado is a Chilean visual artist whose work over the past ten years has been fundamentally rooted in paper. Through this medium, she has developed a persistent material exploration that has led her to discover other ways of painting, drawing, and sculpting. Her practice engages the tactile, the volumetric, the pictorial, the graphic, and the installational, approaching paper as a body whose materiality remains visible. In her recent work, the image becomes central, generating a tension and a certain ambiguity between image, materiality, and support. Through acts such as layering, shifting, interweaving, and overlapping, she has encountered new ways of observing the surface—what is revealed, the void, and the lightness of paper—shaping her approach to installation and opening new expressive possibilities.

GENEVIÈVE MATHIS

Geneviève Mathis is a graduate of New York University's MFA program in Fiction and was a Center for Fiction Fellow. Her work is forthcoming in *The Missouri Review* and *Tethered Literary*. She lives and works in the Hudson Valley, where she has completed her first novel and is presently writing short stories.

SIMONE MUENCH

Simone Muench is a recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Fellowship and the author of seven full-length books, including *Lampblack & Ash* (Sarabande; Kathryn A. Morton Prize, 2010), *Wolf Centos* (Sarabande, 2014), and *The Under Hum* (Black Lawrence Press, 2024), cowritten with Jackie White. Poems are published or forthcoming in *Kenyon Review*, *Bennington Review*, *Willow Springs*, and elsewhere.

LAUREL NAKADATE

Laurel Nakadate is a photographer, filmmaker, video and performance artist. For twenty-five years she has investigated her relationship to strangers through stories built on camera. Nakadate's work is in many collections including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Yale University Art Gallery, the Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, Princeton University Art Museum, Smith College Museum of Art, LACMA, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Guggenheim Museum.

ALEXANDER PHAM

Alexander Pham teaches fiction and poetry at Johns Hopkins University as a McGarry Lecturer and received his MFA in Fiction from Johns Hopkins University in 2025. He splits his time between his hometown of Baltimore, Maryland, and Brooklyn, New York.

GINA RUGGERI

Gina Ruggeri is a faculty member in Studio Art at Vassar College. She lives and works in Brooklyn, NY.

CAROLYN SCHLAM

Carolyn Schlam is an award-winning figurative artist working in oil, ink, glass and mixed media, and the author of four published books on art which include *The Creative Path*, *The Zen of Art* and *The Joy of Art* series of books (*The Joy of Art* and *More Joy of Art*). Carolyn's studio is in the Cunneen Hackett Art Center in downtown Poughkeepsie.

EMMA SCHWARTZ

Emma Schwartz (b. 1999, Lincoln, Nebraska) holds a BFA in Drawing and Illustration from Herron School of Art + Design and an MFA Studio Art from Syracuse University. Emma Schwartz's figurative work melds painting and soft sculpture together creating devotional objects where explorations of sex, devotion, and relationships occur outside of the repressive doctrines of Midwestern Evangelicalism. She incorporates saturated colors, fabric, and rhinestones to dramatize and reimagine biblical stories and Christian iconography, creating parallels with her personal narratives.

ANNA SONES

Anna Sones received a BA in Written Arts from Bard College. She was born and raised in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and is working on her first novel. Anna's writing is preoccupied with living and loving in a world that is at once full of wonders and catastrophically threatened.

PIÉRRE RAMON THOMAS

Pi rre Ramon Thomas is an emerging Black queer writer whose themes orbit around family, gender, sexuality, queer love, erotica, nature—just to name a few. He is rounding out his first year at American University pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing. Thomas is a native of the Washington metropolitan area and could be seen around the northern Virginia area trying new food, drinking white mochas, or exploring national or state parks.

CAITLYN WALTERMIRE

Caitlyn Waltermire is a writer from Kentucky and 2nd year Playwriting MFA student at UT Austin. Her Greek myth-inspired drama, *Persephone Palmer Steps Out*, premiered off-off Broadway at Theater for the New City in June 2025. She currently lives in Texas with her rescue Bichon, Billie.

JACKIE K. WHITE

Jackie K. White is the author of three chapbooks—*Bestiary Charming*, *Petal Tearing & Variations*, and *Come Clearing*. The chapbook of collaborative poems, with Simone Muench, *Hex & Howl* (2021) and their full-length collection *The Under Hum* (2024) were published by Black Lawrence Press. Poems are published in *The American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *New Letters*, *Poet Lore*, among others.

KAREN TEI YAMASHITA

Karen Tei Yamashita is the author of ten books, including *I Hotel*, finalist for the National Book Award. A recipient of the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters, she is Professor Emerita of Literature and Creative Writing at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

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