











# **DEFUNKT MAGAZINE**

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WELCOME TO AMERICA
JUSTIN O'KEITH

### THE YOUNG SUN

#### KENDRYK YOUNGBLOOD

Even after all this time the sun never says to the earth, 'You owe me.' Look what happens with a love like that. It lights the whole sky.

— Hāfiz

is too self-conscious about her sunspots to delight in her glow, a light so bright, it shrouds her crown from unshrouded eves. Lies reside inside her mind, lies she tries to fight, white lies told by fireflies to undermine her shine, little white lies believed by creatures of the night who despise the sight of her. They say that, at her core, she is more of an attention whore than a star to adore. They say she makes rays to fake displays of charity. Still, no matter the toll, she empties her sol for the whole earth unconditionally, never for getting rewards in return, never forgetting to offer some of her luminescence to the moon. Fireflies and creatures of the night would meet their demise otherwise. A mom even to mother nature, the young sun does not rely on any heavenly body's body heat but her own for enduring the cosmic cold, though she yearns to.

How unfair that Man, her not so secret admirer, is both aware of her care and in awe of her flare, yet did not share that the spots dotting her bare skin are far more akin to constellations than lesions.

# IF YOU GO BACK, DON'T EVER TELL THEM

#### **ELIZABETH JAIKARAN**

She opened the top dresser drawer for the sixth time that morning. Face towels, underwear, sleeping shirts; even the socks with grips on the bottom that she stole from Jamaica Hospital at the end of her shifts were there. Everything but the Necklace.

The Necklace had performed odysseys with her, crossing oceans and mountains, in her bosom for the most important days of her life, just to turn up missing on what she thought would be yet another insignificant day.

Every morning, Radhe would open the purple muslin pouch where the Necklace lived. She would admire each stone laid in gold, for which her father had sold the family car and mortgaged their home in Bihar to buy. When he came home from the jeweler that day over two years ago, he gathered his family into the kitchen to announce that he would deliver Radhe to the bridegroom's family like a maharani; like a queen. He placed an intricately carved wooden box on the square breakfast table in the corner of the kitchen and unclasped the aged bronze lock to reveal the luminous gold necklace resting on a field of red velvet.

When she moved into her in-laws' home on her wedding night, her mother-in-law took the wooden box as Radhe slept, still wearing her wedding saree and the Necklace. Her mother-in-law used the box to store her dozens of earrings and nose rings, thinking that Radhe would not need it anymore.

When Radhe awoke, she searched all over the strange new bedroom, quietly so as not to disturb her strange new husband. But when she failed to find it, she was forced to repurpose the purple muslin pouch that once carried her large bridal earrings. She undid the knot in the pouch's drawstring and carefully nestled the Necklace inside, all the while worried that the strands would tangle as it sat there in a ball. It was in this pouch that she stored the Necklace from that day forward, even after she discovered the wooden box in her mother-in-law's room one afternoon as she swept the house. This was the pouch that the Necklace rested in when Radhe traveled to New York City from Bihar just a few months after her wedding.

"Nikhil! Have you seen my purple pouch?" she shouted as she continued to rummage through already rummaged drawers.

No answer. He had already left for work. Radhe was already late for her shift at the hospital. The evening operator would have to wait until she got there -- she had long decided this much. Her Necklace was gone and not even fifty overtime shifts could replace it. She couldn't call the cops. If they came and saw that she lived in an illegal basement apartment, she wouldn't have a place to live in anymore.

Just a few weeks after they first moved in, Radhe and Nikhil had to vacate the apartment while their landlord removed the mini-stove and bathtub

for the city inspection, promising to pop them both back in once the inspection was passed. Rima, the landlord, suspected that it was her insufferable sister-in-law who had made the call to the city to report the basement to get back at her for an argument they had.

"The bitch has never liked to see us happy," she told Radhe one day over evening tea. "If there is ever a way to bring us some calamity that woman will figure it out!"

Rima and her husband Amal left Bangladesh sixteen years ago and have been living in Queens ever since. They had their first child nine years ago, within months of moving into the house they own now. Rima tried to get pregnant for so many years after she had her daughter Farheen, but to no success. 'Allah knows best', Rima and Amal would both say with just enough sadness in their eyes to reveal tenderness no one would otherwise know existed. And what a weight this was on little Farheen! They would tell Farheen it was God's plan that she fulfill their many dreams for the many children they wanted but could not have. Dreams of academic scholarships and dance recitals and instruments played with professional calculation - that was all Farheen's responsibility to actualize, all on her own. By now, at the time the Necklace was discovered as missing, Rima was already walking Farheen to school and Amal had long gone to open his convenience store hours ago. Radhe was shaken. And alone. Had someone stolen her Necklace while she was at work yesterday? Had she moved it somewhere and just didn't remember? Was she losing her memory like her grandmother who went missing for a week because she couldn't find her way home?

Radhe dashed to the kitchen where her all too quiet cell phone was charging next to the narrow two-burner stove. She called Nikhil's cell six times only to be forwarded to his voicemail just as many times. It was comical, really, how her father mortgaged their family home so that she could get married and live in this place that is barely a third of the size. When they first got their visas, Nikhil told her family that he had made arrangements for a house in New York City. When they finally arrived at their new home that winter evening two years ago, Radhe was horrified when Nikhil said, "Follow me," and, rather than up the front stairs and through the heavy oak door, he proceeded down narrow steps into the ground.

They had only been married for five months when their U.S. visas were approved. Their lives became a screaming rush as they prepared for the move, but it was Naresh, Nikhil's childhood friend, who helped ease their shift. Nikhil had secured a job for himself with Naresh, who was working in a restaurant kitchen. Naresh was in many ways a much kinder person than Nikhil could ever be. His delicate facial features -- his small upturned nose, rosy lips, and cheeks that could never know stubble though he tried -- all contributed to the sweet aura that always seemed to surround him.

Radhe struggled to understand how Naresh and Nikhil could derive from the same place; how they could possibly have lived shared experiences as childhood friends. It was Naresh who picked them up from the airport. It

was Naresh who helped them find their apartment. It was Naresh who had his wife, a sweet Bihari girl named Diya, cook and send meals for them for the entire first month of their relocation. When they had to vacate that apartment, it was with Naresh that Nikhil and Radhe stayed. And it was Naresh she found with Nikhil on the fateful day that it all started to make sense. After that stay, Diya's meals no longer came to them when they returned home. Those three weeks living together which should have made them all closer farmed a field between them instead.

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It took Radhe eight months to find a job. For the first time in her life, she sent a muttered blessing to the mean, dictatorial teachers of her childhood who forced English on her unwilling tongue, as it helped her to secure the only job she could find. It was Rima who spoke with her cousin, who spoke with his co-worker, who spoke with his aunt, who knew the hiring manager for administrative staff at the hospital, and got Radhe a job as a telephone operator at the hospital switchboard. Speak English and be available for the listed hours. That was all she had to do. The rest they would teach her, they said.

The eight months before this job turned up, Radhe remained confined to her basement-dwelling all day, brewing in her discontent. Too afraid to face the foreign snow and arctic winds, those first months she just stared at walls and ceilings, watching the brown water stains and looking for any growth. She'd sit with her back against the wall on the bare ground, hugging her knees, taking in the unfurnished space, an antithesis to the clutter of the family home she was used to. She eventually began a daily ritual of retrieving the purple pouch and examining her Necklace — the only bit of her bridal jewelry that she brought with her, leaving the rest in Bihar for her sister's wedding day.

The purple pouch was her security. The kind of security that she needed to know was there each morning in order for her spirit to rise with the cold New York sun. When her best friend Shruti got married a few years back, her parents could only afford a simple wedding set – plain gold without precious stones, complemented by tiny earrings of the same style. Shruti's in-laws did not mind that she was not dripping in valuables. They had made some snide comments once or twice whenever they felt she was disrespectful, reminding her of how gracious they were in accepting her despite her flimsy jewelry and laughable dowry, but it was enough for her. The flimsy jewelry was enough for her to buy a train ticket from Odisha back to Bihar after her husband beat her until the gold retainer between her front teeth flew out of her mouth. She pawned the retainer too.

Just a few weeks after Shruti returned home, the Yadav family's girl came home with a glistening black eye. Her opulent wedding jewelry was enough for her voyage from Bangalore back to Bihar. It covered her tuition for the first year of business school, which had always been her dream. A dream that led her husband to bring his fist to her face when she brought home the enrollment forms.

It is often shameful for the mothers and fathers who welcome home daughters after failed marriages. Yet, when she arrives on their doorsteps, crying and bruised, there is also some pride to show that they had sent her well-equipped to find her way back. They did not send her as a beggar. They sent her with jewels. It is an arsenal that is so crucial in these parts where girls don't leave home with wads of money hidden in their bras, much less with their own checking accounts.

When brides leave their homes, it is understood that they are leaving their families behind, only to return when absolutely necessary, or for some auspicious holidays. Thus, a bride's wedding jewelry is the only protection that she takes with her into her new home. The golden anklets and multistrand necklaces that beautify them before the marriage ceremony are what discharge them when their new lives turn ugly; when the vicious mothers-in-law and violent husbands become all too much. One gold nose ring can buy two small pieces of hand luggage. Three if you're shopping in Delhi. The bangles will cover food and new clothes for the voyage, maybe even a hotel along the way. The Necklace can potentially cover the plane or the train ride home with enough left over to survive for weeks before finding a job. When a bride walks into a ceremonial hall, the guests examine her closely, waiting to see with what arsenal of asylum her family is sending her away. 'What a beautiful bride' really means 'look at her armor'.

Leaving the rest of her jewelry back in Bihar for her sister, Radhe came all the way to New York armed only with her Necklace. Bright yellow gold, dual stranded with an 'S' eye-and-hook clasp in the back. Laden with precious stones. Bits of rubies. Emeralds. Kundhan. All of them nestled into the golden ground like feeding calves upon their mother's safe teat. Radhe's father purchased the Necklace from the wealthiest jeweler in Bihar. He said his pieces came from all over India: Karnataka, Jaipur, and even Mumbai. His shop was located at the opposite end of their district in a shopping strip that was bookended by rival textile stores.

The day Radhe's father purchased the Necklace, he drove to the store and walked back home. "The car was part of the payment," he explained to his distressed wife as she stood over the stove with boiling curry and half-cooked parathas. They had saved for seven years to buy that vehicle.

"What about the money from the mortgage?" Radhe's mother demanded to know.

"That wasn't enough, Neelam," her father pleaded. "We needed extra. We need to protect our girl, don't we?"

In the end, they both agreed. Mortgaging the house and selling the car wereworth it to have peace of mind. This was the only marriage proposal Radhe had gotten in three years. And the boy and his family seemed nice enough. But after what happened to Shruti and the Yadav girl down the road, they knew there was no such thing as being too careful. Even if it meant flinging themselves into instability.

At nineteen-years-old, Radhe made for a stunning bride which came as a shock for all of the community members who had dismissed her as "too

dark" her entire life. Her in-laws heard about Radhe through her eldest aunt on her father's side, and were keen on getting her for their aloof son.

Nikhil never completed university, and he floated from job to job. This made it so difficult for his parents to market him, leaving his poor mother in a constant state of strain to formulate good traits about him. NON-VEGE-TARIAN, FAIR-SKINNED BOY WITH NO SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS SEEKING HOMELY GIRL, was what the newspaper ad read. Dozens of families had refused to arrange their daughters with him. Radhe's family was the first to accept the arrangement. During the wedding ceremony, Nikhil refused to look at her, but Radhe couldn't look away. Throughout all the varieties of Sanskrit chants and performative devotion, her eyes remained fixed on him, searching for what was wrong with him that his family would agree for him to marry a girl like her. Either he was an enlightened and conscious man, or just entirely self-loathing. Those were the only calculations that made sense to her.

When she moved in with him and his family, her mother-in-law stepped into domestic retirement and shifted the totality of the workload onto Radhe's back, insulting her for her dusky complexion whenever she sliced the potatoes too thin or forgot to douse the Shiva lingam in milk first thing in the morning. One afternoon, Radhe cussed at her under her breath just loud enough to cause her mother-in-law's hand to collide with her right ear. The jingle of her new mother's bangles as they traveled to her head matched the ringing in her ear that did not go away for days. Her earring had flown off, and she was left with a shallow cut on the lobe from one of the many rings which adorned her mother-in-law's bony, dry hand; rough with flaking and splintering skin and white cracks that resembled train routes.

She spent the rest of the afternoon weeping in the bedroom until Nikhil came home from work. This time he was trying his luck working at an insurance call center. He put his arms around Radhe's shaking shoulders, awkward and stiff, as he listened to her explain what happened. It was the first time in a full month of marriage that he touched her. He didn't say anything. He just held her as she emptied her eyes onto the starch pressed dress shirt that he hated wearing and she hated ironing. He never told his mother anything. They both knew how horribly that would go.

Nikhil's mother Shanti -- paradoxically a namesake meaning "peace" -- was a miserable and hardened woman, once soft and loving with trusting dairy cow eyes. This was all before she went through the proverbial wringer of her own mother-in-law when she was married at fifteen. After years of verbal abuse and punitive lashings, all with no defense from her husband or only son (Oh, how Nikhil loved his violent grandmother notwithstanding!), Shanti became the kind of woman whose very countenance put the world on notice that she wanted revenge. And now she finally had a daughter-in-law of her own to abuse.

It was just two weeks after Shanti's Slap and their first physical contact as he soothed his sobbing bride that Nikhil finally moved closer to Radhe in bed. He pushed his right hip closer to her body on the opposite side of the bed and then the rest of his body shifted to follow. Radhe shut her eyes and pretended to be asleep. She felt his heavy breathing on her neck. His legs

over hers. His chest becoming parallel with her own. She opened her eyes. The light from the street came through their bedside window and shone orange on his face. That was when she saw and she knew. His eyes were sewn so tight that they created wrinkles along the lids that resembled deep fault lines. As though he was trying to avoid witnessing some grave tragedy. She shut her eyes with him, not wanting to see it either.

By now, Radhe was nearly fifteen minutes late to work, and she was still at home. Dumbfounded. She had to go, she knew this, but she remained planted, sitting on the edge of the bed. She knew she had to, somehow, find some motivation to get up and go or they would not even be able to afford the basement they were in. And as loving as Rima was to her, she was very serious when it came to her rent.

She threw on her silver down coat with the horizontally stitched puffs and her green mesh sneakers. Radhe raced out of the door without turning off any of the lights. She locked the door from inside, pulled it in behind her and started for the sidewalk. She forgot her scarf. Even with her coat fully zipped to the top, the breath of the arctic that always came to visit around January stabbed her skin. Her neck and chest felt barren and dead, just like the naked trees that lined her street.

When she got to work, the evening operator stormed past her in a huff. She was just shy of an hour late and the evening operator's unexpectedly extended shift meant that his wife had to drop the kids to school and be late for her own job. Radhe didn't even look at him. She was too empty to fill herself with apologies or explanations. She just walked straight to the switchboard and replaced his seat in the rolling chair. Her coat still on; her face infused pomegranate from blood capillaries bursting in the slap of the New York winter air; her tied back hair frizzed as though electrified, with short strands postured upright. The next six hours were a miracle to behold. She had no idea how she made it through the workday. So many calls came in -- to page doctors, to connect with patients' rooms, to alert that vitals were flat-lining and bodies were dying in their beds. She punched all of the appropriate buttons and paged all of the appropriate people as though on autopilot. Not present. Not feeling, Mindlessly, All while an uneasiness bloomed in the pit of her stomach in thick, fleshy petals. Her only means of escape was gone. It left in the middle of the night, much like she thought she would one day do herself.

She had this plan. She would stow her travel bag, filled with her most important articles of clothing, in the narrow oven while Nikhil showered. She'd put an extra measurement of warm milk with cardamom in his evening chai, and let the especially deep sleep embrace him as they slept on the extreme opposites of the queen-sized mattress that lay on the bare tiled floor. She memorized which parts of the ground made noise from loosening tiles when you stepped on them, as though to welcome you for visiting. She'd tie the brown strands of the beaded curtain that hung in the place of the bedroom doorway to the sides so she could walk through freely without inciting the

flirtatious clamoring of the small, round beads.

She'd leave with her bag and her purple pouch filled with the cash she would receive from selling her Necklace. She'd leave her cellphone behind. Once she was outside, she'd walk three blocks to the 24-hour taxi stand owned by the Dominican men who always called her Linda India. THE QUEENS QUISQUEYA. She'd climb into the backseat of an old Lincoln sedan with silver duct tape patching the rips in the upholstered seats, and instruct the driver to take her to JFK, Terminal 4. Air India. She would nervously fondle and leaf through her passport as they sat in mind-numbing traffic on the Van Wyck Expressway.

"What time is your flight?" the driver would ask, "What time do you need to be there?"

"I am on time," she'd reply absently, knowing she doesn't even have a ticket yet.

She'd pay the driver when they pulled up to the always-bustling terminal. She'd walk up to the ticketing counter, hopefully not burdened with a long line of incoming passengers, and inquire about the next few flights out. She'd choose one of them. "Oh, just one way," she'd tell the agent as she slid her navy blue passport, emblazoned with gold letters reading REPUBLIC OF INDIA, across the counter along with crisp, new U.S. bills, which she would pull out of the purple pouch. She'd take off her shoes and carry the wide plastic container on her right hip as she waited on the security line. She'd step into the security vessel and place her feet on the outlined footprints; lift her arms above her head and wait for her body to drink a small dose of radiation. She'd retrieve her bag and her shoes from the conveyor belt, grateful that the officers did not say anything about the perfume she had packed. Too lovely to leave behind.

She'd walk to her gate and sit with her passport and boarding pass in hand. She'd keep her head down in case anyone she knew was there. In case some relative or friend or friend of a relative was there who could potentially tell the world that she was there without Nikhil. She'd stand to board the plane only after all the rows had been called. There was no use standing on that long line the entire time. She'd have her boarding pass scanned and torn along the perforations, leaving just her name and seat number on the stub. RADHE SRIVASTAVA. 23F. She'd walk to her row near the rear of the aircraft. She'd find her seat and buckle her seatbelt. She'd unbuckle and change seats with a woman who wanted to sit with her family in that row.

She'd settle into her new seat a few rows back and then watch the reunited family with some bitterness as she thought of how Nikhil never wanted a family with her. As she thought of how he never touched her again after The Night He Shut His Eyes a whole two years ago. As she thought of the three weeks at Naresh's house while Rima's basement underwent inspection, and how she came home from work one day to find him kissing Naresh on his neck. His lips parted and suckling lovingly onto his skin, as though trying to inhale him. She would shake as she thought of the way Naresh held onto the counter as he leaned into her husband's body, and outstretched his neck as though commanding him to drink.

She'd swallow the emptiness that so frequently crawled up her throat and gripped her as callous as Shanti's dry and bony hands for the year and a half following that night when everything began to make sense. That night when she began to avoid her own thoughts, terrified by the fact that, at the sight of them, she felt betrayed, but also intrigued.

The pilot's voice would thunder overhead and shatter her spiraling thoughts, welcoming them on the direct flight to New Delhi. She'd then become busy thinking of which train tickets to arrange to get from Delhi to Bihar. About what her parents would say when they saw her on their doorstep after so long. When they saw that she came alone.

"Did he touch you?" her father would cry, scanning her with his eyes in search of signs of hate on her skin.

"No. He never touched me," she would answer truthfully. More truthfully than her parents would ever know.

The plane would begin to taxi. She'd hail the Mother Goddess under her breath. It would be the first time in months that she remembered god. There would be no turning back now. The plane would accelerate and lift off into the air, leaving her suffocating basement home far away on the ground that she never wanted to walk upon again.

On the bus ride home from work, she had to get off two stops early. As the bus drove closer to her street, her chest became tighter and she struggled to find air in her lungs. She felt like she was encased in thick, salty water. She wheezed and gasped. She pressed the yellow tape on the wall by the window that signaled for the driver to stop at the next bus stop. She hit the tape just

in time for the driver to reach a stop he was about to zoom past.

"Back door!" she shouted as she waited for the rear exit of the bus to unlock. When she heard it click she shoved the dual accordion doors apart and ran down the three short steps onto the sidewalk lined with muddy snow. She gasped repeatedly and percussively. Crouched over with her hands on her knees. After a few minutes, she slowly regained her composure. She had to return home unarmed, without the weapon that her father plummeted their family into financial distress to give her. All she had now was Nikhil.

She walked haltingly, like a ceremonial guard, in the direction of their home. Nikhil never returned her calls from the morning. He never returned her calls in general. Sometimes, he would send her a brief text to be sure there was no emergency in times when Radhe called many times in a row. But he awarded no such acknowledgement today. Radhe's life was collapsing around her. And Nikhil was too busy to see if she was still standing, six calls later. They'd been robbed in their own apartment and she couldn't even call the authorities without them being robbed of a place to live. And Nikhil was just too busy.

The tightness returned. She gasped. Again. Again.

She tried to stop thinking about him. About his grainy skin and perpetually chapped lips. She tried to love him once. She tried so hard, after she moved into his home, to adore him and learn to do all of the things that would

make him adore her. But nothing could bring his gaze to her. Nothing motivated him to hold her except the night of Shanti's Slap. Nothing motivated him to ask how she was doing when he got home from work. To thank her for dinner. To at least try to look at her with an expression that didn't so easily communicate that, but for his mother, he would not have married her. It made her wish that Shanti had slapped her more. Maybe it would have made a difference to have more outlets demanding comfort.

When they moved to New York, she thought that without Shanti as her overlord they'd be free to attempt a marriage. To act like they loved each other and not as though their entire arrangement was as transactional as it was. But she slowly came to understand that the environment made no difference.

Radhe made no difference. It was Nikhil who resisted the life Radhe wanted so desperately to build. Nikhil didn't want any of it with her. When she discovered him and Naresh, he did not even care enough to apologize. To at least say sorry for wasting the one chance she had at marriage after three years of searching, and three years of rejection. During the remaining week of their stay in Naresh's home, the men carried on as mutes in their shame, looking at Radhe with pleading eyes so that she would not tell Naresh's wife. But they didn't even have to do as much. Radhe was unable to hurt Diya with the truth that she felt was circulating like a poison in her own body. She kept it to herself.

At that point, at least it all made sense. She could make sense of The Night He Shut His Eyes and of his always-disinterested attitude. She was just his roommate. Just a pawn to keep his parents off of his case for being unwed. She understood why they always ate in silence, and laid in bed in silence for the many minutes before they fell asleep. And it was in silence that Radhe looked at Nikhil's face one day -- slender with salt and pepper stubble, accented by a broad nose and almond-shaped mud-brown eyes -- and decided that she did not love him either. A feeling that was as somber as it was a relief and gasp of fresh air.

And so, from the Day She Gasped for Air, she began the ritual of staring at her insurance each morning. Examining each centimeter meticulously to be sure no scratches or scuffs had plagued the Necklace. Shining the corners with bits of cloth and warm water. Placing it back in its pouch, resting the pouch back in the drawer, before leaving the room to brush her teeth. Tracking the value of gold from her work computer each week.

By now, her feet finally brought her to the front gate and she reached into her left pocket to retrieve her keys. She pulled the bunch out by hooking her index finger into the keyring and letting the single brass key dangle freely along with the yellow and pink box-stitched lanyard that Rima's daughter made for her at her after school program. She shuffled down the short series of steps to the basement enclosure and unlocked the door, turning the key swiftly to the left in the keyhole. The lights had been on all day. When she stepped into the doorway, she halted in her steps at the sight of Nikhil sitting on the ground, eating from a takeout container. Dominican

food from the restaurant two streets over. She could smell the sweet plantains and the broiled chicken. She pushed the door in softly and turned the small lock on the round doorknob.

He didn't even look up from his food when Radhe stepped inside. He continued chewing and maneuvering his fork about the bowl. Before she could begin to tell him of the robbery, she noticed two things placed on either side of his seated body. On his left was a flat, square, white box with gold foil trim. To his right: the purple pouch sat contentedly with its base puffed out and the top narrowed as the drawstring was tied securely in a knot. As though grinning mischievously for all the trouble it caused today.

"I called you this morning," Radhe choked as she tried not to weep. "I called you six times."

"I know," Nikhil countered matter-of-factly as he shoveled a final mound of rice into his mouth.

He stood up and his knees cracked. He walked a few steps over to the sink and threw the take-out container in the trash. He turned the faucet on slightly so that he could rinse his fingers and then cup just enough water in his right palm to sip with his lips and swish around his mouth. He spat the water out into the drain and rinsed his fingers again before turning the faucet all the way off. He wiped his hands and mouth with a nearby napkin and then threw it, soggy and gray, in the trash.

Without looking at Radhe, he returned back to his seat on the ground. He crossed his feet and left his knees bent. He reclined to brace his back against the wall and let his hands rest on his sides— one on the broad white box and the other on the same purple pouch that piloted Radhe's emotional stability. He raised his eyes after a heavy sigh, and finally met his wife's gaze.

"Sit," he instructed her. His voice was more rough and gravelly than was usual. He must have smoked nearly twelve cigarettes today. Yes, that was a twelve cigarette voice, Radhe decided as she removed her sneakers and, in light steps, walked five careful steps to be seated in front of Nikhil. She sat on the ground and unzipped her coat. She maneuvered out of the arms and let it fall behind her like a shadow.

"You have two options, Radhe," he began. Radhe's heartbeat was nearly painful in its intensity.

"Option one is, you can go back to India. Stay with your parents in Bihar, or even get a flat on your own," he said. "You can work, go back to university, whatever you want." He paused to examine Radhe's face. To assess her understanding of what he was saying. He noticed a tiny mole resting peacefully on her quivering jawline and was surprised that he had never noticed it before.

"Option two is, you renew your visa, stay in New York, get a place that isn't a basement under Rima and Amal's bedroom, and continue to seek whatever you want in this place without having to look at me everyday," he said as he reached into his back pocket with his left hand to retrieve his wallet.

He pulled out his brown leather bi-fold wallet and opened it care-

fully, the way a holy man opens a holy book. He reached into the pocket where the bills are typically kept, but there were none there. An oddity, as he always kept at least forty dollars in cash on his person. Instead, he brought out two pieces of paper. Both folded. One was a thick, white sheet, the other a thin, yellow sheet. He unfolded both and placed them in front of Radhe. With his right hand, he lifted the purple pouch that had been sitting so patiently, taunting Radhe during this entire exchange. With his left hand, he lifted the white sheet of paper off of the ground. It was a narrow slip with bold black text.

"You cannot succeed under either option with this," he said as he shook the purple pouch in his fist for emphasis. He handed the white sheet to Radhe. It was an appraisal.

"Your father's necklace cannot even cover one week of groceries. The jeweler is a fraud. The gold is mixed with other metals and the stones are not even semi-precious," he explained. "But do not dare ever let your parents learn that," he said with eyes that showed he spent a lot of time thinking of this. "If you go back, don't ever tell them."

He placed the purple pouch and the white sheet back on the ground as Radhe's eyes began to sting with comprehension. Tears jumped off of the corners of her eyes as though suicidal. Hot and thick, leaving salty rivers on her cheeks.

"You will be able to succeed under either option with this, though," Nikhil said as he retrieved the white box and the yellow sheet from the ground. He handed the yellow sheet to Radhe. She took it with trembling fingers. Her nails were all bitten down to different lengths and her peach nail polish was in tatters, like maps of countries, on each nail.

She held the yellow sheet up to her eyes, blinking away tears so that she could read properly. It was a carbon paper receipt from an Indian Jeweler. NAIR JEWELERS. What kind of name was that? From Kerala? Or was it Bengali? She couldn't remember. Her mind was too clouded, unsure of whether she would leave this night grieving or relieved. She scanned the receipt and found a number on the bottom that was circled and sat right above a stamp that read PAID IN FULL. \$9,000.00.

"It's worth even more than what I paid," Nikhil said after some time, nodding toward the white box to signal for Radhe to open it.

She lifted the box off of the ground and then lifted the top so that it opened its hinged mouth. It was the brightest gold she had ever seen, resting in a familiar aesthetic of red velvet. It had a thick collar piece that cascaded into a golden waterfall in the center. Intricate designs danced in the sun-toned metal, and scalloped arches accented the border of the collar. Off to the sides were matching earrings -- also gold with a round stud center with attached cascading waterfalls of gold. Small Kundhan stones twinkled playfully throughout the aurous landscape.

"It was half of my savings," he remarked as his eyes lowered to the linoleum tile that blared under the harsh bare fluorescent bulb jutting out of the ceiling. "But now you won't wake up each morning to remind yourself of something that isn't really there."

He uncrossed his feet and planted them flatly on the ground. He used his hands to push and propel himself off of the floor. In silence, he retreated to the bathroom and shut the door. The shower turned on and the pipe squeaked as it belched out barely warm water mixed with traces of orange rust. Overhead, the ceiling shook with the fast pace of footsteps – little feet and big feet. The bare bulb trembled under the tremors of life above. Radhe sat unblinking. The pipe continued to squeak as water spat and shattered onto the porcelain shower floor.



UNDER ROOF NIDHI GARG

#### CELLULAR REGENERATION

#### ARTHUR WILHELM

Fresh bone and blood Are being replaced with Tangled wires The human condition Reduced to forced glow And instant gratification We are ghosts Ghosts in the bedroom Ghosts at the dinner table The touch of skin has been Replaced with the touch Of glass and flash dilated **Pupils** Hardwired but disconnected Physically there but blank The world is moving at lightning Speed, but we are fixed On temporal distractions Sex money and confidence All in the palm of your hand But there is nothing romantic About that We've become robots Slaves to machines The human condition Reduced to forced glow.

# **LIFT**DANIEL ELFANBAUM

I went to the wedding of a college roommate in a certain suburban city in Alabama, and because of some general confusion, I ended up having to attend the reception after the ceremony ended. It was a good ceremony—successful, all of that. They're even still married. But because of some things that were going on at the time, I had planned to get pretty smashed at the wedding (because when would I see any of these people ever again?), and having the car was a bummer.

The reception was at some sort of golf club, a club that his wife and my friend didn't belong to, but I think perhaps it was the bride's parents who may have been involved, and anyway, it was somewhere I felt like I could leave the car. Nice neighborhood. Lots of streetlights, and it was tucked back far from the road. My car would be broken into later, almost four months to the day.

We sparkler-showered the bride and groom into their black getaway sedan, posing for the photographer whose time was almost up, then we went back inside to finish the party. The bride and groom stayed another few minutes but then did in fact leave in the Cadillac sedan. I got a ride to the afterparty with one of the brothers. The little dessert bar was right across from where I'd gotten a last-minute haircut that morning. The bride and groom showed up for exactly one chocolate martini a piece before heading back to bed in the adjacent hotel where everyone aside from me was staying. Those of us that were left were huddled into booths at the back of the bar. My buddy was only a little drunk per prior agreement with his new wife, but still giggling, he told me that they had already consummated the marriage before arrival. I think they had tried a nominal abstinence for a few weeks before the thing to keep it special. Catholics and all of that.

I participated in a betting pool with the brothers and brothers-in-law about how soon the newlyweds would have a first kid, and then I made a move towards the hotel where I was staying. It was farther out of town than where everybody else was going to spend the night. I was living on savings and between jobs, and I had missed the window to RSVP at the hotel block anyway. I still need to collect that beer from one of the brothers.

At the bar I paid my bill and ordered a ride on my phone. A big suburban picked me up. It was either dark grey or black. It was pretty late at night and it was much nicer than the cracked red Suburban in which I'd ride to school with my friend, or maybe it just didn't smell like hockey. New leather. This was all a while ago, not long after the 'ordering a ride thing' had become a thing. I felt, reflexively, that I should get in the passenger seat, as if it were my mother picking me up from orchestra after school, but of course it wasn't. In any case, I climbed in the back.

I don't remember what this guy's name was, but we'll call him Richard. He wore a suede jacket and had bushy grey eyebrows that I could see in the

rear-view mirror. Not an unkind look. A friendly drawl that I was on the verge of picking up, of mimicking out of thoughtless habit, but I wasn't from around there and I didn't want to give him the wrong impression. I sat on the passenger side in the middle row in my rumpled suit, my eyeglasses now oily from dancing at the bar and my socks were scrunched down around my ankles. Richard pulled away from the curb while whistling a little, and he asked me how my night's been after we'd left the little strip mall plaza. I told him I was from Missouri, that it had been a long drive to get here. The wedding was almost on the way to where I was going to.

I asked about how he was doing.

He said, "Good, good. This will be my last official trip of the night. After that one more thing and then I can let the dogs out, go home and go to bed. I've just got you and then I'll drive right back around here to pick up the gang, drop them all off, and then I can go home. It's been a good night. Fairly busy, yes. You're the first wedding guest. No, I haven't seen so many, but it's still early spring. There's weddings out here all summer. Pete, one of the gang, was telling me there's weddings planned all summer. Said he'd let me know where they were so I could make a little more money.

"Peter's a DJ, dates Samantha. Though the last few weeks they seem like they've been on the outs. When I pick them up at the end of the night they don't talk to each other, and Pete sits in the front seat. That's usually where Bobby sits. I hope they'll be alright. One of the first times I drove these guys home they were the last I dropped off – I guess this was at her place – and on the way there from dropping off Miss Jennifer they were making out in the back. I've been told that it was the first time that had ever happened, so I feel kind of invested.

"The gang is what I call this group I drive most nights on the weekend. They have my personal phone number, and I usually wait to end my night until they call me. I used to wait for them to start it, too, but sometimes they don't call until pretty late and I don't want to miss out on the money. Social security checks don't always cover it. My wife died about a year ago and I was not expecting the cost of a funeral.

"They call me and I come get them. Drive them home. They're a pretty funny lot. Nice folks. I think they drink a little too much but I was young once, too. We joke around. Know each other pretty well by now. They gave me some leftovers after Christmas last year. Most of my family's farther south, Gulf Shores, near the beach. Just a brother and in-laws left in Alabama. A few nieces. My daughter's in Connecticut. I asked Miss Jennifer if she knew the town where my daughter is living but she said she didn't.

"I've been thinking about them a lot lately. They're almost like friends. Or like kids. I'm happy to take them home and make sure they don't drive drunk. I would hate it if they did that. They almost never forget to pay me, too. It's all cash, though they sometimes email me money. I need to call my daughter or get one of them to explain how to get it back into my bank account. It's easier than trying to manage it all through the app, you know, if you're trying to drive some particular people.

"They should be calling me any minute now. Did you get a chance to go to any of the restaurants downtown? They're pretty fun. Some good music, too.

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I can sometimes hear the bands when I pick folks up. The town's really changing. Mostly for the good, I think. But I don't mess with politics. Peter's always trying to ask me what I think about things but I stay out of it. I'm a very private person." There wasn't any music playing on the radio and I was thinking about how during the other few rides I'd gotten, there was always music, and it seemed like he maybe liked music or at least had ideas about it, and it was quiet because he'd finished talking and I was still drunk. I had meant to try and meet someone at the wedding but was either too drunk or they were all married, and mostly I remember trying to keep up with a conversation about our alma mater's football team as compared to Auburn's football team with the two other guys from college who'd been invited, and maybe I hadn't been trying that hard anyway to not go home alone.

Richard asked if I was seeing anybody back in Missouri and I told him I didn't live there anymore, but that I wasn't seeing anyone anyway.

Richard said that dating apps were going to be the future. "I'm sure you've tried some of them. I see ads for the religious ones on TV, and half the time I pick people up earlier on in the evening they tell me it was an app date gone wrong and they'd said they'd gone to the bathroom. Guys as often as girls, though I usually trust the intentions of the girls more than the guys.

"I wonder when those kids will call me. I'll be a little far out after dropping you off. They sometimes don't give me much notice and I feel bad for making them wait. The bars will close soon and it's chilly tonight. When I dropped them off, none of them had jackets. The girls are already wearing the little skirts and dresses. Just last week, we were in the forties and everybody was wearing ski jackets."

Richard drove to the wrong side of the hotel, but I didn't say anything. I waited until he pulled away before trudging around to the front. My keycard didn't work in the back, was the problem. The gang hadn't called him by the time I said goodbye but he said that he'd drive back to where he'd dropped them off and wait, that he would get some coffee at McDonald's because he wouldn't go to sleep for a few hours anyway. Benefits of being retired, he joked. And he said that McDonald's coffee was getting better.

I unbuttoned my shirt when I got to the room and fell into the bed, wondering if I should masturbate or go see if I'd left a stray beer in the mini fridge, or if there were any snacks left in the out-of-towner bag the bride had run out to give me after the rehearsal dinner the night before. I wondered about Richard, if the gang was going to call him or not.

I was groggy when I woke up and checked out and was a little disappointed when it wasn't Richard that picked me up to drive me to my car. I was lucky to have saved the address of the club whose name I could not remember. The woman who drove me played the radio loud and kept switching channels, and I developed a headache on the interstate. I drove to a Cracker Barrel to meet the rest of the wedding party for a post-op brunch which almost helped my hangover, and then I drove south to try and see some other old friends I might have been missing. Old friends who maybe, or at least I hoped, might be missing me.



MONSOON CITIZENS
SUMAN KABIRAJ

# FEMINICIDIO FRONTERIZO STALINA VILLAREAL

Nabil Gonzalez's massive, cascading sand and abundant name tags: Lourdes Guti érrez Rosales y las

desaparecidas. Maquiladoras gone. No body y el alma ¿por dónde estará?

discs of illusional eyes, eyeliner, and plucked eyebrows sobre la arena

del desierto, terrain shaped like a wrinkled skirt.



**HUMAN** KARLY VILLASEŃOR

### LATE NIGHT NOONS

#### MAI SERHAN

Eyes
scantily dressed
in eyelids
and bodies
flit.
I wake
to late night
noons and noons
from many moons
ago.

News,
a skank,
she won't go home,
she's with fever
not with child,
she cannot
taste her tongue.

Fridge,
and five
half empty jars
of jam, and
thousands of deaths
in New York City
alone, I eat
my feelings
in April
and think of
June.

**Numbers** 

smell
of unmourning, but
I'm innumerate
behind these
roadless doors.
Behind these doors
the air is still
and the pots
are boats
that don't bob
in the clogged
sink.

## **POETRY**

Mother,
the womb is far
and the wild-eared
have escaped
their fold.
I fold
little dresses and
unfurl one cape
in the shape of
a bright side.

#### **EXODUS**

### ALICIA ALCANTERA-NARREA

"We don't use Exodus anymore," I say as I close the book and hand it back to Lou.

She crossed her arms and said to keep it, that it might help with my report.

I keep my mouth shut and leave her on the steps of the library. "Exodus was once a grand subterranean machine dedicated to the extraction of large materials hidden underwater." I close the book again.

I knew all about Exodus. I was nine when the world went underwater, not five like Lou. Every building became a high-rise and Mother finally became wealthy, outfitting them with elaborate elevators and taking me to see the views from her glass office. It became a national holiday, not because of Exodus, but because we all became pseudo mermaids.

I thumb the book open and turn to the ending. "Although outdated, Exodus is still used and preferred today by several small companies across the globe."

I don't use my legs much to walk anymore, just to visit Outer Edge, this little town with one library. Lou's family lives above the library in a handful of rooms they converted into studios. They're part of a community which chose to stay on or live near little pockets of land that refused to sink when the world went underwater, even while the rest of us built conglomerates up to 30,000 leagues under the sea. Mother would always ask why I chose to visit a stone-age building, stuck in an old town, dead set on living in an ancient time. I never answer her because I know she never expects an answer.

I can see the ocean's edge. Whenever I do visit Lou, she fills my ears with gossip she hears between the library's customers. The same customers who never check out books, but Lou's parents don't mind; they just sit behind the counter and listen to their stories and share many of them themselves. The visitors often ask if they were ever famous authors or teachers and sometimes Lou's parents will oblige and nod their heads vigorously and knuckle their glasses firmly up their nose while smiling, but they were actually janitors for a nearby school which crumbled during the massive earthquakes. The library remained fairly untouched. It stands like a humble sentinel -- teeming with cracks in the foundation, water running through the channels -- accepting it's position in life.

I make it to the water's edge, where a bridge begins, but most of it submerged. I turn back and see in the distance a Lou-sized black blip sitting on cement steps. Her shadow stretches toward me like the point of Pose-idon's staff. She waves enthusiastically. I turn back toward the water and reach into my pocket for the poxies -- little red pills that can run you as much as an apartment above a library. I swallow them and wait a minute. I'm about to submerge myself but remember the book in my hand. The pages would get

ruined, the whole Exodus. I suddenly fear if Lou is still watching, if she notices my indecision. She should've just kept the book. Or scanned the images into an email. Except, except Exodus seems too important to fit in an email. The cover is striking. Navy colored in a heavy-weight canvas with cream-colored etching and gold trim along the border. I run my hand across the title, across the nicks in the corners, and the wrinkles in the spine. I almost look over my shoulder again.

A boy to my right rushes into the water, sending droplets everywhere. I look back at Exodus and watch as water droplets sink into the title. I remove most of them. I press into the last droplet with my thumb and hold my thumb there, afraid to check under it. I scowl at the boy, his image blurry as he swims down deeper to reach a lamppost. Mother would be upset. I know it. She'll wonder why I didn't just swim home. I curl the book into my forearm and reach with my right to call her. She responds quickly. I can definitely feel someone's stare now -- at my back, at my forearm. I pocket my call device and wait for Mother. I keep my thumb on the title the entire time, even as Mother arrives and lets me in and makes idle talk.

"What's that in your arm?"

I stiffen. "A book."

"A book?"

"Exodus." I turn away from her. "I need it for a report."

Mother doesn't say another word as she prepares to take off.

I let out a breath against the window; the fog left behind disappears. I stare at Lou's black blur from the passenger seat even when it becomes indecipherable; even when it's completely gone.

# SONG OF CRIPPLED BIRDS EBUKA EVANS

our meeting was sheer light singled out of slippery rain strands we stand here an organ born of play and music, frequent lapses some days we congeal like light poles watching stars boundaries like zebra pavement between river and ice other days we become butter placed on sick skin, turning lotion the bus ride from here to there is a collision of shooting stars our meeting was sheer light. once, we met under darkness and played ourselves to songs, corpses bearing forth epilepsy.



ETERNAL STORY NIDHI GARG

## STARCH CONTRAST

#### ROHA SIDDIQI

We hurl you into the scalding sea

Yet you forget to ablute

Engulfed in a stream of milk

Only to covet chocolate

Submerged in the aromatic fields of Madagascar

To abhor the fetid Mangrove swamps

We beseech you to scrape the vanilla bean first

Yet the simmer enthralls you

You harvest

Strip

Extract

Amass

Triturated sucrose

Only to succumb to the piquancy of violence

Salt to thwart the blood flow

While blistering pepper arrests you

The syrupy, honeyed ballad yearning to stir

Virtue forgone

Dulcet music released from the throat

For you to lay your hand against its breast and choke

Mellifluous harmony

Your eyes glisten as the seething sea erupts

We implore you to bathe in the nectar

Only for you to eagerly watch

The bursting ocean rupture the vessel

Here you lie in starch darkness

Doused in firm rice

So you forget the tender taste of rice pudding

# TREES: REDUX LISA KRAWCZYK

Sugar pine blister rust cankers the trees Klimer has the nerve to praise all joy to see.

Preying first on the branches. The rust snuggles up in the soft knots and flags it.

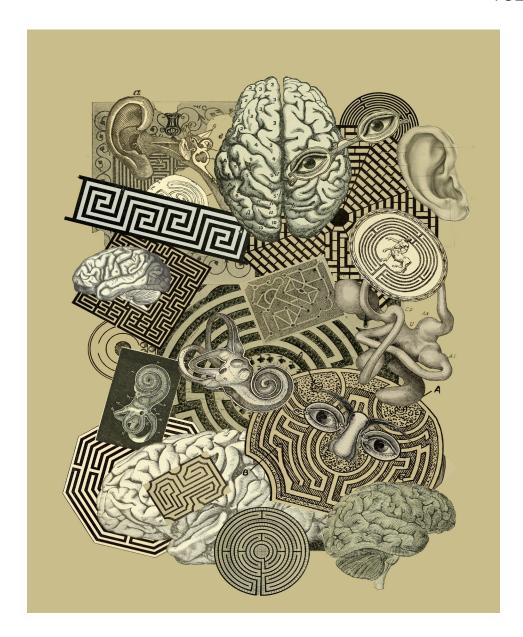
The Civilian Conservation Corps boys blamed the fungus on gooseberries and black currants

removing them. The fruit, offended, points to the birds who likewise spread it.

As the rust proliferates down to the trunk, the pine succumbs, and prest to the ground,

dies. the boys tried to tighten your knots, young sugar pine & timber,

an attempt to create their resistance to the disease you never imagined.



LABYRINTH COLLAGE 5
PAWEL PACHOLEC

# DANCE OF THE WHITE PHOENIX

## TRIP NGUYEN

Hoa stood in the front row of The Emperor's burial. She tightened the lace ribbon of her porcelain mask. The intricate stained-glass windows; the golden, baroque detailing of the mausoleum -- the grievers were in awe of the emperor's gaudy style like idiot cavemen marveling at the sight of fire. The rusty pulley gave a demon croak as it lowered The Emperor deep into his tomb. The blinding gold and silver coffin disappeared from the sun's radiance as it was lowered into the darkness.

"Goodbye, Big Sister," she said.

Hoa was Emperor Khai Dinh's favorite; and before she caught fire, the most beautiful of his concubines. When The Emperor was diagnosed with tuberculosis, the other wives and servants found Hoa's indifference disconcerting. That is life, she'd scoff, as she took a bite of green durian macaron. The other concubines could not believe her disrespectful behavior. The Emperor had kept her within his inner circle even after her face had melted like lumped candle wax; two small orifices sitting where her nose had been.

The servants released the ropes and the coffin slammed in the dark grave, startling the crowd. Hoa cackled like a witch as the funeral pianist played Chopin's Nocturnes. Everyone looked to her as though she had indeed lost her mind. At The Emperor's wake, they all muttered that Hoa was bitter that her dreams of becoming Empress would never come to fruition. She didn't care about royalty, empire or riches. They waste away atop their ornation and watch their people burn.

The block of ice had solidified in Hoa's rib-cage years before Khai Dinh's death, a year before the death of her little boy — the night of The Fire. The cold that would crystallize within her had begun the day she moved into the citadel. She had become just a mistress; the *eighth* in his court — no longer a dancer. Dancing had given her life purpose. Seeing the twinkle in her little boy's eyes in the front row of the Municipal Theatre in Saigon as she danced on stage was everything to her. But when The Emperor beckons eyeing you from the wings of the stage, you obey and leave your family behind.

Years before The Emperor's death, the week after the Taxation Treaty of 1921, Hoa watched from her bedroom window as the imperial city of Hue, Vietnam held its monthly festival for Emperor Khai Dinh. Beyond the royal pond, half-naked men danced in the courtyard looking like Siamese fighting fish in their cyan, yellow, and magenta silk garbs, fluttering in the wind. Drummers, two-string guitarists, and a flute-player performed a folksong for the emperor and his court. The Empress, her bodyguards, and the French diplomat downed wine and steamed rice-paper with pork sausage; their servants by their side. Linh, Hoa's childhood friend from Saigon, entered Hoa's quarters, heels clacking against the obsidian floor. She was the one who had suggested Hoa to the Em-

peror when he sought another concubine.

"Hoa oi, why aren't you dressed?" she asked. She stood fixing her circular khan dong headgear at the vanity beside the window facing the festivities. "What do you think of this ao dai?" she asked, holding a fitted pink tunic dress.

Hoa kept scrubbing the floor in her negligee with a filthy rag bewildered by how much dirt could fit in the crevices. "Un, duex, trois..."

"You look like a manic puppy who knows it's about to be boiled in *pho*. What the hell are you mumbling?"

Hoa rolled her eyes. *Dogs were not for eating.* She couldn't wait for the day when the dated system of concubines and when children no longer had to pedal carts of people to feed their families, when the Indochine left Vietnam.

"I'm practicing French."

Linh tried to pull Hoa from the floor. "I know you've only been here for a few weeks, but the maids have made their rounds twice by now. Enough of this. Get up. It's a celebration!"

Hoa wasn't in the mood. She was frantically cleaning, organizing some sort of control in her life. "Celebration? I'd rather be a catfish underneath the outhouse."

Linh grimaced.

"When I look out onto those performers, I only desire to castrate them by tying a string to their tiny penises, yanking on them while they dance."

"My dear, I am about to lunch."

"Didn't women used to dance in these festivals, Linh?"

Linh sighed. Hoa apologized for her uncouth banter. Her Saigon upbringing had not left her; neither its toughness or its distress. She showed Linh the letter she had just received from her mother still living there who thanked her for the money Hoa had sent. They would be able to pay for rent and medicinal herbs for Hoa's son, Dang, who had been coughing up blood. The neighborhood there had been quarantined. The local hospitals were flooded with people suffering from tuberculosis, and with the riots, they could not take him to a well-trained doctor.

Linh touched Hoa's shoulder. "There is talk of a vaccine in the French colonies. Perhaps the Emperor knows how to get it."

Hoa did not hesitate to request a private visit with Emperor Khai Dinh. A messenger girl confirmed she could see him in his throne room after the celebration.

"Big Sister doesn't seem to be doing anything right," said Linh. The treaty that The Emperor had signed, enforcing a taxation to the citizens of Vietnam, was imposed by the French who had infested themselves into the country, exerting control over the trading ports among other acts of exploitation. "Maybe you have a *good time* with him, and he can introduce you to the diplomat." Linh pointed toward the veranda and laughed. "See how Big Sister watches the male dancers?"

The expression on The Emperor's face on the veranda was inappropriate. A good time with the Emperor meant Mahjong or feigning awe to the designs

of his gold-lined and garishly colored outfits. All the concubines called him Big Sister behind his back, mocking his flamboyant eccentricity. He had a bodyguard sleep in his bed, one who he had raised.

Hoa threw the wet rag to the floor. "I really wish you hadn't suggested me to be his concubine. I hate this life, even though he seems to like me," said Hoa, wiping the beads of sweat from her forehead. The humidity suddenly felt thicker. Hoa sensed a tenderness from Linh's eyes looking down onto her. Linh said, "I needed to be replaced and I knew your family needed the money when you and I were in school together."

"What?"

"I coughed twice in front of the court. They believed I was going to die."

"You never told me this."

"Troi oi! Who are you, my grandmother? Besides, I'm well now, and he still decided to keep you. I hadn't realized that you had become a dancer until he told me that he found you at the theatre." Linh cast her eyes down. "I'm sorry. I really thought this life would help your family."

Hoa was certainly able to provide more money to her family back in Saigon, but what was the point if she couldn't be there with them? Linh held her hand over her nose and said, "Ugh, enough of this; let's go out to the courtyard for some food. It reeks in here!"

A concubine didn't have many benefits except for an allowance and living behind the walls of the citadel, but even so, the concubines' quarters were in the same pavilion as the kitchen. It smelled like dried anchovies and rotting animal carcass from the compost heap outside. Thankfully, the draft from the hallway balcony carried the foul smell away from their rooms. Hoa rose to get a closer look out the window. The performance ended and Emperor Khai Dinh stood from his seat with an effervescent nod and grin. Everyone followed with raucous applause. She didn't care how much she needed to degrade herself. She would convince the emperor to help her son. She was tired of this life as nothing more than a caged white phoenix.

That night, Hoa passed the bodyguard and the French diplomat outside the Emperor's chambers. They were sitting shut-eyed in front of a Mahjong set, smoking from a long, snake-shaped pipe as she entered Emperor Khai Dinh's candle-lit room. The vinegar-like smell of opium smoke lingered. They didn't acknowledge her. On the bed, a long white Vietnamese dress with intricate crystal and silver beading was laid out. The embroidery was foreign to the Vietnamese style.

"It's yours," said Khai Dinh with his yellow grin, sitting crossed-legged on the bed under the canopy. The way the skirt draped created the same effect as traditional, loose pant legs.

"Rat dep! I have never seen one like this. The sleeves are very different from any ao dai."

"It's *Lanvin*," he said proudly, "a French take on a Vietnamese classic. Try it on."

She undressed. "The way it sparkles!" She slid the heavy dress on in front of the mirror and they both marveled at the crystal beading that shimmered in the candlelight. The sheer cape draped from the ends of the sleeves like wings. "Thank you." she said. "This probably means I'll never be able to dance, will I? When you picked me from my dance company, I was told you needed a performer."

He chuckled. "You think dancing is why I chose you? Dancers are common workers, a life you no longer have to worry about."

"Don't you know what it's like to be passionate about something?"

"When you have the responsibility of the whole nation riding on your shoulders, you haven't got the time for 'passions.' I never could do anything that I loved, only what my parents, what the traditions said I could."

"I don't understand why you picked me. For sex? Ravish me now, then! Take me as I am." She sprawled onto the floor beside the cabriole coffee table. The sound of tea trickled from its pot that clinked onto the table as the consort served them. She watched as Big Sister undressed the man with his eyes. She scoffed, "God knows you delight in hard cocks."

"I like my chickens roasted and tender." he said, the lustful grin still stuck on his face.

He joined her at the table, low to the ground.

It was almost like they were like siblings.

He took a sip from his porcelain. "Women will no longer be in the festival. I don't care how we used to do it."

The warmth of jasmine tea comforted Hoa. Silence passed between them as she realized the dance was no longer a fighting battle. "My son is not well in Saigon."

He sipped his tea.

"Is there any way we could please move him and my mother to Hue?" He said, "Em, Saigon is a city of medicine. Surely—"

"My mother cannot afford a doctor. If not move them here, could you please just provide him with an adequate one? Or perhaps your diplomat has access to a vaccine? I hear they've created one in the French colonies." She bowed before him; her face so close to the stone floor that she could see the smell smeared fish sauce from the bottom of their shoes. "My son may die."

Even as a concubine, she had never been in such a demeaning position. Hoa believed in the emperor. She believed he truly cared about the people of Vietnam.

"So, I see you wish to spread disease to the people of Hue. Treason!" She cried out with her face back to the floor, "Un, duex, trois—!" He slammed his teacup onto the table. "Have you lost your mind?" "I will ask the diplomat myself. I'm learning French."

"So, you can count to three? You are just a concubine!" He laughed. She said, "There is a vaccine!"

He narrowed his eyes into a vengeful look. "Why are all the women so difficult around here? Always nagging. The Empress is leaving me for a monastery. Do you hear what people are saying? I'm in a difficult place."

Difficult? Though she did not say anything, she squeezed the rug into her fists, with her head bowed to the ground.

"I must pay the Indochine their taxes."

"You've passed the new tax law on the citizens last week." She felt the heat of his rage boil. She could see the executioner, the shiny guillotine falling onto her. Death seemed preferable to this life of misery.

"Lift your head up."

She was frozen. "I said, get your head from the floor. Look at me! There is no money in the citadel."

Their expensive outfits, their fancy meals, luxury, were all enjoyed at the expense of the common people, like her family. At what cost was it to bankrupt the city? Spending to absolve some sadness within his pitiful heart.

"How are you paying for the palatial tomb that's being built?"

He did not answer.

She raised her head. "I must leave the citadel then." She bowed again.

"You're the only one who understands me." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "I know the other wives laugh at me. It isn't my fault I don't desire the touch of a woman." He reached for her. "You never judge -- a beautiful person, inside and out."

Pain shot through her. Was she bound to this wretched life of silver dresses and golden platters because of her kindness and empathy? She knew what consequences were in store for her if she did flee.

"Stand."

She obeyed.

He called to a severant grasping his flute. "You. Play the song."

The beading of her dress rattled as she trembled, clutching the white silk.

"Hoa!" he commanded. "Dance."

Dance? His dark eyes were unrelenting. Even if she risked a beheading and escaped the citadel into the balmy night past the guards and ride the train to Saigon, she knew she could never escape that gaze. She looked at the crimson rug, which reminded her of her son coughing blood. An escape to a quarantined home in the midst of an epidemic is foolishness.

The impoverished district where her son and mother lived would never get the medical attention it deserved, especially with the ongoing struggle against the French Indochine. Even if she did try to see them, Hoa would be left with nowhere to go, as a beggar or whore to the French proletariat on the filthy streets of Saigon. How long could she dodge tuberculosis there? Her sweet boy's shiny black hair softer than a yellow chick's fur; she'd never wrap her arms around him, squeezing his warm little body, his skin smoother than wax. Pain twisted inside her as she envisioned her child's toothy smile. This world didn't accept people as they were. She could not escape her role -- a mannequin for her captor.

She put both her hands into the air. The white silk of her sleeves draped like wings engulfed her as she danced her fate. She could not hide her grimace, not even with a forced smile. She shut her eyes and imagined herself like the

silver bird embroidered on her torso, flapping her arms to fly out the window into the dark sky, but still she could not escape, tethered to the emperor by a leash. This was her life. She would die a concubine, away from her family, behind walls of stone. She danced, faster and faster. She could feel the rapid beat of her cold heart like the mad pounding Dong Son drums performing on New Year's Day. Her dress twinkled in the fire light. Maybe her mother and son could see her radiance. All while the melancholy of the flute persisted in flickering candlelight.

Un, deux, trois... Her hips swayed, body writhing for Big Sister. She kicked with pointed toes. She spun into a fury, reckless and mad. Her wings caught the edges of a candle's flame as she spun, whipping wind ferociously around her. Her audience -- the diplomat, the bodyguard, the servants, and Big Sister himself -- all cried out to her to stop, still, she danced, spreading her wings of fire. The white ao dai and its sheer cape billowed, flowing around her with the flaming elegance of misery. A dance into madness.

# WALLPAPER WOMAN KEIRA TADEMY

A fly on the wall That's what you are And wouldn't you like me more if I were too? Or maybe a wallpaper woman

Wallpaper Woman is silent, discreet, decorative by design She expects nothing and asks for nothing She fades into anything and everything She is perfect and pristine, soft on all edges—a square

How it hurts when she speaks unless it's butterflies and rainbows How it tires you when she is more than what is asked of her It is too much for her to be the knickknacks or the flowers It is too much for her to be pedestrian

But even wallpaper starts to peel It cannot stay on the wall forever And the fly must not stay if it wants to live For the wall is not a life; just a resting place



Tisha mavi

Title- Carnival of rust

Medium - Acrylic on canvas

Size - 4 x 4.5 Feet

Year- 2017

# CARNIVAL OF RUST TISHA MAVI

# BATHSHEBA DELANEY BURK

Before Uriah had been deployed, he had made a list of all the things he would fix before he left. He never got a curtain for the bathroom window. I wasn't used to the new layout of the house, didn't know how the neighboring apartment windows lined up, and the steam from the bathroom wasn't enough to hide me from David.

When we moved in, Uriah insisted on having a party for the officers who had helped in his promotion. I didn't mind having a party but there wasn't room to refuse when it came to his work. He helped me clean and prepare plates of food. He welcomed guests with his arm locked around mine, but after enough drinks, I was left alone to mingle with the guests. I smiled, feigning interest in foreign affairs, but service was my husband's life, not mine, and war was something I didn't like to think about. One may call it being willfully ignorant; I call it avoiding early grief.

David didn't knock when he entered. The door was unlocked so that guests could travel in and out as they pleased, but I was surprised to see him. Uriah was speaking to his friend Joab in the other room. David spoke boisterously to the other guests, laughing loudly and clapping hands on backs, the sound was enough to make me flinch.

People stepped aside to let David pass, greeting him with a tone of reverence. As he drew closer, I recognized him from my husband's stories. Names had never been my strong suit. In his tales of training and comradery, Uriah would pull up photos on his phone so I could put a face to a name. David had stood out in all of his photographs like there was something about him which raised him above his peers; an unspoken whisper of superiority. If I had been spiritual, I would say he possessed an aura of greatness, or perhaps goodness, but at the party, that light seemed to dim. Unsatisfied with what we had set out, David dug into our refrigerator for something to drink. He greeted another guest, grasping their arm too tightly to be nice. Tarnished. He looked similar to the friend from Uriah's photographs, save some graying at the temples and rounding at the middle, but I couldn't say he was the same man.

Soon after that night, Uriah was deployed. I had grown used to his departures. I threw myself into the matter of settling in to avoid my loneliness. There was still much to unpack and arrangements to be made. A new city, a new life rooted in the old routine. The bathroom and its privacy was the least of my concerns.

I shouldn't have been surprised that he'd find me. As uninvolved as Uriah was on social media, he did have a Facebook account and our relationship wasn't hidden from our mutuals. I was scrolling mindlessly as I ate breakfast when the message appeared.

'David has requested to send you a message.'

I'd seen his profile photo before. It was one of the pictures Uriah had shown me of him and David at some ceremony I'd neglected to attend. I could

tell it was more recent. I accepted the request. The text was longer and more eloquent than I had expected; a greeting, an expression of support in my husband's absence, an offer of friendship in this time of isolation. I was in a new place, rebuilding my life once again, and all without the man I loved to take it on with me. I could use a touch of compassion.

I considered declining, telling him that I was perfectly fine, that I had done this several times before, all without a shoulder to cry on, but as I read the message again, I knew this time was different. This wasn't a friend. This wasn't a boyfriend of a peer or an ex. This was Uriah's superior; my husband's boss. Perhaps they had formed their friendship as equals, but the unspoken reality of their new dynamic pulsed beneath a weak surface of shared anecdotes and housewarming invitations. David was opening a hand as a kindness and the warning that my husband's livelihood remained in his palm, ready to be crushed if I said no, weighed on my mind. Eventually, I willed myself to reply, expressing appreciation for his generosity and agreeing to follow through on a visit when he felt he had time.

His answer was instantaneous.

I considered dressing more appropriately, exchanging my lounge attire for something more formal, more in line with the sensibilities of interacting with my husband's superior, but I wanted to savor a minor act of rebellion. Travelling always toyed with my cycle and my period arrived at full force, so I remained in the comfort of clothes softened by age and loss of beauty. My bottoms had holes in them and I'd procured my sweatshirt from one of Uriah's boxes. Making my way to the building next door in such clothes with unkempt hair and untouched face felt like I had traded perfection for protection. I was not to be presented in a way to be enjoyed, but to be cared for. That's what he said he wanted to do, was it not?

I should have known that none of it would stop him. I thought stained clothing and oily skin and used feminine hygiene products would have been enough to push him away in disgust. I thought my disheveled image would get him to reconsider what he wanted and lead him to ultimately forget. I thought he would be reminded of who he had been in the old photographs, the man Uriah spoke so fondly of; the man that had exuded a light so brightly that surely it hadn't been completely extinguished now.

Perhaps I hadn't thought of any of those things, or at least hadn't believed them, not truly. When he opened his door, he reached out to greet me in the same way he had his friend at our party. Too tight to just be nice.

I tried not to think about it after I went home. I did my best to compartmentalize, to act like this was just another requirement of being in a relationship with a man in such a field. An unspoken need to protect my husband's place in the world he had devoted himself to. I went about my days — unpacking our home, going to the stores, learning to complete the tasks on the list Uriah had left behind. I would walk past clinics and find myself trying to keep from looking in the windows. I contemplated asking for help, even going as far as to pay in cash to avoid any record on our insurance, but

stepping foot inside would be an admission of something I couldn't yet face, and I would always walk away, ready to lose myself in another list of chores to take on.

Still, I couldn't lie to myself when my cycle didn't return. I could claim that my body was still shaken by our move and that I would find myself bleeding soon enough, but I knew I couldn't lie to myself more than I had. A child was never part of the arrangement. Amidst the many duties I had put upon myself as the wife of a soldier, this was not one of them. Of the little contact I was able to achieve with Uriah, I couldn't bring myself to sully them with this information. Even through a grainy video call, I knew I wouldn't be unable to handle his face coming apart; seeing the moment his heart breaks. Nonetheless, this was not news I could keep to myself.

I contemplated various methods. Letters, e-mails, even reappearing at that door once again. In the end, I settled on mimicking what had led to the creation of this problem. Opening the Messenger app, I declined an extended explanation. I wasn't going to hide behind comfort and lies as he had. He didn't deserve a soft blow.

'I am pregnant.'

I did not receive a response. In fact, the site didn't even indicate he had seen my message. I returned to my routine, to march on as I was sure Uriah was -- wherever he was. Through the misery of symptoms and the reluctant acceptance of reality, I was comforted by the fact that I saw no hide nor hair of David. Even on the days when I forced myself to check social media, to see if he had finally gotten my message, there was no indication that he had been online. It was a minuscule comfort, as if the source of my present fear disappeared entirely from the world.

The first time I saw him again was weeks after I had passed on my news. I'd found that I preferred to be sick in the sink than the toilet, as if the location allowed for me to cling to a sense of remaining dignity. After rinsing down the bile and preparing to brush my teeth, I caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of my eye. I turned to the window, still unimpeded by curtains, just in time to see a hole in my neighbor's blinds disappear. I stepped close to the window, peering out across the alley. Even through the low-turned shades, I could see a familiar shadow. It didn't move, remaining pressed against the window as I was. The dare was unspoken; the first to move, to flinch, would lose. I wouldn't be the one, not this time, not again.

He knew they were coming. He had probably been the one to send them. I was drawn from my place at the window when the ringing of the doorbell wouldn't stop; the shrill chime echoing throughout the apartment. I exited the bathroom without turning away.

I recognized Joab as soon as I opened the door. Besides the photographs, It was the first time I'd seen him in uniform. I didn't care to identify his companion; it wasn't exactly a concern at the time. As Joab folded his arms in front of him, it took everything inside me not to cover my ears and scream. Amidst stuttered apologies came the information I expected -- Uriah had been

killed in action. A massive hand gripped the back of my head and slammed me under water. I stared up at the identical men, garbled words scarcely passing through the surface to offer explanation. Uriah had been stationed in one of the most difficult areas and he'd been separated from the rest of his party. He had been one of many to die.

It was foolish to think, but I couldn't help but consider the possibility. Uriah had said nothing about he or his men being moved. He'd seemed completely fine and even happy when we last corresponded. There was no indication that this was to come. My mind thought back to the lack of answers and the flash of movement behind blinds. Absolute power corrupts absolutely, but surely not to the extent of this.

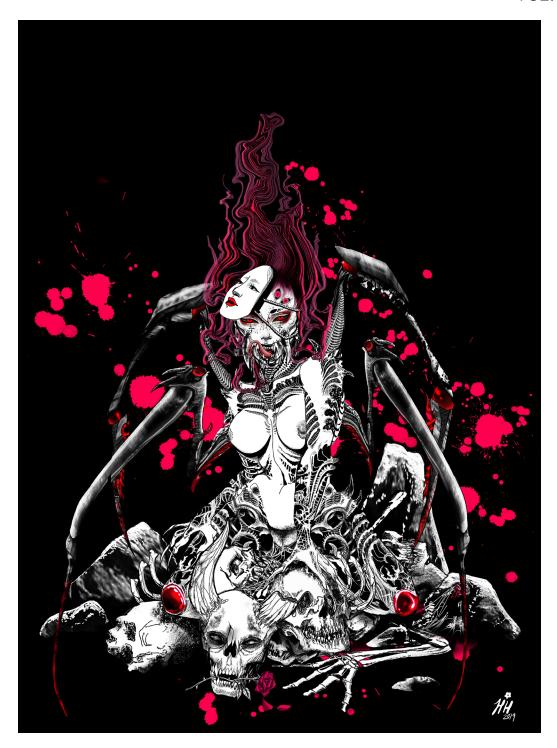
I don't remember asking them to leave. I only remember Joab's hand on my arm, softer and far more tender than the last man to touch me there. I sat in my doorway, barely remaining upright with the help of the frame. My gaze fell on the glint of my wedding ring. The physical reminder of the promise I made to always be there and support Uriah, even in ways he may have been completely oblivious to, but my most recent attempt to protect him may have been what led to his death in the first place.

I didn't notice when the pair of descending steps were joined by an ascending presence. There wasn't a question of who was to arrive, but when he would. The air of goodness, the light that should have warned me of his impending arrival, was completely diminished, replaced only by heavy footsteps and a sense of duty.

# **POETRY**

# THE FEMALE GAZE FACING THE SELF: TINA HERNANDEZ SELF-PORTRAITURE STALINA VILLARREAL

Herstory and Chicana symbolism, like "virgen/puta (whore) dichotomy " that Anzaldúa terms, with half face sin maquillaje and a religious rebozo. Or as the dead of the Self-Regeneration series. The Allegory of a Chicana series appropriating stereotypes, such as sensual skin and la muerte.



A STAR CROSSED PROPHECY HELLSEA X

# SILVER ALERT

#### NILES REDDICK

We knew Aunt Marie was going to drive to Atlanta to see her sister Elizabeth because she told us. We offered to take her, but we couldn't do it that day. We told her if she'd wait, we'd take her on the weekend when we were off work and that we'd come back to get her in a week. Her twelve-year-old Accord wasn't a hundred percent reliable anymore, but she couldn't afford a new one on Social Security. Plus, Aunt Marie had been showing some signs of dementia in the past year -- like the repeated calls that someone was in her attic. For someone who grew up on a rural farm, Aunt Marie had never been used to neighbors and noise, but in her condo in town, she heard neighbors night and day, especially because she didn't play music or keep the television going to cover the sounds next door. She liked peace and quiet, but no amount of telling her someone was not in her attic made a difference.

When we got the call from the Honda dealership that Aunt Marie wanted us to come and see her new Accord, we knew we were in trouble. First, we couldn't believe she'd pass a credit check and could finance a car with Social Security income, but she had plopped her COVID-19 stimulus check down on the salesman's desk, and since it was near the end of the month, the salesman did all he could, financing the car for eight years with her down payment. What that meant was that Aunt Marie would pay almost twice what the car was worth because of interest spread out of over time. We didn't even understand why she would get a stimulus, since it should've only gone to people who were unemployed and couldn't get unemployment pay such as people who'd quit jobs, people who were fired for cause, or people who were self-employed, because with unemployment hitting close to an all-time high, none of these groups would be able to find a job.

Aunt Elizabeth called about eight o'clock that evening, asked if we'd heard from Marie.

"No mam, we haven't. She hasn't arrived?"

"No, and I'm getting worried. It's getting dark and she can't see well at night. That cataract surgery didn't help her night vision."

"What time did she leave?"

"She told me she was leaving this morning at nine."

There was a thump in my chest, a lump in my throat. She'd been gone for thirteen hours for a trip that shouldn't have taken more than four. "I'll do some checking and call you back."

"Okay, thanks, sweetie."

I called the police department and they sent an officer. I shared we suspected she had dementia, but she had no children, and we looked after her as best we could. He said they could put out a silver alert, like an Amber alert, and while it wouldn't go out in the same exact way, it could help. I shared she had a new Accord and had put her smiley face tag from her old car on the front of the new one.

"Like the Wal-Mart one?"

"Yes, but she thinks it's the bouncing ball from cartoons she used to watch as a child."

The officer smiled and said he'd let us know if they found out anything. Later, he called and said she'd been tracked just outside Birmingham using her debit card to fill up on gas, and that's where the trail went cold. I called and gave Aunt Elizabeth an update, told her not to worry, that I would call her back if I heard any more.

I tossed and turned, played out scenarios in my mind: Aunt Marie's car being stolen by a gang, her being thrown in the woods or a river and her injuries causing death in the night; Aunt Marie trying to push buttons that she remembered being on her old car but weren't on her new one, getting confused, running off one of the mountains into a ravine below where coyotes would tear her to bits even faster than the buzzards, and getting a call in a month they'd found her skeletal remains in the ravine and we'd have a closed casket service for the handful of church people, former students, and family members; or Aunt Marie being abducted, abused or raped and having her identity stolen because the thugs believed she had financial means since she had a new car. At some point, I must have fallen asleep until the phone rang and it was the police department.

"We've located your aunt."

"Is she okay?"

"Yes. She was at a Waffle House in Villa Rica near Atlanta. When the night shift came on, the waitress from the earlier shift shared that your aunt had been there for hours drinking coffee and didn't say much. They called an officer. She was very confused. Said someone stole her ignition, she couldn't get her car started, and couldn't quite recall where her sister lived in Atlanta. She's at the station, where she'll be safe until someone can come get her."

"I'll leave in a few minutes. Thank you so much."

I knew Aunt Marie had forgotten that instead of a key to start the car's ignition, the Accord had a push-button ignition, and while Aunt Elizabeth used to live in a ranch in the country, the urban sprawl had been enough to confuse even me. Nonetheless, I knew I'd have to get her out of the Accord contract, even if it meant ruining her credit. She didn't need to be driving and she didn't need credit at eighty. We needed to get her into the doctor for a check-up, maybe a new medication to slow the assault on her brain.

# MANAL AL-SHARIF WELCOMES A SUITOR AT THE DOOR

# WAFA SHAIKH

Sultan's mother watched the flutter of my borrowed dress, the vibrant colors unable to recognize my treacherous skin. She was satisfied to see me, our modest house, the Qahwa, the humble smile I plastered for my parent's reputations.

In this obedient city, holding hands with girlfriends was a woman's sport, and scoring virgins, a man's. I could only choose one: a troublesome career, or a loving husband. My guardian.

She called us for another meeting. I could be a bride. I longed for it, the engagement, the everyday struggles of husband and wife.

But I heard my screams, felt my muscles twinge as they forced my legs open and cut me before third grade. I couldn't marry. For a woman like me, lovable men were a scam.

For a woman like me, a troublesome career was loving all on its own.



**NO WATER**JONATHAN PURDY

# STOLEN

# MICHAEL CHIN

Rich Stewart Jr. came back from the wrestling ring to the locker room all jacked up, clapping his hands, spraying sweat and spittle. "That's how you steal the show!"

I was wrestling curtain-jerker women's matches with Susy Hamilton, a rock-solid worker. Her career took off the months that she dated Rich, the boss's son, and stagnated when they split up, or, as she described it, when Rich moved on to his next flavor of the week -- a British crumpet who wrestled under the name Lady London.

Susy clarified her point of view: Rich *never* stole the show. His matches were rarely good, and it was impossible to steal the show from a main event spot. The show already belonged to people working on top. Still, Rich held up his hand for high fives and slapped it on the backs of the boys who didn't bother to acknowledge him. He breezed past the girls, straight to Lady London to scoop her up in his arms and kiss her, open-mouthed and sloppy.

Susy said that was High School QB 101. Ignore the girls to make them want you. When she first got to Ring Master Promotions, it was the same strategy he used to dupe her. Also, yes, Rich really was his private school's starting quarterback, senior year.

For as loud as Rich was, he couldn't compel the attention of the locker room that evening. Tele Daddy -- a 300 lb. Samoan who claimed lineage with the Anoi'a wrestling family, which included The Rock -- threw down his gym bag. He held court in the center of the locker room and even Rich shut up to listen.

"Who stole from me?" Daddy asked.

He pinched his leather wallet between his massive thumb and fore-finger. He'd had \$317 in his wallet and \$267 of it was missing. Nobody was leaving the locker room until he got his money back.

Rich was the first to speak, holding up his hands. "Big man, big man," he called Tele Daddy, corresponding to how objectively much bigger he was than him.

"Can you possibly tell me you know exactly how much cash you had in there?"

Tele Daddy didn't back down. "I know my money."

Rich quizzed him on whether he might have bought a soda when he got to the arena, and if in so doing, a bill or two might have fallen out of his wallet. Or if he paid cash when he gassed up the van he drove from town to town, shuttling his friends, blasting hair metal.

Tele Daddy repeated that he knew his money. He proceeded to make the rounds, one by one, eye to eye, asking if we knew anything about his missing cash. I smelled hamburger on his breath; Old Spice from his body. He slathered it on after his showers, conscious of how easily a big body could stink.

I told him I didn't know anything.

Not everybody stuck around the locker room through the last match, so there was no way to conduct a full investigation. By the end of Tele Daddy's questioning, after Rich had said he didn't know anything, Rich shifted tacks from skeptic to crusader. Maybe moved by Tele Daddy's conviction. Maybe it was something else.

"We don't steal from one another," Rich said. "That's wrestler code. And if we figure out who did this, you can rest assured they'll get theirs."

It rang hollow. Like the kind of promo where the wrestler was reading lines someone wrote for him, rather than speaking from the heart.

Tele Daddy watched.

Tele Daddy listened.

I stole a few times. I don't trust anyone who says they never have. The differences come in regards to what or how much you stole, or from whom, or at what point in life. For me, it was CDs from Chart Toppers, back when they were a thing in the 1990s, peddling new music at fifteen-to-twenty dollars a disc. I didn't take the new music, though, saddled with big plastic cases with their anti-theft devices. I focused instead on the bargain bin.

My pulse pounded that first time, looking around, sliding the CD under the cover of my jacket and walking with my hand pinned to it to keep it from slipping free, so I could act like I was merely carrying it if anyone asked me what I was doing. A feeble lie, sure, but if I stuck to it, how could they prove I was lying, and was it worth pressing a teenage girl over a \$5.99 CD?

I got away with it.

Then it became a habit.

I didn't stop until I got caught.

The two store employees in their neon green polos closed in on me before I got to the exit and told me to open my jacket. There was a lesson in that moment. It was my bad habit of coming to the store multiple times in the same day, sifting through the bargain bin and leaving, never buying anything that screwed me. One of the employees caught me -- a teenage boy with bad acne. He relayed to a college-aged woman and some sort of manager that I was the one I was telling you about.

I got off easy. A stern talking to from a mall cop and a warning not to set foot in Chart Toppers again. My life went on.

Susy was the first to vocalize what I was thinking -- what half the locker room had in mind: Rich was the thief.

There was an absurdity to the theory. RMP was one of the big indies -one of the best-paying promotions shy of the truly national wrestling companies
with cable TV deals. The wrestler's life wasn't lucrative, but working for RMP you
made enough to save for a rainy day -- that is as long as you were smart about
sharing hotel rooms, ferreting away a day's worth of Danishes and fruit from the
continental breakfast, and packing people into cars to split the tab on gas. Tele

Daddy even led a crew of wrestlers with Roth IRAs.

Out of everyone, you'd think Rich would have the least to worry about. He was the boss's son and booked on top, and being on top meant more than a spotlight. It led to a bigger percentage of gates, a bigger base salary, too, not to mention that he collected royalties from the merchandise tables, which pedaled his face on t-shirts and posters.

Rich hadn't always worked for his dad. He had worked in WWE's developmental system. The boys chalked it up as more of a favor from his old man than a demonstration of his potential. He promptly blew that chance on the first random drug test. He spent a spell in Smoke City after that for a change in scenery; a chance to reset. It was a respectable enough place to work; more or less on par with RMP. The wrestlers got put up in a casino hotel and didn't have to travel much, focusing their efforts on five-nights-a-week shows.

The word was murky whether Rich fled Smoke City because his gambling debt had him worried about getting his legs broken, or if his father had bailed him out of trouble, or if he'd been banned from one of the gaming floors for a card-counting scheme. Maybe none of the stories were on point. Maybe they all were. Hear a story from a wrestler, and there's always a shade of gray.

Away from the bad influences of Smoke City, he still had his tendencies. He instigated poker games among the boys in the locker room and found his way to off-track betting sites whenever there was one within striking distance of the arena.

Susy told me when they dated, she spotted him a hundred dollars. It was against her principles to loan money to a boyfriend or a co-worker, but he came to her wide-eyed and desperate. 'Like he'd seen a ghost', she'd said. 'Like the devil himself was after him'.

We watched him talking on the other side of the locker room. Susy stretched athletic tape, coiling it tight around her wrist.

The boys told stories. A lot of them included something getting stolen. They told these stories casually, apropos nothing, old-timers spinning yarns and younger talents trying to get a word in edgewise for a tall tale.

Big Bruiser Olsen, a bald super heavyweight with a hairy back, said he organized a small-time show and had ordered five hundred flyers from a local print shop. The place messed up the order and only made fifty copies, nowhere near enough to paper the town.

"This tampon-necked geek behind the counter has the nerve to tell me there's no time to print more because they're busy." Bruiser ate from a plate of spaghetti. RMP offered catering, which was a leg up from a lot of smaller companies, but the wrestlers had a tendency to complain about it always being cheap food loaded with carbs, like pasta or bologna and American cheese sandwich spreads. Bruiser was never cut like a bodybuilder, never counted calories. He was old school enough not to buck if he had free food in front of him. "So after hours, me and the boys go back to that copy shop."

Bruiser said they were prepared to bust a window, only to find that whoever had closed up for the night forgot to lock up. Maybe they figured they didn't have anything anybody would want to steal besides the copy machines, and who was going to move 300+ lbs. of metal and plastic?

By the time Bruiser and his friends had gotten the machine back to the hotel room and wrangled it through the door frame into their makeshift office, their priorities had shifted. The original plan was to run off the extra flyers they were owed, but with the print shop being unlocked as it was with no sign that they had triggered any alarms, they decided they'd return to the scene of the crime to wallpaper it with 500 or so photocopies of Bruiser's ass.

The machine creaked and groaned under his weight as it churned out copies -- a hundred or so before it blew a fuse. He couldn't remember if they ever did get around to hanging up the copies. Between his ass on the copy machine's glass and the next day, they had railroaded through at least two cases of liquor.

I asked Bruiser what happened to the copy machine. He shook his head, smiling with wonder. "It's still there for all I know."

We hadn't sold more than fifty tickets for a show outside Philly, so some of the boys went to Rich Senior. Putting on the show with a house that small, we were pricing ourselves out of the market. Bruiser, being older, fearless and more secure in his spot, asked Rich Senior how long could we keep pushing his kid on top when he wouldn't draw maggots to a rotten hamburger.

Rich's dad told anyone who'd listen that it was a walk-up town, which in the parlance of the business meant people would show up before bell time, cash in hand, and fill up the seats.

Bruiser muttered that it'd never been a walk-up town before. We worked in front of less than 100 people out of the 1000 folding chairs set up in the arena. Susy insisted on a safer, quieter version of the match we'd been developing, ditching her plancha spot and the super-brain buster she'd been perfecting. Despite her insistence I go for a simpler splash, I still went for my crash-and-burn, missed-corkscrew moonsault to set up the hero for the finish. I'd had it instilled in me that even when I worked smaller time promotions, I ought to give the fans their money's worth, no matter how few of them there were.

Rich went forty minutes in a main event of mostly chin locks and laying on the mat breathing heavily to sell the low key offense. The few fans who were left started clearing out early. You'd think that his dad might address the issue then, either in a closed-door conversation with Rich or some public declaration to apologize to the roster, or at least offer some explanation as to why he was staying the course, but as I was coming to understand in RMP, it was never that straightforward when it came to Rich and his dad.

After some generic praise for a good show, the old man singled out my match with Susy as an example of what he didn't want to see. "You win back a town when you go all out for it. You lose it altogether when you half-ass it." Susy and I both knew better than to say anything. I could even bear to nod along. Susy kept her eyes fixed down on the cement floor. If I weren't sitting right beside her, I might not have noticed that slight tremor in her body, pulsing

with indignation.

Rich Senior went on to announce the King and Queen of the Road tournament. The show would be in Duggan, a town where RMP had a history of drawing crowds. A car dealership he was connected with had agreed to donate new cars to be awarded to the winners.

I noticed one of the boys perk up, revealing himself a rookie, hopeful he might be the chosen one and drive off with some new wheels. One of the first rules you learn in wrestling is that it's not just the storylines that are works of fiction, but the prizes, too.

No one was driving off with one of those cars.

"We're going to gimmick the windshields with sugar glass, so they shatter when somebody hits them," Rich Senior added. "Junior and Dark Warrior are going to do a big spot, and we've got not one, but two cars, so that there's a backup."

Rich clapped his hands. "This is going to be big business!" No one joined him in celebrating.

His father went on with the last item of business while the roster was all there. "It's come to my attention that there was another theft tonight. Gary Page's watch is missing."

Gary was an old-timer. Classy. He was a friend of Rich Senior, doing a short tour with us as a favor to a chum from back in the day. He was old enough that it was believable for him to have a nice watch; old school enough to go straight to Rich Senior to complain rather than making a scene in front of the boys.

Rich Senior went on about 'doing the right thing,' telling folks to say something if they see anything. I ventured a look around the room to see vacant stares and nods; to see Tele Daddy, cracking his knuckles in the corner.

Over beers, after a show, Susy told me how she stole her way into the business.

She started on the up and up. Told her folks, a week before she would have started, that she wasn't going to college. She told them she needed to wrestle.

I could relate to that impulse.

Technically, it wasn't stealing when she walked to the bank and withdrew five thousand dollars cash from the fund her folks had scrounge together. It was a joint account; the money was in her name. Still, she knew what the money was meant for, and that didn't have anything to do with hitchhiking to the training camp an old wrestler named Delilah LeRoux ran across state lines, or Susy buying her first pair of wrestling boots.

I asked her if she'd ever spoken to her parents since.

"Of course," she said. "It was rocky for a few months, but after I'd started wrestling and paying my own way, what were they going to do?"

A waitress delivered our sampler platter, all onion rings and buffalo wings and potato skins smothered in melted cheese, dotted with bacon and chives. A splurge, but the bar sold half-price appetizers after eleven p.m. and we were starving.

"Mom still needles me about the money sometimes, though. She says I

owe her."

I bit into the first wing, spicier than I expected, but once my teeth had sunk through the flesh, it was too late to turn back. The fried skin all stuck together, leaving little choice but to tear it all off the bone in that first bite, my chapped lips burning with the heat.

"She says I stole the money," Susy said. "One time I told her that's how I felt about all the college plans she and Dad made for me -- that they were trying to steal my life."

Rich got caught red-handed going through Billy Glover's duffel bag in a broom closet. From what I could glean, it sounds like it was some sort of set up, where he'd acted protective over the bag like he had something valuable inside, then acted too distracted in conversation to remember to put a combination lock on his locker, all to entice the thief into going for it.

Tiny Terror, one of the little-people wrestlers, played lookout. It wasn't enough for Rich to open the locker or even to take out the bag -- that could have been explained away. The key was for him to leave the locker room with it and sequester himself away.

The guys surrounded Rich. Tele Daddy stood over him, arms crossed, looking every bit the enforcer he played in the ring.

Rich laughed. "Guys, it was a rib! You really think I'm going to steal from the boys, hide and rifle through your things? I figured this'd break the ice about all the thefts going around. It's a joke. "He couldn't explain the punchline, though -- what he was going to do with the bag or its contents, or when he would've given it back.

Rich Senior got involved and asked what was going on. He heard out the prosecution and he heard his son's excuses, feebler in front of his father, when it was clear no one from the locker room believed his lies.

I got mugged once. Weeks out of training camp, still new to the road, driving the same beat-up Chevy sedan I'd taken from home to high school and back in another life.

I was getting in the car, no one else in sight, when the guy came up to me, navy ski mask, switchblade gleaming in the street light and demanded my phone and wallet.

I gave him what he asked for.

He rifled through the wallet, right there in front of me, clearly disappointed that I only had three dollars cash. I almost apologized to him.

I told the other wrestlers about it by way of warning, as if this might be some pandemic they ought to be wary of.

Iceberg Jones laughed in my face. "He must have been out of his damn mind."

Other wrestlers laughed, too. Because wrestlers were strong and used to getting hit. Knife or not, most wrestlers would have taken their chances in a fight.

Sandy Jensen asked why I didn't scream. The other wrestlers were nearby. Someone would've heard.

## **FICTION**

All I could say was that it hadn't occurred to me to call for help or to fight back.

It was a long time ago.

When I made my entrance through the curtain for the show in Duggan, I walked right by the twin sedans, shining under a fresh coat of wax. I gave one an extra look -- I could pass it off as lusting after the car, because after all my match with Susan was a quarterfinal bout for the Queen of the Road tournament, one of these automobiles the prize.

I looked for signs of the sugar glass that would shatter with ease beneath the weight of a body, but whoever had gimmicked it had done a good enough job that it was tough to tell.

Susy and I had started the conversation backstage, born from a shared dissatisfaction at our place on the card. Lady London would win the women's tournament and pose for photos with the car earmarked for her -- photos that would circulate in RMP promotional materials. The car was a further establishment of RMP's legitimacy. While other minor league companies couldn't afford real leather for their championship belts, we had cars at our disposal. Lady London's victory would also fast track her status as a title contender.

I'd beat Susy, then get beaten by Canadian Queen, who'd lose to Lady London in the finals. As such, me vs. Susy was set up to be forgotten. No one remembers a match that's only there to feed the bracket, a route for the losing finalist to get to the end of the night.

When Susy and I talked, we mused about stealing the show anyway. About what it might take to stage something that would get fans talking, even after we were both eliminated from the tournament.

What if we didn't have restrictions?

What if there were no consequences?

In another backstage conversation, Tele Daddy gave his notice. He was leaving the company after this show. His contract had run up a month before and he'd been working on a handshake, as a nicety, but a guy like him had no shortage of places to go, and there weren't many places where anyone had to worry about hiding away their valuables against a thief who was the booker's son.

I didn't have a long-term contract, working shot-to-shot, with the implication that if they stayed happy with me, I'd stay employed. Susy was signed, but only for a month longer.

Tele Daddy told a story about getting in a brawl with a bunch of firefighters.

Young firefighters. Strong firefighters. Brave firefighters. Far from pushovers.

But they weren't wrestlers.

It was a parking lot brawl outside a bar where somebody from one side beat somebody from the other in a twenty-dollar game of billiards, and insults were thrown about how wrestlers were phonies and weren't so tough.

The fight took a little time, but the wrestlers got the better of it. Cooler heads prevailed when they heard police sirens. No matter if the wrestlers were in the right, there's no way that small-town police were going to side with them over

local firefighters. The wrestlers knew they were screwed, because even if they could take the cops, there was no good ending to that scenario, only arrests or somebody getting shot. No, the best thing to do was to run.

Tele Daddy was just a kid, cutting his teeth in wrestling then, and it was his uncle who hollered the idea to steal the fire engine. It was an obviously terrible idea, but who was Tele Daddy to argue? He jumped in with other boys in the cabin, others hanging off the side as his uncle turned on the siren and they tore through the night.

"You stole a fire truck?" one of the young boys asked, not because the story was ambiguous, or even out of incredulity, but with the sheer wonder of a child hearing something sensational.

Tele Daddy nodded. "Those were wild times."

Susy and I worked the match the way we wanted to. We didn't start with a lock up and chain wrestle. We traded haymakers. We didn't save energy for the next round the way the veterans would have advised for any first-round-of-a-tournament match, or set the bar low at this early point in the card, so it wouldn't be so hard for bigger names to follow.

I hit a top rope hurricanrana on Susy.

She kicked out at one, hit a roundhouse kick, and set me up for a burning hammer.

The ref cautioned us to settle down. I shoved him out of the way and swept the ring bell, house mic, and a pitcher of water from the time keeper's tale, so I could slam Susy's body down on it.

The ref called for a double count out, signaling we were out of the ring too long, scrapping the match because there was no point in prolonging a match that wasn't going to follow the script.

We kept fighting.

Officials tried to separate us. Here's an insider secret: if you've got two people who know how to fight, they'll find a way to keep fighting. You know the fix is in when they let a couple of white collars keep them apart before they get another shot in.

Me and Susy could fight. We fought the white shirts. She muttered, come get me, a signal that her heel character was going to run and that I should chase her. Really, we knew we were faster than the people out there to split us apart. Put some distance between us and them, and we could keep fighting.

We fought by the cars.

Susy poked me in the eye and then pulled my hair until she'd wrangled me up onto the roof of the car. She hit a piledriver through the windshield. No need for a backup car. The first worked like a charm, glass shattering on impact with my skull.

I bled, but it didn't hurt much. Maybe that was the adrenaline talking. The real paramedics came out to extract my limp body, and I imagined the pandemonium in the locker room, management and the boys watching on a monitor. Was this a real fight? Had Susy really meant to hurt me?

She stood on the hood of the other, pristine car. She was triumphant.

## **FICTION**

Just as my back made contact with the stretcher, I sprung to life.

I tackled her. Susy's back hit the glass first, technically, but my skull was only a half-beat behind. Our skin shredded, the second car wrecked, we waited for the medical crew.

\_\_\_

It's so easy to steal something. It's not just the cold-hearted criminal who does it, but the average teen, the wrestler after a couple too many drinks. My first real gig in wrestling, back in New England, I stole somebody's boyfriend. I never did pay the price properly from the other woman, but I worked a spot show in New Mexico years later, and one of her friends knew who I was before I knew who she was and she spat in my face.

That's the thing about a certain kind of stealing. You know you were in the wrong. You get caught. You pay the consequences. You never get rid of that warm heat of shame on your skin. I let that wad of phlegm run its course, dripping off my cheek like I deserved it.

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In an ordinary, functional locker room, Susy and I'd have been greeted with cold stares and a veteran or two telling us what damn fools we were for going into business for ourselves before management told us we were fired.

We came back to a standing ovation.

Applause loud enough we could barely hear Rich's complaint, for as loud as I'm sure he was yelling it.

You stole my spot! You stole my spot!

I draped my bloody arm over Susy's war-torn shoulder and touched the top of my head to the side of hers. "No," I said. "We stole the show."



SEVEN ELEVEN FRED LAMBUTH

# LO QUE SUBSUMA CELESTE DE LUNA

# STALINA VILLARREAL

Candlelit, Our Lady of the Checkpoint, relief

print, protector la migra stands on telescopic eyes

with barbed wire alrededor. La calavera observa that death

amenaza our Anzaldúan "conocimiento" of the unknown beyond a bridge,

where a child anchors fenced borderlands with wind turbines y flores.

# FIRST CLASS SEAT

## CRAIG BOEHMAN

# I am among the dearly departed.

Seven miles high; free and clear. They say when your life flashes before your eyes, Mr. Time slows down. What they don't tell you is that Miss Death may pay you a little visit and wipe any notion of a complex and satisfying ending from your screaming narrative, and then, in one hot jalapeno moment, you're accelerated to 120 miles per hour, straight down into the loving arms of one fatal ménage à trois.

# An explosion of such magnitude is like a giant box of Crayola crayons going supernova.

The air is cold, industrial freezer cold. I cannot breathe. It's like a tornado pried open my jaw and climbed inside my throat. I shut my gaping mouthful of frozen teeth and notice I'm still strapped into my first-class seat. There's one thing I did right today — the seat belt. I manage a fake smile for my absentee director and wonder if the guy spinning out of control across the airy debris field saw me. Yes. He smiles back and flips onto his tummy, all four limbs spread evenly across the horizon. He looks like a leaden hawk; says something, screams, waves his hands around wildly. I can't hear him for all the rapacious wind in my ears. He didn't wear his seat belt. He's improvising in free fall. Did he come from coach?

# The Pacific Ocean has made me a promise I know she'll keep.

My sunflower dress is torn to shreds. I spilled a very fine glass of Cabernet down the front of it when the engine blew. I must look like a bloody butterfly that flew too close to the sun. Wishful thinking. Nothing flies this high but fame.

The guy is still screaming at me but he doesn't look scared.

Just passed through my first cloud. No time to reflect because the guy has floated his way over to me. He's not unattractive, just not my type. He could have easily been an extra in the film. It was one of those artful and existential, cinematic messes that would end up winning awards in a few small festivals and then vanish like a rapist.

"Take off your seat belt!" the guy screams in my face.

Why? I want to ask, but then I see the bright marshmallow world of cloud rising fast to greet us. I'm scared. I don't want to go through it alone.

"Help me!" I scream to him. I'm such a damsel in distress. Pathetic. Somebody give me a role in the next King Kong movie.

He unlatches my belt. The click is inaudible. I can't accept I'm going to

#### FICTION

die. My brain holds out for a miracle. Maybe if I hit the water feet first, straight like a ballerina on their tip, tip, tippy toes?

We crash the cloudy lowlands together like a frat party. Straight in, no greeting. Eyes shut; water... water. Super-chilled. Splash! Like a microbe piercing a cotton ball full of suspended shoreline breakers. I count. One. Two. Three.

How many seconds do I have left?

Four. Five. And the entire world, crass and terrifyingly beautiful, opens up before us.

Apart from the few scattered clouds below, the Pacific Ocean is our everything and our everywhere, our here and now. It could be we're falling from the ocean into the sky. We look into one another's eyes. Clutching one another's hands. We're looking like expert skydivers who forgot their parachutes. We're that good. Keep the cameras rolling!

Every good existential film ends badly. Either the director was never really good at telling a cohesive story, or he was just so goddamned brilliant that any abrupt ending would serve as his unknowable portent.

# Save the film critique for hell should I resurface with soul intact.

My partner in death releases me, and we part like dropped onions. He wants to die alone. He wears a ring. He wants to remember her face with what little time. The peach tree. The orchard. A litter of golden puppies. A million other things and a first-class seat.



TANTRA! TOKYO UNDERWORLD
HELLSEA X

# SOMETIMES A CELEBRITY'S ACTIVISM STRETCHES AS FAR AS THEIR PUBLICIST ALLOWS

## THOMAS FUCALORO

They can only hold their head underwater for so long

Here is an award for best outstanding in a commodity

During your acceptance speech you bring light to an issue we deal with everyday

You denounce America while accepting the what it does for your brand

Celebrities are corporations, flowers come with the catering to make everything look natural

You go to the afterparty and not to fight for the cause you lift your head above water

You are congratulated for your bravery and your role you walk out into the night

This dark lavender Rangerover lost, loose and in love with your role in bravery

You yell into nothing and mean it

# THE GRIM REAPER'S WISH

#### **CHARLYN TUZON**

The rain has started to die out. It's a mere drizzle now whereas a couple of hours ago, the tears of the clouds battered the land below without mercy. It only lasted for a few days, but for the people living here, it lasted for a lifetime filled with misery. It was a Thursday when the typhoon arrived, and when it did, it made itself known as one of the strongest to ever hit this place. Hours of heavy rainfall covered the earth, the sky, and everything in between. The flood was expected, but not to this extent; houses were submerged, garbage was floating on the streets, and vehicles drifted away. Winds blew whistles of lament, knocking down trees and electricity posts. Galvanized roofs that once covered houses flew in the air to shatter windows. The areas closest to the sea were immersed in water within the first day. The seawater rose to take over the land and swept everything within reach only to swallow them back to the sea. It was like Poseidon rose from the depths of the ocean to challenge the heavens to war. Poseidon is a myth, however, and I am not.

I have many names. Humans call me The Grim Reaper, Thanatos, The Fourth Horseman, *Shinigami*, Death. Where I am right now, they call me *Kamatayan*. But I do not care what I am called. Names are only for those who have the need for identity. I simply am.

Gray clouds continue to cover the sky, emulating the devastation below. What used to be a city of beauty, bustling with business, filled with smiling children playing on the streets, and people greeting each other with smiles, is in wreckage. If you could fly up high in the air and look down, you would see how it looks like garbage piled on top of another. The houses that were made of concrete are still standing, but those built with only wood and plaster are scattered where the wind has carried them. The trees are bald and some no longer stand. And, if you would believe it, a ship that used to sail the sea was carried over to the town by the flood and now sails the debris of destruction.

I walk where the streets once were. The people who survive have started to assess the damage. Some of them sense me as I walk past while others are too busy crying and searching in the rubble for loved ones they couldn't find, but I know exactly where they are. Behind me is a carriage blacker than the midnight sky; its large wheels rolled silently. It has no windows but black curtains are draped over its dark doors. If you listen close enough, you might be able to hear the whispers from the voices inside. No horse pulls it -- I don't like the idea of animals, dead or otherwise, being used to do another's work. It knows its purpose and it simply follows me when I call.

I stop at what was once a fish vendor's house; a modest family house now all wood, bricks and carnage. The vendor is kneeling in front of it. He is crying and hugging the bodies of his two lifeless children. Their souls are standing just behind the man. The boy, still bright with innocence, holds the hand of his younger sister. I touch the boy's shoulder, letting him know that I have arrived. I take their hands and escort them inside my carriage.

Over and over, I repeat the process of calling the souls. Some do not want to go with me, choosing to stay behind, instead. 'The In Denial Ones', sometimes they don't think I'm real, you see. They are those who do not want to accept death. There are 'The Stubborn Ones' who think they have something left in life they needed to fulfill. How foolish! There are also 'The Guardians' who do not want to leave the people or things they have left behind, they choose to haunt the living world even after what they protected had been long gone. In the end, these poor souls never find peace.

As I reflect on these, I sit -- here -- on the roof of the city hall that is still standing erect and proud. I have sent my Carriage of Souls ahead of me. Work has been exhausting and messy -- mass deaths always are -- but I'm not done here yet. I still have to come back as more souls depart from their bodies. How ironic it is to think you've survived the worst only to succumb to something like pneumonia. I do not pity the dead. I do not have emotions. I was never living, therefore I do not have a heart, but what I do have are eyes, and my eyes see beauty.

The coastline frames the devastated land a few meters away, but the darkness of the night has taken over, and, if I do not look behind me, the destruction can almost be forgotten. The clouds of rain are slowly moving on, and pockets of the sky can be seen, and as if in a tease of bad humor, the crescent moon winks and a few stars shine their light to look at the ruin below.

Allow me to shine some light on a few things for you. First, you are going to die. It is not I, however, who will kill you, nor am I the one who decides on when. I am merely a worker, an intermediary, an employee working for someone with that power. Yes, there is a 'Someone'. Although, I haven't met Someone. Someone is the only one that scares me.

Second, you already know that I was never human, but I have only ever associated one thing with them since I started work in carrying the dead, and that is the perception of beauty. I see it in the colors of the sky as it gives way to light and shadow, and in the way a lion pounces to catch its prey. I hear it when the drops of rain fall suicidal to the ground. I catch it as a volcano spits loud, raging fire to mark its territory. I watch it as the trees dance to the songs of the wind, and I recognize it in the glint of a man's eye as he takes aim to fire a bullet to kill. I cannot get enough of beauty in life and in destruction.

Third, humans are my only clients. Some animals go with me when they have become attached to certain humans. I do not stop them, for I see the beauty in their hearts. Nature is different -- wild. The spirits of the forests, the mountains, the rivers, they do as they like and when they die, their spirits roam free to find new hosts to give life to. That is why nature survives and will continue to longer than humans ever will.

Fourth, you might have wondered how I am able to get to all the souls when humans are constantly dying in every part of your world. Well, time is something that does not exist for me. I could be in Asia fetching typhoon casu-

alties while also be in Europe carrying war victims eighty human years in the past. It also makes me as young and as old as the youngest and oldest human that ever was and ever will be.

Fifth, I am tired. Death has been my life, my identity, and my sole purpose of existence. Lifelessness has been my only company in the same way that weeping has been the only song that I listen to. Chaos has become my favorite painting and innocence has been my only reprieve. Life keeps giving and building and growing, whereas I only keep taking away. So forgive me for repeating myself when I say that I am awfully tired -- for tiredness is a consciousness rather than a feeling of emotion. Only in death shall the long, sought-after freedom be found. Yes, I want to die.

There is a place where human souls go after I have carried them to the other side. A place where the sky burns red, orange, and white, and where, in the vast emptiness of barren land, stands a mountain taller than the deepest ocean bed; its face sharper and more jagged than a pile of hundred-foot rusty nails.

The Carriage of Souls wheels the souls to the head of Judici Mountain, the voices inside no longer spoke. It stops at an opening in the rocks, a cave with an entrance that looks like the blade of a dagger. One by one, the souls step out of the carriage and enter the cave. I have no knowledge of what happens when a soul goes inside the mountain. Some go through it quickly while others stay longer than the years they have spent living. Whichever path they travel through the mountain, I can tell you that when they leave -- when they finally crawl out of the foot of the mountain crying, howling, and beaten up, with their knees on the ground and their eyes finally seeing light -- they are more naked and more vulnerable than a newborn child.

This place, an ominous-looking structure, silent and yet loud with fore-boding, has a mind of its own. The top of it is lost from my sight, and it looms before me as I stand at its feet. It looks down at me as if asking if I dare to confront it. Well, confront it, I do. Warm air blows from the crack where the dead, I've watched so many times, exit; where I, unhurriedly, enter.

Darkness surrounds me and embraces me as if trying to be of comfort. Yet, as I go in deeper, I think that I am transported into the night sky. Clusters of stars twinkle above me. The rough stone that I walk on makes me aware that I am still in the stomach of the mountain (or the anus, if I'm being anatomically correct). I realize that the stars are also at my feet and on the walls beside me. Whatever those lights are, they are guiding the way.

The air is cooling the further I walk, coupled with the blackness, it almost seems reassuring. The lights that look like stars start falling one by one to the ground. I walk on and more lights fall gently as if they are floating downward, until the darkness slowly dwindles, surrendering to light. A snowfield lay before me, quiet and unmoving. Bland whiteness stretches wide, no trees or rocks, or any kind of rise or fall of the land.

I cannot see my feet as they move buried in the snow. The cold is as pleasant as a cool blanket on a stormy night. I tread on, not knowing for how long, or if I am even gaining distance since everything around me looks the same. Step by step feels like a loop. I have the fortune of not being able to feel

weariness, but the monotony is boring.

I decide to stop and change my direction, thinking that it might lead me to some new scenery, or at least find something that isn't white. I turn to my right and put one foot forward when everything suddenly turns upside down. Everything except for me. I am still standing on white, but the snow is now above me, falling to the top-turned-bottom. I slowly walk forward, looking at the bright specs floating around me, contemplating on this occurrence. I see that what I thought to be snow was actually the same as the tiny bits of light that surround me from the moment that I entered the mountain. Each one is as incandescent as the other and yet as cold as ice. I stop again, turn completely around, and take a step. Once more, it happens: everything inverts aside from myself, and the snow that settled on the bottom-turned-top starts falling again. Am I in a snow globe? Whatever this place is, I understand that I am helpless to its whims, so I trudge on.

I maintain my course, continuing in a straight line, lest this place turn upside down on me again. I don't know if the concept of time exists here, but if it does, I have been walking for a long one. What I do know is that this field of luminescent snow has turned from boring to interesting to revolting, and I am getting worn out.

There is a sparkle in the distance. The sparkle doubles and turns into a cluster. As I move closer, I recognize that they are trees; clear and transparent. They are made of ice or maybe of smooth crystal. They look like sentries lined up at the border of a snowfield, stretching from left to right, as far as the eye could see, reflecting the whiteness of the land in front of it. These trees are the first thing that I can call beautiful since I entered the mountain.

I am returned to the darkness. The low shuffling sounds of my feet seem loud within the quiet path. The snow-lights still drift like persistent fireflies. I wonder about the limits of this place; the inside of this mountain. It is bigger than how I imagined it to be while looking from the outside. A place where space is only as far away as the eyes can see, and yet as big as the number of steps taken. Then again, isn't that how human time works?

There is a lake ahead, red and thick. It covers the path, touching the rugged walls with its unmoving ruby water. I cannot see past the surface of the water because of how opaque it was. The air by the lake is different too. It's as thick as the water is opaque, but also warm and metallic. I look around to see if there is something I can use to cross it but find nothing. Did I really expect a boat and its oars waiting patiently for me?

I take a couple of steps on the red water expecting it to go deeper as I walk along, but the level stays the same. Even the top of my toes stay dry. I haven't gone far when I see something in the distance. At first, there are only three of them, but it looks like there are more ahead. They look like large rocks right in the middle of the lake, different sizes, and uneven shapes. There are more snow-lights nestled on them than floating in the air. I reach the closest one and see something written on it. The writing is hard to decipher in the dimness of the cave, but somewhat legible:

Glory Shall Be Mine.

As I read those words, water starts pouring from above, heavy, loud, and blood-red. It is a downpour of crimson rain. The water level rapidly rises. It is already at my knees when I become aware that this is not only a lake, but also a graveyard, and those rocks are headstones, but there are more than rocks underwater. Human limbs sprout from the surface of the water. An arm is standing on its elbow looking like its owner is drowning, reaching out for help. But the arm is only an arm, and nothing else. I can see a leg. It's bent at the knee as if tired from hanging its foot in the air. There's a torso lying face down without a head, it looks like its lower body is underwater, but similar to the arm, there is nothing there. The decrepit lakebed resembles a battlefield but in a cemetery; humans buried in blood, the stench of iron and rot hanging in the air.

It is harder to move as the rain continues pouring, and the water is already at my chest. Some of the headstones are already underwater, but I can still see the top of the taller ones and body parts here and there. I start to swim rather than walk. The blood-rain is unrelenting and, soon enough, everything is underwater. I keep swimming, not knowing where this cursed lake will end. My foot hits something solid. I lose control when I feel something grab me from the water and pull hard. The force disappeared as instantly as it came, but it was enough to drag me under.

I struggle to try to take control and swim up, blinded because of the thickness of the red water, but when my head finally breaks free of the surface, I am in a different lake than the one I was swimming in. This lake is clear, and, though it is still raining, it is not crimson droplets, but ash mixed with snow-lights. Ahead of me is the rocky pathway of the cave. I climb out of the clear lake and look back. Like the previous one, there are many headstones here, but no human limbs. I read a tombstone and make out the words:

#### Breaking For Dawn.

An odd sound is coming from a long-distance away. It reminds me of the deep beating sound of a timpani, low and dark. It comes in slow intervals -- a one-note thump, just soft enough for the ears to pick up, then slowly fades, and starts to thump again just before the softest sound dies away.

A bat flies above so I follow the direction of its flight. I can hear them before I see them; the high-pitched screeching of a whole colony of bats. There are thousands of them flying chaotically, filling the space of the cave with winged pandemonium. The noise was unbelievable as their cries echoe, sounding like murder. They move all at once toward me -- thousands of black arrows let loose to find one mark -- but they ignore me, flying above, around, and past before plunging to the rocky ground, their screeches dying with them. It is as if someone flicked a switch and turned them off. I realize that someone was me. There were thousands of them flying toward me relentlessly, but it didn't take long until the last of them fell dead. Thump, goes the timpani-like beat, as though a period to a cruel sentence.

I don't look back as I walk away; I already know what death looks like.

A tiny light ahead of me, different from the ones floating around, flickers as if consuming oxygen. A small candle sits on a cake abandoned in the middle of a forlorn path. I crouch in front of it. The small fire dances invitingly. The beating thump calls once again. I blow the candle out and watch as the icing

melts. White whiskers sprout rapidly, and green mold took over what was once a delicate-looking cake.

I come upon an opening, an archway carved through the cave wall. I step through and into an enormous room. I stand at the edge of the archway, and below the cliff I am standing on is a small village that is nestled inside, and everything is gray. Houses sit next to each other, their windows open like blank eyes seeing misery. Vehicles are parked in the middle of the small roads, and a multitude of palm trees stand with their leaves bowed as if in sorrow. It is like looking at a sepia photograph. Nothing is moving and nothing is breathing.

I climb down a rough stone stairway and onto the street below. Ash covers the bottom of my feet as I walk, and it is ash that envelops the entire village. Four inches of gray, coarse powder sit on top of the roofs of the houses and cars and anything that lay flat. The patches of grass give a rough texture in contrast to the smooth concrete street. A bicycle that leans on a wooden fence blends into the monochromatic stillness. The leaves on the trees are weighed down, lamenting the loss of color and life.

I climb up another set of stone stairs onto an archway similar to the one before. I look back at the grayscale scene and can't help but smile. Thump. The landscape looks serene and peaceful. The smoothness of the settled ash is like velvet, and the monotony of an equal blandness was harmonious. The tiny floating snow-lights drifted like glitter in a blanket of dust. Ah! Beauty in death and in destruction. Down the road I have walked, I see my footsteps imprinting the trail of Death on the path of desolation.

I continue along the rocky path encountering nothing. These circumstances that the mountain chose to put me in are the same as a bored child's daydreams who is desperate for a playmate.

A hundred steps pass and I realize that I haven't heard that curious thump. My footfalls are silent as well. They aren't loud to begin with, but now they've lost all sound. I raise my hands before me and clap -- no sound. I walk faster, hearing nothing -- not even a hum inside my head. Something is moving above me. I look up and see a row of a hundred thousand wind chimes and bells hanging from the ceiling. They are moving, crashing into each other despite the lack of wind. Their metal bodies, tubes, and clappers collide, but I couldn't hear their cries.

I start running as if to get away -- the cave roof full of unheard clanging -- but I know it is to no avail. I cannot escape what I cannot control. The mountain pushed the mute button. Did it remove the noise of everything, or did it make me go deaf? In the disarray in my head, I try to recall what the noise of ringing sounds like but find that I cannot remember it. I look up at one of the bells and try to imagine what note the metal might have, but it doesn't come. I attempt to conjure the sound of a child's voice in my head, but I cannot. I cannot remember what the sigh of the wind is like, or the buzz of a car's engine, or the purring of a cat, or the gurgling of a tsunami, or the explosion of a bomb. The countless wails and screams of pain I've heard from the dying, how did it go again? The mountain killed sound. I cannot fathom how music is composed; the whistling of the piccolo, the trills of the piano, the moaning

of the cello, the vibrating tone of the trombone, the singing of the violin, the thump of the timpani. The thump of the timpani. The—

Thump, thump! Thump, thump, thump! Thump, thump! It is louder than before. Either because it is closer now or because it is after the soundlessness, I do not know. I can feel it resonating at my feet as well. Thump, thump! It is growing faster, as if each thump is racing the other.

The gasp of air for life. I can hear it in my head. I can remember what breathing sounded like!

The ground starts shaking. A small vibration escalates and cracks the pathway. Rocks are falling from above. Dust powders the air and the walls rumble around me. It feels as if the mountain is ready to get rid of me.

Thump, thump! Thump, thump! Thump, thump! Thump, thump!
There is a shriek, It sounded human; a piercing, high-pitched scream for help. It bounces off the walls and the shrieking doubles. It continues echoing down the narrow path until it sounds like a hundred people are wailing their lungs out in anguish all at once. I cover my ears but it doesn't stop. The snow-lights! They are floating closer to me, encircling me. They're the ones shouting. Each one a different voice, each one from a different human. They're the ones crying! No. Don't be stupid. It is me.

The baby's cry fills the room. The umbilical cord is cut. The baby is wiped down, wrapped in a blanket, and taken to a small bed. The room is still in frenzy, though. The mother doesn't seem to be doing well after the delivery. The medical staff is saying something about the amniotic fluid entering her bloodstream. Words like "excessive bleeding," "respiratory failure," and "cardiac arrest" were thrown around as well. It wouldn't be long before she steps inside my Carriage of Souls.

Lub-dub, lub-dub, lub-dub, goes the baby's heart. Oh, music to the ears! Compared to the cries of pain of the dying, the beat of a heart sounds more soothing, don't you think? I listen to the noise around me. Footsteps on tiled floors, a bed creaking, clothes rustling, machines buzzing, voices of humans rapidly talking. The person checking the baby's vitals is singing a lullaby. I close my eyes. Music, after all, is a beauty best experienced with your eyes closed.

It's interesting how life and death can exist together in the same room and yet never overlap. Life keeps giving and building and growing, whereas Death only keeps taking away. But what if it was Death that gave itself up and Life took it? Then Life would only have to whisper a breath for Death to draw in

I watch the baby while I wait for what I was here to collect. It's no question that our paths will cross over and over, and there will be a day when I will come for her, although not for a while. She will still have to experience coldness in apathy and drown in a battle for passion, she will grieve in truth and in demise, she will be at peace with the calmness, and she will celebrate what is beautiful. After all, one has to live before they can die.



LAGRIMAS TEARS
TAMARA DIAZ

## PALESTINE NOOR HINDI

is a woman. A child in a thobe. Olive pits in my hands. The tatreez on my grandmother's scarf. Is thirty-four Palestinians killed. We don't wake up. American politicians. Occupied country. Israel has the right to defend itself. Ahed Tamimi, ice cream on her tongue, flavor unknown. Are you grateful your parents came to this country? Three hundred dead. Open air prison. Ten-year blockade. Rouzan al-Najjar, accidental bullet. Pomegranate so bloody. My grandmother, born ten days before Nakba, gun powder in her blood. Stop killing us. Stop telling us how to fight. Is grape mint hookah, country I've never visited. Woman, body bruised and policed. Is queer. Is fuck the patriarchy. Three hundred thousand Palestinians killed. My father crying to Omavma El Khalil. Sweet black tea. fresh mint stuck on the roof of my mouth. Two state solution. We thought the house was empty. Is stranger living in my great-grandfather's home, eating the pomegranates he planted. One hundred acres of farm land. So how do you say your name again? Is \_\_\_\_ Palestinians killed. Sunflowers on their graves. Seeds we crack between our teeth. spitting out each shell before digging another grave.



LOVE HEALTH WISDOM DOSE

MY LINH MAC

# THE CHAFFEE CUP SAMI A.F.

"Mom, can read my future?"
I told her passing my cup of dried-up Turkish Coffee.
She sees me squint when I drink it, she knows I don't like it,
She knows I just want her to read the line sit left behind.

Mom sits up and puts her on red glasses she wore for years.

I see

I see mountains on Knefe and Baklava.

I see The Empire State Building

I see words you regret.

I see no marriage, why?

I see pride and colors.

I see jobs that take you away from me.

I see no marriage, why?

I see a man you stick by, why?

I see no children, why?

I see you leave home.

I see you live in airports.

I see no marriage, why?

I see opportunity but I am not there.

I see you laugh

She stops, smiles, and says,

I see you laugh, that's nice.



LONG LIVE THE KING
JUSTIN O'KEITH HIGGS

# THE PROJECT ALEX MCMILLIN

I hadn't expected the strange and disturbing tattoos I was getting to jeopardize my job until midway through the second year of the process, when it was time for the work on my neck and face. The first tattoos, on my ribs—really one huge off-white tattoo of ribcage and sternum bone—happened to be covered by the standard sunray-yellow t-shirt of my employer, Sunshine Demolition.

My tattoo artist, Gene, was reputed to be the best in Southwest Florida, and his prices—which were just short of outrageous—reflected his standing in the small local community. Gene was in his 60s, burly, expansively gray-bearded, and always clad in about six cows worth of black leather. He hadn't expressed any reservations when I explained my two-year plan to painstakingly cover my entire body with anatomically accurate tattoos of my muscles, bones, and organs. In fact, Gene hadn't expressed much at all. He simply nodded and asked where I wanted to start.

I had prepared a lengthy explanation for the questions that I'd thought were inevitable, but I wasn't prepared for a total lack of interest in what my girlfriend (by then my ex) had called a "sick obsession." I mumbled something about internal organs, and Gene chose to start on my liver. I have to admit that I was drunk during that first visit—and for most subsequent visits.

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I didn't realize the significance of Gene's choice until I took a sledgehammer to the first house of the following day. The pain from my liver seemed part of my flaring hangover, which came on as I sweated out last night's booze. The tattoo had hardly hurt at the time (from what I could remember), but the repetitive twisting and turning motions that came with tearing up a decent-sized house stretched the swollen skin on my torso until it split and started to bleed through my shirt. I could've grabbed some ice from a nearby cooler. Instead, I let it hurt. The pain filled my mind until there was no room for anything else.

Pain wasn't the point of my obsession. It was an added benefit. If you'd asked me then about the point of my project, you wouldn't have gotten a straight answer. I had some vague idea of showing society what it had done to me—how being ignored and treated like garbage my whole life had ruined my body and my mind. Honestly, I didn't really think about the point of the tattoos at the time. The growing pain helped numb my mind, especially when Gene finished my ulcerated stomach and moved onto my ribs.

At some point, I began wearing a black tank top under my work shirt. Laundering the blood out of my only Sunshine t-shirt every week was getting tedious, and the guys in my crew were asking questions. I only wanted to discuss my tattoos on Instagram where I could ignore the responses of specific humans. My anonymous account—which had previously featured

snaps of strippers, booze, and weed—had something like 100 followers on the day I posted the first shot of my liver and half-finished stomach. In 24 hours, the picture accumulated over 250 likes. The majority of the fifty-odd comments expressed support for my "cool tattoo ideas" and for the superior quality of Gene's work. Only a few expressed the shock that I was looking for. Still, I was the object of attention for what felt like the first time in my life.

I continued to post pictures of the project and my Instagram following slowly approached the four-digit mark. It would have grown quicker if Gene would have reposted the photos on his shop's page, but Gulf Tattoo was just about the only tattooing establishment in the known world without an Instagram account. I brought this up at our next session.

Gene looked up from one of my gory ulcers (done with a surgeon's hand in crimson ink which was indistinguishable from the blood that he'd wipe off) and said, "Nah, brother. I don't need to fuck with that shit. People around here know who I am." The buzzing resumed and my pained groan precluded any follow-up questions.

Gene was calm and methodical, working slower than the hacks who'd inked my stars, skulls, lightning bolts, cannabis leaves, naked girls, and Hemingway quotes. He never took a break. Never even looked up. Unlike the rest of humanity, he didn't feel the need to fill silence with small talk. I appreciated this—being un-alone without having to listen to some idiot's boneheaded political opinions or look at pictures of their ugly kids.

I listened to the tattoo gun's ceaseless buzz, savoring the agony that came when he pressed the needle deep into my flesh. An especially talkative SoCal tattooist said that this was necessary to achieve 'the verisimilitude of shading' found in the best tattoos. I wanted to ask Gene about it. Instead, I asked if I could smoke in the shop.

"You can smoke outside," he said without looking up. "We're done for to-day."

Gene wiped the blood, ink, and sweat off a cluster of ulcers near the entrance to my small intestine. I watched him inspecting his work, hoping to learn something from the old man. He seemed to have some hidden truth of life figured out. He nodded and began cleaning the gun.

"You want a smoke?" I asked as I struggled to my feet.

"Quit years ago," he said. "Drive safe."

I froze at the exit of his tiny shop. I hated it when people told me to drive safe. The superior tone in their voices. Gene, however, had sounded more bemused than patronizing.

I lit my cigarette before the door swung closed. The skin on my stomach was screaming bloody murder. I climbed into my filthy Wrangler and pulled out of Gulf Tatoo's ruined parking lot. It was a rainy Monday night and the winter holidays had ended six weeks prior. The pain gradually faded to a dull ache as I drove through the empty streets. I sailed through a dozen green lights before catching a red at the 75 on-ramp. A cold wave of endorphins surged through my body, raising goosebumps from my scalp to the soles of my feet. I took a heavy drag on my cigarette and watched sparks swim through my peripheral

vision.

"Not bad," I mumbled.

The light turned green and I white-knuckled my way back to the shitty little studio apartment that I shared with Ernest, my best and only friend. Ernest was a one-eyed ex-stray cat with fur so black he looked less like an animal and more like a cat-shaped void. I parked my car in its usual space and got out after checking for lurking crackheads. My apartment building was a shitty fleabag motel until Red Roof Inn's corporate offices pulled the owner's franchise license after a meth lab exploded.

Some of the crackheads who hung around the parking lot still talked about the crack drought that followed the explosion. The presence of drug cops surged in the immediate area, driving the local dealers further underground for a week or so. It didn't seem like a long time until I thought about not drinking for a week.

I made it into my worn-out motel room without incident. It came with furniture (except a bed), which was a plus since I didn't have any at the time I moved in. This was the only place in Fort Myers that had a landlord sketchy enough to rent to a tenant as sketchy as I. I had seriously considered living in my car before getting approved for this place.

Rent was due in three days and I was already a month behind. I leaned back against the door and closed my eyes. Every surface was covered in cigarette butts, junk food wrappers, and empty containers of alcohol. Ernest was hiding in his usual spot under the worn desk jammed in the corner.

I'd spent nearly all of my pathetic paycheck on booze and tattoos. Even if I could find a way to make rent, I still owed hundreds of dollars in late fees. I was too drunk to deal with this so I just kept drinking till I passed out. In the morning, I'd be sober—at least until I had my 'breakfast'.

My Instagram following continued to grow. I'd recently passed 1000 followers. When a company called Tattoo Balm offered to send me free products in exchange for a sponsored post. I hesitated before accepting their offer. I didn't want my fans to think that I was a sell-out.

I started taking two water bottles to work—one for water and the other for vodka. I drank more and more on the job. I tried to hide the drinking at first, but soon I was stumbling around with liquor on my breath. One day, my crew leader pulled me aside during an early-morning smoke break and told me to get my shit together or get off the team.

"If I hadn't been there myself, you would already be out on your ass," Big Tom said.

I looked into the man's cross-eyed stare, not sure whether I wanted to throw a punch or beg for help. I looked away and nodded. He clapped me on the shoulder and walked off.

I decided that I needed to dry up and work hard enough to keep this shitty job. I'd maxed out my credit cards paying the rent, and there'd be no way to pay for the next round of tattoos if there were no more paychecks. I knuckled down and suffered through my shifts without taking so much as a drop.

It wasn't long before I got the shakes. It started a day after I quit. Unfor-

#### FICTION

tunately, I couldn't afford to take so much as a single day to dry out in peace. Besides, laying around my apartment would just lead me back into drinking. Instead, I sledgehammered shitty plywood houses into a million jagged pieces and tried to think of hand tattoos that would illustrate this new problem of mine. When I couldn't, I thought of the families who'd once lived in these "teardowns."

This was somebody's dream house was something that I got in the habit of thinking every time I started busting apart another fiberboard shitbox.

One night, I showed up at Gene's shop without an appointment. Gene took walkins when he wasn't booked solid, which he was most weekends and holidays. This was a Thursday or maybe a Wednesday and I managed to get in after waiting for an hour and a half.

I hadn't been able to afford a session for three or four weeks, yet he didn't seem surprised to see me. He gestured toward the chair and grabbed a new pair of black latex gloves. I took off my shirt and waited. He wiped off the fist-shaped hole on the left side of my chest—the blank spot for my heart. He grunted and prepped the tattoo gun. I sat back on the vinyl chair, waiting for the pain. I tried to appear nonchalant when Gene turned around, his gun loaded with purple-gray ink. The color seemed off, but I held my tongue. The man knows his shit.

Gene raised an eyebrow and I nodded. I took a deep breath and let it out all ragged and split. The gun started buzzing. The needle felt like it was stabbing into my skin fifty times a second.

I hoped that my heart would be a big hit on Instagram. The picture of my finished stomach had received over 500 likes, and I'd reached 2500 followers that night. My heart ought to get 1000 likes.

A flash of pain broke me out of my thoughts. I suppressed a yelp and looked down at my chest. Gene had the needle so deep that it seemed to be in the muscle.

"Hold still, brother," Gene murmured.

I broke out in cold sweats. Asking for a "bathroom" break to catch my breath seemed a little transparent, and I didn't want to disrupt the man's work. I kept a straight face, but inside I was screaming—a skill I picked up as a kid.

Gene paused to reload the gun. "If you sit tight, I just might be able to finish the outline tonight."

The endorphins were kicking in and I relaxed a little. The pain came through the crashing waves of relief like the swallowed sound of someone screaming into the night surf. I was gliding. All I had to do was ride out the pain. I was drained like I had busted a nut—but in a much less pleasant way. I felt like I hadn't slept in days. The skin over my heart throbbed with my pulse. All my blood gathered there.

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My attempt at sobriety lasted for one miserable month. I was sick every single day of it. I couldn't dry up completely. I still had to drink three shots before I could think about sleeping. It was just enough to keep me in a perpetual state of withdrawal. I called in sick far too many times that month, and I could tell

that Big Tom's patience was wearing thin. Drinking was the only way I knew to blow off steam, and without it, I felt like I was going to explode. Three shots before bed became five, and I started having a beer or three with my dinner. Before long, I was back to drinking on the job.

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This has all happened before and this will all happen again became my mantra as life slipped through my fists. I knew what was coming. Over the past several years, I had begun to make getting fired something of an art form. I would get smashed and tell my boss and coworkers what I really thought of them. Some would laugh, others would curse me out. The guys at Sunshine Demolition were different. Even if I got piss-ass drunk, I'd only have good things to say about them. I imagined drunkenly complimenting the guys on my crew as Big Tom sadly and reluctantly fired me.

I waited until the rest of the guys had grabbed their pay envelopes and left before I approached Big Tom. "I wanted to leave before I embarrassed myself any more," I said, picking at the envelope's gluey flap. I felt a wave of tears scalding my eyeballs.

Big Tom grunted. He put his palms flat on the desk and pushed himself up from his chair until he was more or less upright. "Give me a call if there's something I can do," he said. "Good luck."

I shook his hand and left the office as quickly as possible.

I don't know if I'm going to make it through this one, I thought as my old Jeep rattled over the shambolic North Fort Myers asphalt near the office. I stopped at a light near the river. Trailer parks lined both sides of the street. A little ways down the cross street was a Waffle House, one of the older, shittier ones. If I do, this is probably where I'll end up living.

I was lost. North Fort Myers was the poor white trash suburb. I grew up in Fort Myers proper, so I didn't know these streets. I hadn't visited North Fort Myers for a year or more. When I took the Sunshine job, I had just been fired from my third copywriting job in three years. I was pretty much unemployable by the standards of any reputable corporation. Now I was unemployable, period.

I wandered through the cheap streets north of the river for another half-hour before I finally stumbled across I-75. I had a GPS app on my phone, but my service had been cut off. Besides, I was in no hurry to get home. Every cell in my body screamed for the half-full bottle of whiskey I'd left on top of the TV. I hoped I'd never reach it.

I took 75 south a few miles to my exit, thinking all the while about just driving, driving through Fort Myers, Estero, Bonita Springs, Naples, plowing east down Alligator Alley toward Miami and finally taking 997 southbound from the outskirts of the city to where it became US-1 and driving all the way to Key West—the end of the line. One last chance.

The motel was visible from the freeway, the whiskey was whispering my name. I took the exit home.

The biggest problem, so far as I could see, was money. I needed enough money to finish the project and I needed money for liquor. I force-stopped all thoughts

of my looming eviction. I knew from experience that it would be three months or perhaps more before my case went through the court system. Hopefully, I could turn things around before then.

I had to sell the old Wrangler that'd served me so well over the years. More than once I skidded it into a roadside ditch and walked away unharmed. The Jeep had accumulated a fair few dings and scrapes over those last drunken years, yet nothing major ever broke.

My father loaned me two grand for the down payment when I was a pimply high school kid. I still owed him \$1800 of that \$2000. I'd only made two of the twenty payments we'd agreed on before moving out of their house and into a domestic war between my slash-happy girlfriend and her meth-head mother, who'd hardly seemed to notice I was living with them. My girl had started drinking heavily after getting a hold of a fake ID somewhere, and I hadn't wanted to watch her drink alone.

I managed to get my GED and even a college degree while drinking an ever-flowing river of whiskey and beer. I had functional alcoholism pretty much figured out until I woke up one day and I simply couldn't stop drinking, not any more than I could stop breathing.

I checked the Blue Book on my Wrangler, which I loved as much as I loved Ernest. Fifteen grand can buy a lot of whiskey. Even after paying Gene to finish the tattoos. I could even pay Dad back most of what I owe. It's not like I need to drive to work anymore. I listed the Wrangler on Craigslist. I had no shortage of pictures to choose from in my Instagram account. When I opened the app, I saw that I had 398 new followers since my last sign-in. No way did I get 400 new followers in... less than a day.

After a little digging, I realized that a huge tattoo account had posted a link to the picture of my stomach tattoo. I took another swig of whiskey and checked my messages. There was another message from Tattoo Balm. They wanted me to do another sponsored post, but this time they were actually offering to pay fifty bucks.

I spent the money from the Tattoo Balm post on two big plastic bottles of cheap whiskey and a huge 64-pack of ramen. I passed the time by sitting in front of my ancient TV and occasionally checking for messages from people interested in the Wrangler. Each day brought a fresh barrage of emails, and some of these even seemed legitimate. I didn't respond to any of them.

I visited Gene twice more before running completely out of money. He was able to finish my heart and even started outlining my lungs near the end of the second session. I set my usual Tuesday afternoon appointment before leaving, though I was flat broke and unsure when Tuesday was anymore.

I woke the following afternoon with my usual gargantuan hangover. *Time for a little hair of the dog.* I rolled to one side of the cot and groped for the bottle, but came up with the hair of my cat instead. Ernest swatted my hand for the rude awakening and padded away.

"Good morning to you, too," I mumbled as I rolled to the other side of the cot. I grabbed the whiskey and lifted it to my cracked lips. The sunlight came through the far window's crooked blinds and lit up the two fingers of amber at

the distant bottom of the value-size bottle. I swore and took two quick swigs. I didn't have enough for this afternoon, let alone this evening.

I considered buying a bottle of the cheapest wine they had at the neighborhood liquor store. It would carry me through the day if I went at it slowly. I was pretty sure that my bank account was overdrawn, but I did have a coffee can half-full of spare change. I drank the rest of the bottle and started to get dressed.

Ernest laid atop the desk and watched me with one yellow eye.

"Don't worry," I told him, "I won't sell you. You're not worth anything, anyways."

Ernest meowed.

"It's okay, buddy. Neither am I."

I put on my Sunshine Demolition shirt, the least foul-smelling t-shirt I could find. Ernest jumped down from the desk and daintily crossed the filthy carpet to sit at my feet.

"Don't worry, buddy. I'm going to get you your food and your shots. I just gotta get the money first."

I tore the room apart in an increasingly unhinged search for the Wrangler's title. Finally, I found it behind the desk. I had a vague memory of getting it out a while back to check something.

"This is it. Rock bottom." I gestured around the room. "We can only go up, right?" Ernest meowed and started licking one of his front paws.

I unfolded the title and teared up when I saw the date it'd been issued. If you'd have told me then that it would end up like this. I slapped myself on each cheek and took a deep breath. The Jeep dealership was less than five miles away.

I figured that I'd get twelve grand for my Wrangler at the dealership. \$3,000 was a big hit, but I should still have enough for booze and tattoos. And cat food. I could have tried to sell the Jeep through Craigslist by the end of that day, but going to the dealership was just so much quicker and easier. I would be hitting the liquor store with a flush bank account in less than an hour.

"No matter how many of these we get," the guy at the dealership said, "no matter what year they are, these Wranglers just fly off the lot. I can offer you \$10,000. And that's a firm offer." He sized me up. "We can even do cash if you want. Go right across the street to the bank."

"Check's fine." I pulled the title from my back pocket and unfolded it. He took the title from my hands and grinned like a shark. "Awesome, man."

We sat at his desk. He was a pudgy middle-aged redneck with a silver stud in one ear. I listened to him clack away at the computer. He pulled out a rollerball and inscribed an old, thick piece of paper, filling out the title's transfer section.

The salesman slid the paper across the desk till it was well within my reach. "Just need your mark, brother, and I can print you the check right here." I scribbled my signature on the dotted line.

"Shake on it?" the man asked, trying to appear magnanimous. I gave his hand a half-hearted shake.

He turned to hit a single key and the printer started whirling. I checked my watch. I'd been there for nearly 45 minutes. It would take five minutes to get to Costco for liquor and cat food and another five minutes to get home. Even if it took me fifteen minutes to find the cat food and check out, it would only be twenty-five more minutes before I could have a drink.

The guy handed me my check and happily wished me a good day. I realized that I'd need an Uber to Costco and another to get home. I told myself I'd get a bike. It'd be fine. I took a picture of the check and deposited it into my bank account.

I lean forward in my seat, looking around the ragtag collection of down-and-outers circled around me. Most seem to be paying attention. A few of the shakier ones even lean forward in unison. I've told this story a dozen times for my home group, but tonight I'm one of the guest speakers at the Estero group's Tuesday meeting.

"The only night I remember clearly is the night I jumped off the bridge. I do kind of remember visiting Gene three more times before then. I know he was able to finish tatting my lungs, which..." I hold aloft the unlit Marlboro between the fingers of my left hand. The smokers amongst the group allow themselves a small smile. "You can imagine what those must look like."

I sigh, partially for effect.

"Anyway, that night I hadn't had anything at all to drink. I still had plenty of money left. I just decided that day that I wanted to torture myself by not drinking. I put a double shot of whiskey in my morning coffee, but nothing after that. I was feeling pretty sick by the end of the day. I laid in bed and thought This is what my life has come to. One kind of sickness or another. I didn't have the strength to get better on my own, but I had no one to help me, no money for rehab, no nothing. So I decided to get it over with and just kill myself. If I'd had a gun, I wouldn't be sitting here boring y'all with my story."

I take a sip of the meeting's terrible coffee.

"I didn't have anything to hang myself from, I didn't have any pills I could overdose on. I was too scared to slash my wrists. Scared of the pain, maybe a little scared of the blood, too. But I did live really close to a high-ass bridge. The Caloosahatchee Bridge. And I always wanted to fly. So I walked to the bridge and then up to the middle where it's the highest above the river—100 feet, maybe. Not the tallest bridge, but I figured it would be high enough if I went in head-first. And I jumped. I just... I didn't want to give myself time to think about it. I just fucking jumped. And I jumped head-first. At the last possible instant I instinctively put my hands out. I must have hit the water just right. I couldn't even tell you exactly. After the shock of impact, my first thought was... I'm fine. I wasn't even in pain. I knew there were gators and shit in the water, and all of the sudden I didn't want to die. I swam to the park next to the bridge and got out of the water. I had to swim against the current, but I was sober and I've always been a strong swimmer."

I fake a cough to collect my thoughts.

"When I got there, I took a seat on one of the benches facing the water

and stared at the lights across the river. I looked up at the stars, the moon. I realized that the universe had produced me for a reason, and it would be disrespectful for me to take my own life like that. We think we get to choose our deaths, but we really don't. When you die, even if you kill yourself, it's because the universe—or, to put it another way, your Higher Power—has decided that it's your time to go."

"Amen to that," says Big Tom from his seat beside me.

"Amen," says a dried-up old hag.

"I'm not a religious guy, but I believe the universe has a place and a purpose for all of us or else we wouldn't be here. Anyway, I went to my first meeting the next day." I shrug. "And that's my story."

"Thanks for sharing," the group says in unison.



**ALWAYS**CYNTHIA YATCHMAN



#### **INTERVIEW**

Brittny Ray Crowell is a native of Texarkana, TX. She earned a BA in English from Spelman College and an MA in English from Texas A&M-Texarkana. Recently, she won the Donald Barthelme Prize in Poetry and the Lucy Terry Prince Prize, judged by Major Jackson. Her poems and art have been published or are forthcoming in Frontier, The West Review, Mount Island, Aunt Chloe, Glass Poetry, Cosmonauts Avenue, The Journal, and the anthology Black Lives Have Always Mattered. Currently, she is a teaching assistant and PhD candidate in Creative Writing and Literature at the University of Houston.

I first encountered Brittny and her poetry when I served as Art Editor for Glass Mountain, University of Houston's Undergraduate Literary Magazine. It was our Halloween reading in Fall 2019 and she was one of our featured readers. Quiet, dressed nice, and such a beautiful presence. I would be lying if I said I could recite her poetry, but in truth, I remember the impression. Her poetry felt so Southern and I related. Dealing with family, trauma, religion, and living in Texas. She is a native of Texarkana, but if you're from Texas then you know that connection felt when hearing someone singing a song similar to yours; recognizing words that one would only know if you grew up in the South, having family members who sound the same, and honestly just hearing someone with a similar accent gives me a sense of comfort. Instantly, I was impressed and changed by her poetry. Come Spring 2020, I attended Glass Mountain's online writer's conference, Strikethrough, a result of the virus and the inability to host our usual 5 day, in person, writer's conference, Boldface. It was such a pleasure. She taught her workshop, Pop Culture and Persona: Poem as Narrative Artifact, and through her teaching and the banter in between, I learned just how down-to-earth, humble, and wise this poet is. Immediately, I decided to ask for an interview and share her wisdom I witnessed during our workshop. Due to the virus, and convenience, we completed our interview using email

Amanda Lopez: How are you doing today?

during June 2020 - July 2020.

Enjoy

**Brittny Ray Crowell:** Pretty good. It goes, you know. Just happy to be around— "In the land of the living" as my grandma would say.

**AL:** Could you tell me about the beginning of your writing journey? What compelled you to write.

BRC: My interest in writing spurred from my desire to read. My mom said when I was little, I wanted to learn to read so much that I would pretend to read anything lying around. My grandparents were in education, so when I stayed with them throughout the week while my parents were working nights, I would read all the books on their shelves. It's probably cliché—but I loved Poe. I was a sensitive little thing, and this one poem "To—" was so poignant to me. That he could write about loving someone who felt only pity for him. But Zora Neale Hurston, and Toni Morrison... they were IT for me; and Octavia Butler. I later saw her note-

books and found out how she literally willed herself into being as a writer. She is my patron saint.

I wrote my first poem in a little spiral notebook that had ladybugs on the cover around 7 or 8, then a poem for my great grandmother's funeral. Writing was always a way for me to try to immortalize how I felt in a moment. I think my work is still very much tied to elegy and eulogy today. I also credit a lot of my progression as a writer to the creative writing camp I attended as a kid. I ended up teaching and later co-directing the program which meant a lot to me. The whole full circle aspect. My mother is actually the first writer I knew. She has mounds of notebooks stored away. She is the prototype.

AL: What particular writers influence your writing?

**BRC:** I'm definitely drawn to Black southern writers. I feel like there's a code behind the palimpsest I understand, a sentiment in their word choice and imagery that resonates with me. Jericho Brown and Natasha Trethewey are definitely the first that come to mind. Also, anyone that knows me knows all too well my obsession with A Van Jordan's MACNOLIA. I carry that book everywhere with me like a baby blanket. Danez Smith's work always hits me everywhere I can feel. I love Eve Ewing's 1919 for her ability to evoke history as a means of witness and a kind of ancestral reckoning.

AL: For me, your poetry sounds very southern. The stories sound familiar for me since I am also born and raised in the South. Would you say that your writing tends to be influenced by where you're from? Are there times you want to purposely convey what it felt like to you growing up in the South?

BRC: Absolutely. It's definitely purposeful, but I don't think I could write a poem without that kind of essence. It's so much a part of who I am, the facets of my imagery (sonically, visually, metaphorically). My hometown, Texarkana, is such a heavy-laden place. All types of hard earned and resilient, pain patinated beauty that I feel like I have to show the world. I want everyone to know the country folx and things I see, the things that stick with me, and for everyone to somehow love them and how I love them. I think a lot about being a Black writer from the south—at least for me— is about salvaging what you know could die. For instance, when I think of my elders' voices, I think about how they use certain words like "commode" or "tote", or how they pronounce some words with a special "r" that makes the word "turn" sound like "toyin". No one my age and under speaks like that, but it's the accent of my memory. I'm trying to preserve it and the people that used it. Their stories are my inheritance.

**AL**: As a woman, and as a woman of color, it can be difficult to break the surface and be heard through your writing. Would you like to discuss your views on that subject?

#### **INTERVIEW**

BRC: Being heard as a Black woman is always a conundrum. I don't wait for permission to be heard because if I did, they'd be able to dictate how often and how loud. So, I put it out of my mind in a sense. I write like everyone is listening, and those that matter, who I chose to give my voice to, will hear it. I have to give myself that agency, to always believe it exists. I have to be assertive in terms of how I perceive my voice being projected in my writing because I know Black women are constantly at odds with everything trying to put a hand over our mouths in so many ways. I'm not the most assertive person, but I don't hold myself to what I think people want to hear or are "ready for." If you don't hear me, somebody will. Someone might be waiting for me to say this. I don't worry about anyone in the way. As a teacher, I try to instill this in all my students, particularly those who are Black, POC, or those in the LGBTQ community. I teach them that your voice will find its way back to your folx. Damn everyone else.

AL: When I have a thought for a poem, I can just be driving in the car and start having a deep conversation with myself inside my head, or I can be walking by someone and they say a phrase, or just living in the moment. Would you also say that you have random outside influences that trigger your want to express how you felt within that moment, or would you say that you write reflectively?

BRC: There's something I heard recently about "the two types of writers" I can't remember that would help me out with this, but alas (ha ha). A lot of my process involves external triggers or nudges. Trigger not necessarily in terms of trauma but something that pulls at a loose thread until something is unraveled. Back in the pre-covid gap, I liked to listen to people's conversations in passing. Snatching little tidbits. I still do this with whatever I'm watching or listening to, or just in conversations with my family. Sometimes my little girl will ask me what a word means, and I love the process of trying to decipher or translate meaning for her. Trying to explain God—"do they poop?"—or how thoughts work. Those conversations are already little poems. The process of making comparisons to help her understand are like metaphors. I've gotten a lot from that.

AL: Your workshop at Glass Mountain's Strikethrough Conference, Pop Culture and Persona: Poem as Narrative Artifact, was fantastic. It really opened my eyes to the influence of a persona poem. I believe if not only the subject matter, but truly your approach to leading a workshop. You decided that we would have different options for how we wanted the other members of the workshop to approach the poem, and you allowed us to speak. You wanted to focus more on what the writing was accomplishing within the poem rather than what they, the writer, could revise. Different than traditional workshops lead at UH. Would you say that the traditional approach to workshops hinders the writer's creativity for editing, possibly damaging the writers' confidence in their writing, by trying to focus on technical rather than the freedom that comes with writing without restrictions?

BRC: The best workshops I've encountered are all about getting to the possibilities of a poem. It might begin with an objective—"y'all write about this" or "here's what I was trying to do"—but I really like the approach of seeing what is already on the page and what the poem is attempting or seems as if it wants to say. That's where all the technical stuff comes in for me. The poem is trying to do this. How do I do that? What are the different ways that that might be achieved? Francine "Frank" J. Harris has been really great with guiding us with this process without having us feel like we're trying to achieve what "the sage" wants. Hayan Charara's workshop menu, where the feedback is centered around what the writer thinks they need or is interested in achieving has really influenced how I see the whole process. It doesn't need to be steeped in so much fear. I'm interested in possibilities and suggestions, versus correction. When that type of environment is established, it's so much easier and approachable to get into the technical because you don't feel like people are there to gut you like a fish.

**AL:** Given the current events (The Pandemic, the BLM movement, Trump, and so on) have you found it hard to write or has inspiration sparked and it's helped you write more?

BRC: It's been very hard for me to write. I felt guilty about it for a while, but I decided that it's more important for me to strategize how to live and process in this moment, than to beat myself up about writing. The writing will come from reflections on what it was like to be here. It's difficult for me to write in the thick of it. It's like trying to write everything you see with your head out of a car going 1000 miles an hour. There are writers that can do this beautifully, elegantly. Stilling the blur is definitely a focused practice that I'm interested in, but for now, I'm just being really gentle with myself. I have been exchanging work with a few friends in the program. Two of us have been getting together virtually on Sundays to do some writing exercises and to chat. That's really helped (hey, Tompkins!)

**AL:** Has writing helped you to process the current events?

BRC: I think I kind of touched on this, but right now, it's hard. Sometimes writing for me is better at a distance. There are things that still hurt too much. There's a lot of fear to contend with. Things that we all don't know how to say in the midst of it, and the pressure to feel like everyone wants or expects you to write about it doesn't help. I believe some of us are caught in a private time during a public moment. In terms of BLM, it's encouraging to see this sort of mass awakening, yet I can't say that there's not a bit of sorrow and frustration. We've been trying to tell y'all. How do we heal from the trauma of things that have been left to bleed for so long? It's a place that's hard for me to create from right now at this moment and I'm ok with that. I don't have any expectations for what that work might look like either. It might come out as the personification of an ugly, snot coming from your nose cry, or it might be something else. I'm just taking the time to make sure I'm emotionally equipped to be at the reins of what I feel and when I want to write about it.

#### **INTERVIEW**

AL: Referring to your workshop, we had a day where we picked a song and wrote a poem from a persona that could have come from that song. Music and poetry are definitely interchangeable. I believe to be a nod to the feel of that certain era as well. What we embodied at the time. The sound of a poem really sets the foundation, to me. Words resonate through vibration. Steven Dunn's workshop, "Getting Your Sentences to Feel Like What They're Describing," also during Glass Mountain's Strikethrough Conference, discussed this. I was watching Hip Hop Evolution on Netflix last night and it's so beautiful to hear the different sounds that represent different regions. There was Bounce from New Orleans, of course you know Screw for Houston, music from New York, Virginia, and so on. Knowing the influences and significance of sound, what would you suggest to writers when trying to accomplish not only a melody, but a specific sound for a certain subject matter? Your poetry has a beautiful sound by the way.

BRC: Thank you! Martha Serpas taught me the best thing ever when it comes to the sound of a poem— "Follow the music". That's always in the back of my head. Sometimes I try to activate that with a phrase I heard that just won't leave my head. I just write whatever sounds like it would come next without trying to force any connections, then I try to step back and see what's going on. Carl Phillips and Francine J. Harris have influenced me a lot about the way sound and meaning can come from the placement of words. How inverting a line—the way you say something— can command a different response sonically.

**AC:** Congratulations on pursuing your doctorate as well as writing your manuscript. I imagine being a student while working on publishing your work, and raising a family is a juggle. How do you find time for it all? Do you discipline yourself with a schedule for your writing?

BRC: Man... I gotta tell you it's hard sometimes, but a lot of it just kind of happens by necessity. In between working part time teaching CW at Pershing MS, my coursework and teaching assistantship duties, I mostly write really late at night once my baby and husband are asleep. I don't have a set schedule. I thrive when I have a structure to work around, which is why this period has been tough for me. I envy people that are like "2:00-5:00 is my writing time". My kid doesn't care about all of that. So, I get in where I fit in. I don't get a lot of sleep, but I have to have quiet. No music. Nobody in the room even if they're quiet. So, from about 10:30 until about 2:00 or 3:00 am is when I get most of my writing or ruminating towards writing done. Sometimes it's just me looking ugly staring off into nothing, thinking about what seems to be pressing in my thoughts. That's very much a part of the process for me. Sometimes you've got to let the poem gestate and marinate. Let it roll around on the spit.

**AL**: How do you decide which poems you would like to include in your manuscript?

BRC: Honestly, I'm still figuring it out! Fortunately, I know that the thread of the work involves home and "haints" (ghosts), thus the title of the manuscript. The trouble comes from trying to make sure that all the poems connect cohesively for everyone else. I'm trying to provide a certain experience or vision, a context of family and trauma in a certain place and everything that comes with being haunted by things you have or will potentially lose physically, spiritually, emotionally, etc, but a lot of that depends on having outside input. I may know what the hell a poem about chef salads and souse has to do with everything that's going on, but if someone I trust reads the manuscript and isn't able to access that without me stepping in, it generally isn't a good fit. Some opacity is fine, but I don't want to leave a reader totally confused without something to hold on to. The poems that don't make it become possibilities for other things or potential manuscripts, which is nice.

AL: Do you have any advice on searching for an agent and a publisher?

BRC: Oh wow. At this point in time, I'm really still a fetus to that side of the game. I will say that I've been in situations where I really had to think about the integrity of my work and where I felt a poem would have the best home. Some places provide greater visibility and perhaps even "prestige". It's difficult not to get tied up in that allure as the main focus, especially as an emerging writer, but in the end it's about whether or not I feel good about a place having the poem. What is the motive of their investment? Do you really value my voice and everything behind it? Do the rest of the writers and the content of the work you publish contradict or stand as proof of that?

AL: I noticed your poetry is pleasing to the eye. You have one poem that looks like a form you would fill out. At first glance, you wouldn't think it to be a poem. How important is the visual aesthetic of a poem? I think that some poetry is meant for the page and some poetry is meant to be spoken. Some can be both. How would you decide what subject matter gets what treatment? Are there some topics that you feel are best heard and felt by being spoken?

BRC: I don't really think about how the poem looks as I'm writing it, but I will say I've started to take risks in terms of how different forms—lists, multiple choice, and more experimental forms—can make way for a different experience. Giovanni Singleton is really great with showing me different options for how a poem is presented—performed even—on the page. I do have one poem that tries to personify how a ghost might speak if they were interviewed. The language is fragmented, and I tried to capture how that voice might struggle with translating their answers from whatever language they might be using in the spirit world back into that of the dimension they are no longer a part of. In another poem, "Prayer Fox For Psychosis: A Word From the Saints" I try to illustrate the experience of someone basically being told they can "pray away" the voices they encounter. I played around with the size of the font at times to illustrate a multiplicity of voices and volumes. Altogether, most of my poems are pretty standard

#### **INTERVIEW**

in their page presentation, but I don't limit myself. Play and experimentation is important in my revision process, so some drafts look drastically different from the original. As long as it doesn't distract from what I feel the poem wants to say, anything goes.

AL: Do you get nervous when performing? Any advice for others trying an open mic for the first time?

BRC: I think it's funny that a lot of people find it hard to believe that I'm pretty shy. Nervousness is pretty much my normal. If you see a wet paper towel sticking out the back of my collar, just go on about your business. It's the only thing keeping me from running out of the room, ok? When I read, I just try to stick with how the poem sounds in my head, or the voice of the person or situation I'm trying to evoke and how important it is to let that be heard (yes, situations have a voice, too). I just recommend that people remember how important it is for that poem to be heard. The first time you read it might not be great. Reading or performing poems isn't everyone's ministry but allowing the poem to be heard is the charge of the writer.

AL: Lastly, and thank you for hanging in here with me so far, any book or music recommendations for us?

BRC: Danez Smith's Homie is so important to me right now as I'm not able to physically be around my friends. I recently sent it to my best friend, Evan, for her birthday. Carl Smith's The Art of Daring is something I always find myself picking up when I feel like I just can't get a poem together. I just started reading Unearth the Flowers by Thea Matthews and Felon by Reginald Dwayne Betts. Hybrida by Tina Chang is oh so very brilliant and poignant. As far as music, can I post a link to a playlist? My playlists are a whole mood! I wrote a few poems in the voice of personas from some blues songs. Anything by Johnnie Taylor. I like Big Pokey, Tucka, Calvin Richardson, Sir Charles, and Donnie Ray. Songs my Aunt Donna used to listen to. The late Betty Wright. I recently stumbled on the song "Can We Pretend" by Bill Withers which I'm obsessed with. I'm really just trying to chill, so Stevie Wonder, Roy Ayers, Erykah Badu and Aretha Franklin are my constant vibe. Gotta bang screw. Never forget that. A Tribe Called Quest and KRIT. I've secretly been listening to stuff I heard on Tik Toc. Kind of ashamed of that but don't judge me. Thanks for speaking with me.

#### **INTERVIEW**

This interview took place over email correspondence from March-July of 2020. Through the insanity that has been COVID 19 there were events affecting both Scott and Tamara's lives that allowed this conversation to span over the course of four months. Through these emails we have omitted some of the more personal conversations about what they were going through for the sake of their privacy.

Scott Chalupa is the author of *Quarantine* (PANK Books 2019), described by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Jericho Brown as "melancholy and meditative...a beautiful book." Chalupa lives and writes in South Carolina, where he earned an MFA in poetry at the University of South Carolina, and currently teaches at Central Carolina Technical College. His work is primarily concerned with queering stories and experiences not usually seen as queer, often through ekphrastic response to art, music, and other media. His current creative obsession is queering Biblical text and history to comment on the world now, and one of those pieces is forthcoming in an Orison Books anthology on the Biblical figure of Eve. Chalupa's work has appeared in *PANK*, pacificREVIEW!, Nimrod, Beloit Poetry Journal, The South Atlantic Review, Tupelo Quarterly, and other venues.

I met Scott Chalupa during a virtual event for a local program called "Poetry Around Houston" the organization met once a month pre-pandemic, and since the world turned upside down they have been running virtual workshops and readings every two weeks. He read a few poems from his book "Quarantine" which immediately caught my attention. I felt a kinship and wanted to explore the themes, form, and history behind his work. This interview became something of a light in my life as the pandemic continued.

Tamara Al-Qaisi-Coleman: I wanted to start off our interview by asking about how you came to write this book. I am always curious as to how writers create these beautiful forms of text through one idea or thread or theme. What was the process of discovering that this book would be about self quarantining during the HIV/AIDS crisis? I know that for me when writing about a specific period of my life or an event it takes me so long to pinpoint what the main thread will be through those poems that will connect them to this bigger event.

Scott Chalupa: Quarantine arose out of three chapbook projects. Originally, I thought I was working on a chapbook of obituaries, another of ekphrastic elegies responding to Carravaggio, and another of radical redefinitions of quarantine. It was Maya Marshall, a marvelous poet and a font of pointed, insightful questions, who asked if I'd noticed all the nameless bodies piling up in the three threads of work I was producing. After a few talks with her, I realized that everything went together.

It's important to realize that \*self\* quarantine, concerning disease, was not a thing during the early AIDS pandemic. It's tempting to oversimplify the connections between that pandemic and the Covid-19 pandemic, but there are crucial differences (which I believe grossly outnumber any similarities). More than half the state legislatures in the U.S. debated bills that would have forced persons

with AIDS into involuntary quarantine; that's not even a consideration with our current pandemic. Another key difference is that HIV/AIDS was viewed by a majority of Americans as a distinctly gay disease, even into the mid-1990s (15 years after the first documented case), despite rapidly growing numbers of heteromen and women, and persons of color dying year over year.

My choice of subject and research was certainly informed by personal experience, but the overwhelming majority of the book is not about me specifically. The content of the book is largely the product of a few years' research into queer and HIV/AIDS history. For most of the 20th century, homosexuality itself was seen as a contagion. AIDS just threw atomic fuel on that fire. As a gay kid in the 80s (I started high school in 1990), I watched HIV/AIDS discussed in the national media in ways that told me my only future as a gay man was to die of AIDS before I turned 30. I thought about the history of gayborhoods (which seem to be dissolving rapidly over the past couple of decades), and whether a community organized around an oppressed identity could be some kind of quarantine. As Burnadette says in The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert, "I don't know if that ugly wall of suburbia's been put there to stop them getting in, or us getting out." Which side was it that built the wall, and why? What's more, could someone quarantine homosexuality itself within the body/self, either through "reparative" therapies or lobotomy? These are questions where I feel that \*self\* quarantine most resonates in the book... but that's a far cry from how we understand quarantine with the current pandemic.

TAC: Word-vomit away! I am always impressed when someone can ramble as much as I can at times. Kindred spirits I feel. I completely understand your reasoning. It feels right to understand your work through this crisis. It's not just about quarantine, it's about the history, the oppression, the lives lost, those human bodies that were once their own personalities with their own thoughts and feelings. I was a double major in writing and history back in college. One of my pre req classes focused on American history specifically in the 80s and I remember watching a documentary called "We Were Here" for a paper on that decade. I completely understand the parallels between covid 19 and the crisis are solely emotional because of isolation but they are two very distinct experiences. Interestingly, both deal with their own targeted political focus for oppression but on vastly different scales.

My next question or series of questions/explanations of what I'm asking would be about structure. Your book follows in my mind this symbiotic pattern that is building on itself with each poem. These sections that are split by icons of DNA I feel as though are telling so many stories all at once. Your use of this image is structured in these poems, pacing, the references to politics, religion, history, the poems that feel like an academic speech but in the best way all fill me with such awe and appreciation for you and your craft. I guess my question would be in the broadest of terms how did you craft these poems? How did that look in reference to the whole body of work? Knowing myself I research, write and

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rewrite and send my poems to trusted friends often for months before I think they're ready. I just want to get a sense of your process and connect on that poet to poet level.

SC: As for your questions (and please hold me accountable if I missed anything, or if you want/need to follow up on anything):

The structure of the book was an evolving process. While finishing my MFA, I often met with Nikky Finney, who would only talk to me about the book--not the thesis--and who recommended the "Kwame Dawes approach to book building." Take two or three really strong poems for the opening, then two or three more for the closing, then shuffle the others together until they make sense. Finney's suggestion kicked me out of a stuck space and gave me permission to consider book structures other than the standard 3-section jazz. I then got some great feedback from Bettina Judd, who suggested that I build the book around pairings of quarantine definitions and Gnossienne poems. For the next few months, my book was poem printouts spread over my living room floor. I had to figure out how best to harmonize the poems.

The main driver behind all the formal play is just... play. Most of the poems began in a kind of "can I actually get away with this?" headspace. The Bay Area Reporter has a fantastic online archive of all the HIV/AIDS obituaries they printed from 1979 (not official, but pretty clearly an AIDS death) through 2008 (I think), and they fed my desire to explore personal obituaries as a poetic form. I literally played with formatting in MS Word until one looked right, and then figured out how to be intentional with my line breaks. The quarantine definition poems were the result of queering the fuck out of the concept of quarantine, thus queering dictionary structure seemed logical. Reading Satie's sheet music for the Gnossiennes was a big inspiration to let those poems shape themselves according to their own hearts. Some poems are born from workshop failures where only a few lines survived the carnage. At one point, I was writing so much (sometimes to escape my academic and teaching workload) that I quit thinking so much, and some poems arrived almost finished. Whether composing new or revising, work comes out best when I stop thinking so much and just fart around with language. That said, there is no official first draft until I've read a proto-poem to my friend Regina back in Houston. She's got impeccable discernment and is never shy about telling me, "um... that's not really a poem."

The RNA dividers emerged from their own process. Marie Howe's What the Living Do has un-numbered sections, and I wanted that for Quarantine, especially because it didn't have a conventional structure. (Howe's book alongside The Man With Night Sweats by Thom Gunn and Love Alone by Paul Monette are essential poetry collections about the AIDS pandemic.) Failed experiment followed failed experiment to find something that made sense until I had another "can I actually..." moment. In some way, the single RNA helix also nods the genetics of my book: religion, death, music, and art. Those are sort of like the base pairs in the DNA of how I see the world. I've always been obsessed with those things, and it

wouldn't be my book without those things.

TAC: It's funny actually, I don't ever go into an interview thinking I'll mostly talk about craft but that's what I tend to gravitate towards. I think it stems from my academic-analysis brain and training. I'm always looking for the reason behind why humans do what they do. In asking and talking about craft I often discover these intricate maps of the writer's brain. How you got from point A to point B, which turns into point A, then AB, then AC, and so on until it's point AZ and point B is still on the horizon. I find it comforting and a way to connect to a fellow artist.

Anyway, I would love to delve into the subject matter(s) more. These nameless characters that float from the page and create these satisfying vignettes of narrative. One of the first poems that pops into my brain when I think about this is Quar~an~tine and Big Roy. The former is in first person and reminds me so much of southern queer narratives. This poem tells a story quite literally and it's like I can see these sections play out as scenes. Navigating these spaces of not only the history and politics, but tying them into queer narratives should feel like prose, but they don't. They reflect this kind of collective thinking that has made me refer to them as the queer hive mind. These intrinsic experiences that are so impactful and specific to the individual yet feel universal in a way because they are understood traumas that connect a community. My question then is in the way you cultivate these narratives. Do they derive from people in your life? I also am very interested to know your experience and feelings on utilizing narrative in poetry, do you gravitate towards it? I do and often I am told my fiction reads a lot like my poetry. I do get a sense that there is a personal narrative moving like a thread through these poems -- if I'm completely off, take it as a testament to your talent in writing great narrative in poetry.

SC: I'm a craft nerd, and that's usually what I like to think about once I've completely consumed a poem or book. Many years ago (like 15-ish I think) I interviewed Christopher Rice (yes, the son of Anne Rice), who had just published his 3rd novel, Light Before Day. I steered clear of mom questions because everybody else couldn't avoid them... and I wanted to know about how often he wrote, where his ideas came from, if he kept journals, and how his dad figured in this deliciously crazy piece of crime fiction (which was dedicated to his dad). It was totally selfish, and it made for a fun interview for everyone.

I assume that the "Quar\*an\*tine" you're referencing is the first one in the book, where the speaker undergoes ECT as part of conversion therapy. That's still legal in some places in the US (though banned nationally for minors), and our current VP attempted to get Indiana's legislature to approve state funding for conversion therapies when he was governor. All of the quarantine definitions come from experiences of real people, but they're adapted to fit the needs of each speaker's style. One of my biggest influences with the definition poems is Claudia Rankine's book Citizen. It was another "Holy shit! You can do that?" book, and I reread it now and then. Rankine uses this very personal "you" that was far

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closer than any second person address I'd ever read--it's almost like a displaced "I," but it makes me feel like the experiences she relates actually belong to me. It's an amazing feat to subtly invite me into the lives of others, through experiences that aren't mine, and yet feel deeply personal to me. So I played with doing the same with microaggressions and other experiences from queer lives. Some of those poems drifted into "I" voices and others stayed with "you." The nice thing about "you" in English is that it's singular and collective, sometimes indiscernibly so.

"Big Roy" is one of only a few poems directly based on someone I knew and my experiences with that person—and one of two who get their real names. Roy told a great story about Stonewall, and he loved holding court at KPFT during the "After Hours" show. Jimmy (who produced the show, and whose poem appears near the end of the book) saved my life once (though we'd never met), and gave me a reason to live later on when I needed that. The "After Hours" weekly radio show and the family I met there gave me a huge education in queer possibilities. There was a monthly transgender segment—using the term transgender in the early 1990s. There was a person with their own segment who identified as intersex. All these terms that are increasingly standard in popular parlance in 2020 were used back then and continuously explained one Saturday night after another.

All the nameless poems are composites of people from my research or people I was tangentially connected to or major queer xe/roes. So many people had their queer identities stripped away by family--when family bothered to show up at all. The erasure was massive, and it was essential to reenact that erasure in the process of writing the poems. I like that some poems have a kind of collective ring when you read them. So much of the experience (at least as I knew it with friends in the 1990s) was as collective as it was deeply individual. And in stripping the names, the poems leave what is truly important--the stories. At ACT UP's infamous Monday night meetings, people told their stories. At so many community group meetings and organizing meetings I attended years later, we told our individual stories. Human beings talk about themselves in stories. We relate to one another through stories. Those stories are sometimes linear, sometimes circuitous, sometimes just emotional impressions in series with no discernable events. Narrative isn't just one thing. It's everything. It's the only thing. If it's difficult to say which stories are autobiographical in some way and which ones aren't, then you've paid me an immense compliment.

**TAC:** I was wondering through the trauma of isolation especially in a forced isolation if being creative within that space is conducive or even possible. What does that look like? Is there a process you've found that helps? How was going into this quarantine process like for you?

**SC:** Isolation and forced isolation and creative work is something that I struggle with. I'm much better with schedules imposed from outside myself, and lots of things get derailed or are left undone when I have to self-impose a schedule. I

wish I could say that it's been a great creative space as a writer, but mostly it's been a fun creative space in the kitchen. I find that I've been experimenting with baking and canning quite a bit, and that's something that keeps me grounded.

Because I'm in South Carolina the only quarantine is a self-quarantine, and that's got me thinking quite a bit about the several layers of quarantine regarding queerness and pathogens in the early HIV/AIDS years. I've also finished some final edits on an essay to accompany several poems in an academic essay collection built around queer visibility and the perils of inclusion. There are so many ways in which we quarantine ourselves and pieces of ourselves from others and ourselves. Kenji Yoshino wrote this fabulous book back in the mid-2000s called Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights. He talks about conversion, a way of thinking and living where one actively seeks ways to change they are, such as conversion therapy. Then there is passing, which he says is the primary concern of people living a closeted existence. Then there is covering, where a person dials down/up their abject or oppressed identity (or identities) to better fit in: one is queer in some way but adjusts it to be more acceptable with this or that group.

I also think of self-imposed quarantine as a way to resolve cognitive dissonance or to remain distant from uncomfortable truths. All of the protests, uprisings, and demonstrations for Black lives during the Covid-19 pandemic are a powerful space to think about quarantine more expansively than just in terms of the virus. How do/have I, as a self-identified white person, quarantined myself from the vectors of oppression affecting the lives of people of color? How do / how have I quarantine/d my discussions and interactions with other self-identified white people to make relationships easier or to preserve a particular quality to said relationships? This second question speaks well to Yoshino's concept of covering. It is guite striking how the intersection of these two guestions creates a space for so many people in the U.S. to reexamine the ways their lives are or can be affected by racist ideas and policies, and then what that demands of white people specifically. Baldwin wrote that there are white people who do understand on some level the racist assumptions that drive so much of our sociopolitical practices and policies, but those people are afraid to act because "To act is to be committed, and to be committed is to be in danger."

The intersection of Covid-19 with racist ideas and policies highlights a parallel between HIV/AIDS and our current pandemic. In queer communities during the 1980s and much of the 1990s, caretakers and fellow activists/organizers were often vectors of transmission because of the nature of the disease and the nature of those relationships. People found emotional and sexual comfort within groups who provided services and protest groups. ACT UP meetings were spaces for political education and action, but they were also cruising spaces where one met potential romantic and sexual partners. While not the same in all aspects, the political organizing and action groups are likely vectors of Covid-19 transmission. How does one balance the need to raise awareness and consciousness in the broader public with the need for self-protection and quaran-

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tine? How does one choose between working to change racist policies and ideas that underpin police brutality, that threaten the lives of people of color, with the threat of life posed by the current pandemic? The mortality rate of the two diseases is widely disparate, but so are their impacts on communities of color. Dr. Anthony Fauci has had the same job since the early AIDS pandemic that he currently occupies with Covid-19. That experience across both pandemics has grounded his public recognition of the very real threat that people of color face if they don't protest and speak out, but he has also said that there needs to be some balance with safety practices used in the direct actions. There are so many parallels and so many divergences.

TAC: I honestly couldn't have asked for a better answer to my question. You bring up a great point. In these bigger moments in history there is an idea that events like COVID 19 present a shift in reality that divides our current moment into the time "before" and the time "after." 9/11 is another example of a large-scale event that transitions our reality into a new, different one, as a historian and sci-fi geek I often view this as a shift in the river of time that puts us on a new altered stream. Now, I mention this because other large issues that dominate our world can be easily set aside by policymakers and people in power, because they are not as "threatening" to the status quo as a pandemic is. Yet, through this pandemic we see the BLM movement gain momentum more than ever before. In the wake of the world standing still we are finally able to take bigger stands and take more action. The fight is not over and will not end anytime soon, and this pandemic has contributed to this path that we are on, until there is justice there is no peace.

Now my next and final question for you is what's next? Are there any projects you want to discuss? I am excited to see what you do and what glorious creativity you bring to your future works.

SC: At the moment, I'm working on an essay that will accompany a selection of work from Quarantine for inclusion in an edited volume about queer visibility and the perils of inclusion. Like Quarantine, the essay is focused primarily on HIV/AIDS, but it takes examines the early pandemic in conjunction with the concept of queer time--how we experience past, present, and future as nonlinear and often simultaneous ways. The essay is currently in the editing process, and it's another way that I've explored for myself how our current moment is part of a larger progression of history and events.

As a poet and as a human, I'm currently obsessed with how old Biblical stories resonate with 21st century experiences. One poem that looks at Adam and Eve as creators of creation mythology will be included in an anthology to be published by Orison Books next year. Also, I'm a bit obsessed with golden shovel poems (thanks so much, Terrance Hayes), and I'm working up the courage to try my hand at duplex poems (thanks so much, Jericho Brown). I'm also plotting some nonfiction about the pandemic and events in friends' and my lives, but I haven't figured out how to approach it yet. In a couple of weeks, I'll start a new

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position at Central Carolina Technical College that I'm ecstatic about. As someone who was once a non-traditional higher ed student, I feel there are lots of opportunities in that school to serve others in new ways.

Thanks so much for an engaging and engrossing interview. It's been a fun process to explore with you, and I can see why you enjoy it so much. I hope you're settling back into your house alright.

TAC: I am settling in great! Thank you for asking! I am very excited about your new projects, especially looking into Biblical stories in the 21st century context. I'm very interested in looking at religion within the framework of different time periods. I really enjoyed our quarantine conversations in the midst of all of the craziness that has overtaken both of our lives. This was an experience that kept me through all of the madness and I hope we can keep this connection.

### **ART CONTRIBUTORS:**

Chelsey Bolden, aka Hellsea is a tattoo artist and clothing designer. Her art conveys Dark Beauty in whatever theme. Her inspiration draws from romantic renaissance, gothic & vampiric lifestyle and architecture, Japanese lore & culture, dark psychedelia, occultism, and hell itself. Sometimes, she models and showcases her visions on herself, but mostly she gives it to others in the form of body art.

Tamara Diaz is a visual artist and social worker whose art has been described as fantastical and metaphoric. While it certainly is colorful and has a pop feel, her works also demonstrate a strong emotional content. Often the images tell the viewer a story through symbols in a narrative form. The original feeling of the piece may have been pain, but the emotional process gets transformed through the colors and lines, often leaving the viewer with a happy or curious feeling. Tamara's portfolios start in 1998 and range from colored pencil works, watercolors, paint on canvas paper, black ink on white paper drawings, photography, marker series and mixed media projects. As a social worker and in her personal and professional life, Tamara uses art and play therapy as tools for self expression and healing. She loves to travel and has spent time doing volunteer work in the Dominican Republic and Cuba and has also worked on two murals, in the Dominican Republic and Providence, RI. As far as inspirations, Tamara is mostly inspired by love, art/culture, music, helping others, everyday life, community work with children and families, her Cuban roots and traveling. Tamara grew up in Barcelona, Spain and moved back to: NJ/ NYC area at age 10. Inspired by the NYC (old school) hip hop and graffiti artist scene, Tamara began creating art and seeking out creative opportunities. Tamara lived in Philadelphia for 3 years and currently lives and has her own counseling practice in Providence RI.

Nidhi Garg is a visual artist from Greater Noida was born and brought up in a town in Gautam Budh Nagar, Uttar Pradesh. She has completed her BFA in painting from Amity University, Noida and MFA in painting from Monad University, Uttar Pradesh. Since childhood, she always had a constant connection with travelling, travelling from town to city very often for her education and other meet ups. This idea of such travels fascinated her a lot in terms of constant change in visuals watching from the window of the car. She has experimented with various mediums for her art and during these experiments, she had recently discovered Henna as a medium to express her emotions through art. From past 2 years, she has been continuously practicing and exploring different ways to use this medium. She has participated in various art exhibitions during these two years. She is also working as a founder at Keshav Art Foundation, an online platform to support visual artist.

**Suman Kabiraj** is a South Asian multidisciplinary artist based in India. Kabiraj's work includes Paintings, drawings, photography, installation, short-films and

multimedia works. Has pursued his MFA with 1st class 1st from Govt. College of Art and Craft, Calcutta University in the year of 2006. His works have been represented and exhibited in several international galleries, festivals, art events, and film festivals. He has been honoured with several Awards, Scholarships like Governor's Gold Medal, Kalanand National Gold medal, Kalanand Scholarship, Gaganendranath Tagore Memorial Award, Camlin Euro Professional Visit Scholarship, Rashbehari Dutta Memorial Award, Sunil Das Scholarship, Gopen Roy Memorial Award, Mukul Dey graphics Award etc. He has mounted three solo shows in his artist career. Represented in Taiwan International Show, Group Show organised by Indian Tourism Department and Kolkata Centre for Creativity 2019, Group Show 'Reflection of Another Day' 2018-2019 at Birla Academy of Art and Culture Calcutta, Netherland Streaming Festival for Audio Visual art, United Kingdom in 2014, Summer Show 2014, Centre of International Modern Art (CIMA), Kolkata in 2014, 'Liquid Cities & Temporary Identities' international exhibition, Espoo (Finland) in 2013, Catalyst Arts Belfast International Festival, Belfast, United Kingdom in 2013, Stigmart /10 Europe International Annual Previews in 2012, 'Zen Next-111' International Art Show at Aakriti art gallery, Kolkata, 2008, 'YOUNG CONTEMPORARIES' organized by Aakriti art gallery, curated by Shri Jogen Chowdhury, Kolkata in 2007, 'ART WATCH' trends and talents of India today- Group Show organized by Gallery 88, Kolkata in 2006, All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society, Annual Exhibition ( AIFACS) New Delhi are few of them.

Fred Lambuth is a data engineer, Unix system administrator, sailor, Aggie, international playboy and bon vivant. Very early in his life he displayed a keen interest in the craft of visual art, which he pursued almost exclusively through reproducing scenes he found in comic books, video games, and the promo art for Warhammer 40k. His skill improves with age yet the subjects of his work have not shifted much since fifth grade. His process involves pencil & ink on paper, scanned into an image file that is painted over with GIMP or Krita. His favorite artists are Edward Hopper, Moebius, Norman Rockwell, and Greg Capullo.

My Linh Mac is a multimedia artist, award winner graphic designer and art educator based in Chicago. Mac is best known for her digital paintings, traditional oil paintings and her series of contemporary 'galactic /no-brush' paintings- Ranbu. As an accomplished painter, her works portray beauty in humble places with her signature style of deep and vibrant accent colors. While Mac's paintings have varied genres, from conceptual, abstract, and figurative to contemporary, her digital and visual design works are commercial. Mac is originally from Vietnam and pursued her art education in Singapore, Australia, and the United States. Mac received her Bachelor of Art in Digital Media & Painting from Valparaiso University, her Master's in Art Education from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) and her Master's in Entrepreneurship for the Creative from Columbia College of Chicago. Mac's multi-media artworks are represented by En Foco and RubberNeck Gallery in Chicago, Brauer Museum- Indiana, Queen Victoria Museum and Gallery- Australia, INTACT international- Canada and in many private collections internationally in the United States, Italy, Hong Kong, and South Korea. As an creative influencer, Mac is a member of the National Oil and Acrylic Painting Society (NOAPS), Oil Painting of America (OAP), as well as jury member of Creative

#### **CONTRIBUTORS**

Communication Award (C2A) in Los Angeles, Lorenzo Il Magnifico Award & The Leonardo Da Vinci Award in Florence Biennale, Italy etc

**Tisha Mavi** completed her Bachelor's Degree in painting from the Amity School of Fine Arts at Amity University in Iowa in 2019. She was awarded an "excellence in knowledge and creation" at her alma mater. She did a group exhibition and residency at the *NIV Art Center* (2019) and participated in four art exhibitions at *Amity University. 27 Art Point Gallery* in Jodhpur awarded her a gold medal in the *All Indian Online Art Competition* (2019). Her work represents her visual interpretation of herself and the world around her.

Justin O'Keith Higgs was born in Jefferson, Texas in 1984. He is a graduate of the *University of Texas at Tyler*: 2007 BS Sociology & 2015 Masters of Science in Human Resource Development. He received his Juris Doctor from *Texas Southern University Thurgood Marshall School of Law* in 2010. His chosen mediums are Photography, Painting, Body Makeup and has crated his own genre of Selcouth+Meraki, which combines body art and photography. He has won various awards for his work, been featured in many local shows and published in many modern and pop magazines. In addition to art, he is a licensed Attorney, Human Resource Professional and avid dancer. He currently resides in Houston, Texas with two six year-old French bulldogs Gia and Jackson.

Born 1986 in Poland, **Pawel Pacholec** often refers to his work as classic, traditional techniques and ways of expression. He creates his works in a balanced and thoughtful way based on visible structures and forms. For an inspiration he looks in such trends as constructivism or industrialism and also those from the other pole like dadaism or expressionism. While creating, he tries to relate to geometry and mathematical proportions which he sometimes breaks with something completely oppositional like an irregular stain, line or an expressive gesture. He often puts photography into graphic activities (e.g. through collage or photo graphisation). He prefers prose over poetry.

Currently working to finish his MFA at the *University of South Dakota*, **Jonathan Purdy** is a Printmaker, Painter, Installation Artist, and Curator. He has shown work in dozens of exhibitions, curated four, and been Juror to three. Purdy earned his BA in Painting from the University of Northern Iowa. He was born in Waterloo Iowa and raised in neighboring Cedar Falls. His art focuses on communication, how it gets altered, and how technology has affected it. He speaks in the universal language of abstraction and color, ever seeking new ways to manipulate the viewers subconscious. Using non-traditional screen-printing and relief techniques Purdy's work has been praised as both singular and challenging. Most recently the addition of lighting elements has moved his work forward, encouraging the age old concepts of light paralleling enlightenment. By the end of 2021 Purdy strives to be a Professor of Fine Art. He believes education is the first step in an artist making their journey from

aficionado to professional and is eager to help others whose passion he shares develop into the next generation of artists.

**Karly Villaseñor** is an interdisciplinary visual artist, currently based out of Portland, Oregon. She has Bachelor's degrees in Art Practices and Creative Writing from *Portland State University*. Currently, she is part of the *Sister Space Apprentice-ship Program* that works to support female artists.

Cynthia Yatchman is a Seattle based painter/printmaker and art instructor teaching art to adults, children and families. Her work is housed in numerous public and private collections and has been shown in California, Connecticut, New York, Indiana, Michigan, Oregon and Wyoming. She exhibits extensively in the Northwest.

### **POETRY CONTRIBUTORS:**

**Sami A.F.** is from the vibrant city of Beirut, Lebanon, and is currently an MFA student in Creative Writing at *Northern Arizona University*. His work has been published in the poetry anthology *And We Chose Everything* (by Turning Point Books). Recently, his Zine titled Lebanon Revolts, which includes poetry and his visual arts, was published by *Microcosm Publishing* and is available for online purchase and will be available in stores internationally very soon. During his career as a copywriter for advertising agencies, he was working on his poetry, short stories, and his novel, *The Nameless Land*. Sami hopes to open his own creative writing academy in Beirut and become a professor of creative writing as he works towards the completion of his novel and poetry collection.

**Ebuka Evans** is a writer from Nigeria who is currently pursuing a B.A. in English and Literature at the University of Nigeria. His works have appeared or are forthcoming in *NantyGreens, Our Life Logs, Ngiga Review, Rigorous, Third Coast* and elsewhere.

**Thomas Fucaloro** is the winner of a performance grant from the *Staten Island Council of the Arts* and the *NYC Department of Cultural Affairs*, he has been on six national slam teams. He holds an MFA in creative writing from the *New School* and is a co-founding editor of *Great Weather for Media* and *NYSAI Press*. He is an adjunct professor at *Wagner College* and *BMCC* where he teaches world lit and advanced creative writing. His latest chapbook, "*There is Always Tomorrow*" was released in 2017 by Mad Gleam Press. Thomas' forthcoming chapbook, "*The Only Gardening I Do is When I Give Up*" by *Poets Wear Prada*, is due winter 2020.

**Noor Hind**i (she/her/hers) is a Palestinian-American poet and reporter. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *The Rumpus, Winter Tangerine,* and *Cosmonauts Avenue*. Her essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *American Poetry Review, Literary Hub*, and *Adroit Journal*. Hindi is the Senior Reporter for The *Devil Strip Magazine*. Visit her website at noorhindi.com.

**Lisa Krawczyk** is a queer poet currently residing in Philadelphia who can't stop sleeping with formal poetry. Their publications include in print and online through *Lullwater Review, Esthetic Apostle*, and others

Mai Serhan is a short fiction writer who's had a long distance secret love affair with poetry for years. She considers a Winter Tangerine Workshop at Poet's House in New York City, Night Sky with Exit Wounds, and this global lockdown key moments in her illicit relationship. Mai's short stories have appeared in Anomaly and Chaleur Magazine. She is the recipient of the Madalyn Lamont Literary Award by the American University in Cairo.

Wafa Shaikh is a Creative Writing major at Houston Community College. She

spends her time writing stories and playing video games, but her aim isn't great in both hobbies. Sometimes, she just likes to sit back and watch other people play to give them company. She loves giving hugs and spending time with friends. Find her at wafifi\_ on Twitter.

Roha Siddiqi is an emerging poet. She is an undergraduate student studying Political Science and Biology who aspires to write about Islamic politics and the science of Islam in the future. She has yet to be published but is working diligently to create her first chapbook. Her poetry comes from experience of religious oppression and observations of outside attempts to fracture her religion. She directs her poems at those who value the merit of personal judgment over the merit of written word, and therefore, will never fail in trying to tear apart the fortress of the oppressors brick by brick.

**Keira Tademy** is a Black American woman from Houston, TX. She is currently pursuing a Master of Arts in Counseling at *Sam Houston State University*, where she earned a Bachelor of Science in Psychology. She hopes to become a play therapist and work with children. In her free time, Keira enjoys writing, Netflix, FaceTime, and trying something new! To Keira, poetry is an invitation to feel something—be it sad, happy, angry, or any feeling in between.

Stalina Emmanuelle Villarreal lives as a rhyming-slogan creative activist. She is a Generation 1.5 poet (mexicanx and Xicanx), a translator, a sonic-improv collaborator, and an instructor of English. She is a Ph.D. student in the *Creative Writing Program* at *University of Houston*. She coauthored an article with a historian in the book *Chicana Movidas* (University of Texas, 2018). Her poetry can be found in the *Rio Grande Review, Texas Review, Spoon River Poetry Review, The Acentos Review,* and elsewhere. She has published translations of poetry, including *Enigmas*, by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (Señal: a project of *Libros Antena Books, BOMB,* and *Ugly Duckling Presse*, 2015), but she mostly translates regiomontana poet Minerva Reynosa; they have a chapbook called *Photograms of My Conceptual Heart, Absolutely Blind (Cardboard House Press,* 2016). She also published *Kilimanjaro* by Maricela Guerrero (Cardboard House Press, 2018).

Arthur J. Willhelm is a writer/poet from bricktown, New Jersey. Most noted works are two "blast fiction" novels *Kitchen Beers* and "you can't make an honest woman out of a stripper" as well as various chapbooks. Taking inspiration from the best generation and day to day life, Arthur writes the pain and sorrow that we all think but won't admit.

**Kendryk Youngblood** is a former member of UH's Poetry Slam team called UH Coogslam, which won 4th place in the Collegiate Unions Poetry Slam Invitational (CUPSI), in April of 2019. Kendryk has had his work published in *Shards Magazine*, *Defunkt Magazine*, and *Poet's Choice*. He teaches and shares poetry through his YouTube Channel "Youngblood Poetry".

### PROSE CONTRIBUTORS:

Alicia Alcantara-Narrea is a second-generation American and first-generation college graduate working toward a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing at the University of Houston, TX. She is the social media specialist for Writespace Houston, a grassroots literary arts organization, and an essential worker at HEB. Her work has been published in MORIA The National Literary Magazine of Woodbury University, Still Life: An Anthology of Poetry, Prose, and Art, The Merrimack Review, Epigraph Press, and The Progenitor. She is influenced by a need to understand gender identity, human nature, and familial connections. She is originally from New Jersey but is currently learning to slow down in a southern-ly manner.

Craig Boehman is an American Mumbai-based photographer and writer. His photography career formally began when one of his street images was selected for the cover of the German edition of *Le Monde Diplomatique* in 2015. Since then his focus has been on photography in public places, with long-term street and documentary projects in Kolkata and Mumbai. His past writings have focused on songs and poetry while in recent years he's penned short stories rooted in absurdist situations tempered with existential conflict.

Delaney Burk grew up in Alexandria, VA and earned her BA in English with a Creative Writing focus at Virginia Commonwealth University. She's been previously published in Pwatem, Amendment, Crab Fat Magazine, From Whispers to Roars, Gravitas Magazine, Bottom Shelf Whiskey, Cleaning Up Glitter Literary Magazine, Coffin Bell Journal, and The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts. When she is not watching every Colin Firth movie ever made, or hoarding lipstick like a really lame dragon, she is exploring the urban fantasy genre, finding ways to merge horror and humor, and writing run-on sentences. She is currently interning with Feels Blind Literary and attending George Mason University's MFA program.

Michael Chin was born and raised in Utica, New York and currently lives in Las Vegas with his wife and son. He is the author of three full-length short story collections: You Might Forget the Sky was Ever Blue from Duck Lake Books, Circus Folk from Hoot' n' Waddle, and The Long Way Home from Cowboy Jamboree Press. Chin won the 2017-2018 Jean Leiby Chapbook Award from The Florida Review and Bayou Magazine's 2014 James Knudsen Prize for Fiction. Find him online at miketchin.com and follow him on Twitter @miketchin.

**Daniel Elfanbaum** is a writer from St. Louis now living just outside Boston with his fiancée and their cat. His work can be found in *Taper, Levee Magazine, Sinking City*, and elsewhere.

**Elizabeth Jaikaran** is a New York-based author and lawyer, with work appearing in *The Huffington Post, Playboy, The Higgs Weldon, Brown Girl Magazine, Human/Kind Journal, PREE Lit Magazine, Bruk Out Media, The Muslim Observer, The Jurist, and the* 

New York Law Journal, among other mediums. She graduated from CUNY City College of New York in 2012, where she studied writing and publishing, and from New York University School of Law in 2016. Her first book, Trauma, was published by Shanti Arts in 2017.

Alex McMillin is an American fiction writer living and working in Fort Myers, FL. His short fiction has previously appeared in *Punch Riot* and *Misery Tourism*. He is currently looking for a publisher for his first novel, *The Glass Cage*. If you want, you can follow him on Twitter @MFADropout.

**Jennifer Nessel** is a newly emerging writer based in Baltimore. Her photo and book review series, A Book By Its Cover can be found at @ajennyforurthoughts on Instagram.

**Trip Nguyen** is an emerging writer based in Houston, Texas. His previous work has been featured in *Shards*, Glass Moutain's online literary journal.

Niles Reddick is the author of the novel *Drifting too far from the Shore*, two collections *Reading the Coffee Grounds* and *Road Kill Art and Other Oddities*, and a novella *Lead Me Home*. His work has been featured in thirteen anthologies, twenty-one countries, and in over three hundred publications, including *The Saturday Evening Post, PIF, New Reader Magazine, Forth Magazine, The Boston Literary Magazine, Flash Fiction Magazine*, and *With Painted Words*.

**Charlyn Tuzon** is from the Philippines. Her writing is mostly inspired by classical music, folklore and fantasy tales, and the random thoughts that keep her awake at night.

