

ATLAS & ALICE

21





# Letter from the Editor

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I write this short dispatch as I relax by a fire on a cool November morning, yet as I peruse the twenty-five brilliant essays, stories, and poems within these digital pages, I am transported to warmer climates, for issue 21 contains work originally published from spring through summer. Nostalgia and memory run deep in this collection. Whether it is talk of past lovers in A.C. Koch's "My Fire Still Burns" and Kara Oakleaf's "The Shadow Boyfriends;" thoughts of aging in Barrett Bowlin's essay, "Out for Blood;" or memories of the dead in the poetry of Jayant Kashyap, each page contains connections between then and now. Each page allows us to travel through time. Each page lets us lock a moment in a bottle for future generations to encounter.

I am always bowled over when I look at each issue, and lucky number 21 is no exception. I hope you enjoy reading these works as much as we've enjoyed bringing them to you.

XO,  
BW

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# Allison Renner

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## No Place Like Home

Something in the way the crow carcass is splayed on the pavement brings to mind the flying monkeys from *The Wizard of Oz*. I was seven when I first saw the movie at my grandmother's house. I thought it was black and white because her TV was so old. I loved the land of Oz until the fear overtook me once I put myself to bed. That grandmother was not the one who hugged, tucked in, or consoled. I wanted my parents to come get me but they were at a casino in Wetumpka, Alabama, celebrating their anniversary with a Frank Sinatra impersonator. I pulled the starched sheets over my head and willed myself to think about ruby slippers and a sharp tuxedo. I swerve around the crow and watch its body get smaller in my rearview mirror.

# Brett Biebel

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## Holy War

A kid from our town fell off the water tower and walked away. 150 feet and no hospital, no fractures, not a fucking scratch, and media were everywhere. Must've been a slow news week. Trucks from Fox and ABC News, and they're interviewing all these Big Ten physicists who keep talking about subatomic particles and many worlds and statistical improbabilities, and some of these real fundamentalist-type churches set up tents on site, and you could sometimes hear them singing. Praise and worship shit. Steven Curtis Chapman or whatever. A few of them put up this massive cross on the exact spot, and this was after the whole thing died down. Everyone left, and the kid went back to drinking and driving down to Iowa to bet on hockey and baseball, and sometimes me and Maggie will head out there at night. To the cross. It's strung up with Christmas lights the whole year round. Was a big fight at some city council meeting a while back about power supply and public expense, but then this private donor came through, and it's like Jesus turning water into wine how these farm town Christians can always get their hands on some serious scratch, and we like to drink wine out there now that I mention it. The nice bottles. Ten, twelve bucks and just dry enough, and we talk about miracles. Money. The whole thing's purple and giant and gold, and I ask Maggie what she believes in.

"Kids," she says. "Crops. Anything that grows, and what about you," and I never have an answer. Too complicated. The way miracles are nothing but tiny numbers, and I'd get my ass back up there if I was him. Stare straight down. Measure an arc. Linger on choosing and death and significance, and what are the odds, I'd think. The chances I could somehow pull it off again.

# Hari B Parisi

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## Winter in Los Angeles

A block from home  
I decide to change  
my name, press the walk  
button, cross over  
to the other  
side of the street,  
wish I had a friend  
to discuss whatever  
we might discuss,  
a dog  
tugging the leash.  
I flinch  
from the gunning  
of cars, swerve  
the leaf blower.  
At the sidewalk's edge,  
camellias bloom.

# Mandira Pattnaik

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## Where Fate Keeps Her Tools

We—banjo clocks, ivory mirrors, jadeite—love to be Fate’s tools. We hold up flags of bygone times in the fifty-year-old store named after George the Sixth, where the cobbled street bends away from Town Square. At George’s Secondhand Shop, all we do is—wait. When the wait’s over, we mark our pawns as they arrive, cling on. There’s no mercy to expect, no apologies to offer.

Tonight, we’re kicking a rumpus for the bored shop owner Charlie. He’s swatting insects like he always does because we are usually without customers. The Romanian bells with the lovely bluebirds, jingle. The German handmade kettles, increasingly rowdy, are bludgeoning a helpless ragdoll the Queen is rumored to have played with. Reminds us of the man sprawled on the boulevard just outside only last week. He was still clutching the cursed key chains. Remember how the ambulance blared?

*Sushhh...silence! My man’s here! Shopping for his new wife Martha?*

I know the others will enjoy seeing me in a good bargain. Jonathan simply seeks ruin by walking in.

I’m the kukri he’ll buy, a gift for the ever-vivacious Martha, because she loves antiques, especially from Tibet. I’m that, and I’m the one still bloodstained. Martha knows he’ll buy it, recognize it as the one she used on Sam. I know her story.

Martha remembers how, when Sam touched the first time they met, wildfire raged within her. When she discovered Sam’s roving eye, months into marriage, how her lungs singed, like smoke from burning coal. The day the other woman said to her, *Ugly little village rat*, the way the flames leapt.

Now, it’s fusion. A combustion. On repeat. A chain reaction. Jonathan’s a link in that chain.

The next morning, the lanes will glisten with frost. A woman will walk out of one of the tile-roofed houses, her lips newly coated a sharp coat of burgundy.

They’ll discover Jonathan on the bed many hours later.

Under the lamppost in the next village, Martha will wait. She'll wait to collect the discarded household items from the tile-roofed house famously belonging to the late-deceased-loving-husband-Jonathan, to stock up the secondhand store.

# Melissa Llanes Brownlee

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## What if God Is One of Us

I saw God in the parking lot of a Taco Bell, temporarily closed after a viral video involving hot sauce and a waiting to be filled burrito. He was dealing coke out of the back of a souped-up Honda Accord, baggies bouncing to the beat of Handel's Hallelujahchorus on the subwoofers he had installed himself. He told me what if my name had been spelled d-o-g instead. I decided I didn't need anything he was selling.

The next time I saw God, it was a root beer colored dachshund, snuffling my crotch at my new neighbor's apartment. I had brought a bottle of wine as a housewarming gift, regretting my choice of Sauvignon Blanc. Not everyone likes the taste of cat pee, especially not a god lover, I mean dog lover. My neighbor told me she had gotten it at the shelter its name was God. Isn't that a hoot she giggled. I decided not to pet it and to get the hell out of that God loving house before it tried to convert me.

I kept running into God everywhere I went. I just couldn't shake them.

She was the old Korean lady behind the register of the little grocery I popped into, scolding me over my purchase of an energy drink. Kimchi is better for your health. She shook her head at me as she handed me my change and a bag of free kimchi which I ate with my fingers on the sidewalk, the spicy fizzy garlic cabbage and carrots making me cry.

It was the broken payphone across the street from my apartment, the receiver dangling by a single wire, the droning tone conjuring memories of my mother who I hadn't spoken to in years, the graffiti, a hodgepodge of what I assumed were Bible quotes but didn't have the courage to get any closer to read them. I wanted nothing more than to hang up that phone but I just couldn't bring myself to touch it.

They were the van living couple, draped in bohemian splendor, selling me crystals on the beach I decided to go to because I needed a break from all of the God sightings. You can feel the vibrations of the universe through these. They dangled slender pendants of pink, purple, black, blue, white, clear from leather coils over my head as I tried to



relax. Live on another level they told me in chorus. I ripped those leatherbound rocks out of their hands, ran to the crashing waves of the Pacific Ocean, screaming, and threw myself in.

The final time I saw God, I walked right past, my existence unacknowledged, and for that, I was grateful.



# Iona Rule

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## Calculating

- Snakes with red and yellow stripes touching are venomous, those with red and black touching aren't. If a man is wearing a shirt with blue stripes in his profile pictures, how dangerous is he?
- If you hear hoof beats do you think "Horses!" or "Zebras!"? How many times has it been zebras? How many times did you pray for zebras? How. Many. Times.
- The average red wine has an ABV of 13.5%. How many glasses of red wine constitute an excuse?
- The pharmacy sells 50ml of concealer for £3.95. If the relationship lasts 18 months, how much money will you spend on cover up?
- Is a zebra black with white stripes or white with black stripes? Using this answer is he a good man with bad moments or a bad man with good moments?
- The family upstairs has a son, Henry, who likes tractors. The family downstairs has a daughter, Emily, who likes dinosaurs. Which family will call 999 first?
- How many straws will break a camel's back?
- A rabbit may freeze when in danger. What percentage will survive this way?
- If the rabbit runs, how far will it get (in miles)?

- The sleeper train travels at 80 mph, and the overnight bus travels at 60mph. Which city will you wake up in on Thursday?
- There are 64GB of storage in his smartphone. The human brain is thought to have a million GB. What is the probability he remembers where your aunt lives?
- The front door is 55mm thick and 80 inches high. Use this information to calculate how many apologies you will hear through it.
- On average, a cheetah has 2000 spots and a leopard has 1140. Do you really believe they can change them?

# Anthony Varallo

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## My Money-Making Scheme

I don't know what to say about how it all started, except to say that one day I was living paycheck to paycheck, counting every dime, and then the next day my wallet was bulged with tens and twenties. That's the truth. I know I should say I'm sorry, and I guess in certain ways I am, but the thing is, it was just so thrilling to have money in my pocket. For the first time in my life. When you've never had anything for so long, and then you have something, it changes you. It just does. It's like you've been living in darkness for as long as you can remember, and then someone hands you this, like, giant flashlight, and says, "Try this." And that flashlight is like, the biggest, brightest flashlight you've ever seen—well, that's a pretty special feeling.

I remember my first time. I was at the bank, signing my name across the back of another disappointing paycheck, when the teller remarked that I could deposit my check at the automated teller machine outside, which she referred to as an "ATM." Apparently, the bank had several of these, which anyone could use, any time of day or night. I could feel my heart beating in my ears.

"Thank you," I said, my tongue thickening with guilt.

Outside, I found the ATM encased in a glass kiosk that swallowed my "debit card" and then returned it to me, the kiosk door clicking open in what seemed a clear invitation to avarice. Inside: a whiff of damp shoes and newly-minted fifties. My hands slickened in anticipation. The machine then asked for my "personal identification number," which I would soon privately come to think of as my "PIN," a little secret between the machine and me. I entered the number, whispering each digit aloud—but not too aloud. The machine gave me several options, one of which was, thrillingly, unbelievably, "withdrawal." I tapped the button and waited nervously. A moment later the machine spat out two twenties and a ten dollar bill, free for the taking. I hurriedly stuffed these into my wallet, where they seemed to fit perfectly, almost like my wallet had been designed for this very purpose. But it wasn't until I pushed through the kiosk door that

I felt the full weight of what I'd just done: I'd entered with nothing in my wallet, and left with *fifty dollars cash, U.S. legal tender*. Outside, the starry sky seemed to say, "Tell no one about this."

I didn't.

But my behavior grew worse. Soon I made any excuse to visit the ATM—the weekend's arrival, an upcoming birthday, my wallet feeling non-bulgy—and walked away with ever-increasing amounts; one hundred dollars, two hundred dollars, and once, the five hundred dollar maximum. I'd spend my profits at various shops and stores, the store owners eyeing my bills skeptically, then making change. "Here you go," they'd say, handing me back a ten or twenty, almost like they were waiting for me to confess.

"Thank you," I'd say, swallowing heavily.

Sometimes I'd visit the ATM in the early morning, sometimes at night. Never in the afternoon. I'd made a little ritual out of it, I guess, where the act of making the withdrawal was even more important than the money I was getting. That's something that feels important to say: it was always about something more than just the money. But it was also about the money, too.

I don't know how to get out. It's like they always say, it's a cycle that slowly pulls you in, little by little, until you've gotten in so deep that you don't even realize how deep you've gotten, the magnetic strip on your debit card wearing away to a frazzle. But here's the thing: on my last visit to the ATM, the machine refused my card. Spat it out like it was a fresh fifty, which it most definitely wasn't. "Insufficient funds," the message on the ATM's screen read. I peered closer to make sure I'd read correctly. The words glowed with accusation, malice. And maybe you can say I'm being naïve, and maybe you can say I have no idea which way is up, but when I read those words, it wasn't so much like I felt I'd been caught; it was more like I felt I'd been suddenly set free.

## shannon layne

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### **If hope is the thing with feathers, and I am full of eggs, am I a bird?**

Forty antral follicles is too many. If you think, as I did, *the more the merrier*, you'd be wrong. Since each antral follicle contains an egg chock full of hormones, too many of them means too many hormones, which wreak havoc on my insides like a mischievous band of pixies unscrewing a chandelier twist by twist. Mayhem held just in reserve, delicate glass hovering over a marble floor as their devious plot unfolds. A part of me is always prepared for the sound of shattering.

The doctor doesn't know that she is relaying this information to a former spelling bee champion who was asked to spell that same numerical word in front of a crowd of bored, likely hungover parents and beleaguered younger siblings who were forced to sit in a frigid auditorium for hours as kids with braces lisped into a microphone. There's no "u," in forty. It's trickier than you think. I didn't miss it then, and I don't miss it now as I spell it in my head. One ear listening to the doctor, the other spelling every few words letter by letter as they flow into my auditory canals—a trick that's always calmed me. She explains. I nod, rolling the medical terms in my head like a candy in my mouth. *Ovary. Polycystic. Insemination.*

Insemination is the word that trips me up, that day and on the ones that come. IUI, or intrauterine insemination, is presented as a valid option for someone like me, gay and with too many eggs that refuse to descend in an orderly fashion. The little vial and catheter used to transfer the donated sperm up, up, and away into my uterus are all opaque, adding another layer of mystery. So much of this process is invisible, like magic. If it works. Otherwise, just as invisible as the being we're attempting to create out of hopes, dreams, and my erratic eggs. An idea lacking shape and substance. Billowy clouds that gather and drift in a gray sky.

Where I come from, on most days fog rolls in from the sea and lingers over the tops of redwood trees in a blanket of whispers, otherworldly and silent. Morning and night, the fog is thickest, and I like to sit on the deck and watch it creep and settle.



I think about that a lot when I am lying on the table during one of what comes to seem like a thousand appointments: crinkly paper under my bare skin, my feet in stirrups, my body invaded by a speculum (great spelling word), the modern design of which was invented by a man in the 1840s—"modern" being an oxymoron. When the catheter is inserted into my uterus, a place things are supposed to emerge from, not enter, I curl my toes over the padded metal edge and spell. *Endometrium. Cervical. Implantation.* The letters are bright against the blackness of my closed eyelids.

My vast stores of eggs are persnickety. It makes sense, if you think about it. There should be half as many held in reserve as there are. Things are cramped. Only a very small number will ever get the chance to grow big and make the trip down a tube, millimeter by millimeter, toward destiny.

Did you know there has to be an explosion in the follicle for the harvested egg to be released? Why don't they teach us any of this?

If the egg my blood and hormones have grown to a fertilizable size doesn't cooperate, my body will tell us in a matter of weeks. Whatever the outcome, this time or the next or the next, one thing I know for certain: my body is a nest. My love for something yet to be is like any other winged being's trust in something they can't see or touch. In that, I'm not alone. I am feathered and equipped for flight and full to the brim of all the possible in the world. All I can do is spread wings damp from fog to dry in the sun. I too must launch from the tallest branch and glide over the morning mist pulled from the sea, eyes on the horizon, buoyed and driven by something ancient none of us can name.

# Lauren O'Donoghue

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## Formaldehyde

The taxidermist's wife was just that until the day her husband died. Now she is simply the taxidermist.

People bring her their corpses, kills and companions both, and she resurrects them with borax and cotton wool. Her small, careful hands are suited for the work. Her incisions are clean and her stitches are neat. She creates life where before there was none.

A hundred sets of eyes watch her as she works, each pair as blank and glassy as her own. She always keeps her scalpels clean.

(To begin, make a deep cut down the animal's back. Remove the skin in a single flourish, like a parlour trick.)

(Take care when preserving the fur. If done improperly there may be insect infestations. They will feast on your dearly departed like moths eat through wool.)

(Make a skeleton out of wire. This is as hard as it sounds.)

(The rest you will have to learn for yourself.)

The taxidermist does not discard her carcasses. She picks out the choicest morsels, the liver and lungs and heart, and feeds them to her black cat. If she is preparing a cat, she leaves the offal out for the crows. She does not want to facilitate cannibalism.

It does not occur to her that some clients may not look kindly upon this dismemberment. Beloved pet or no, she cannot abide waste.

There is a single window in her workroom, filmed with the dust of dead things, and a garden beyond it.

The gardener is too tall, her callouses too hard, her skin too rough, to be considered beautiful. But each day the taxidermist watches her as she turns the soil, as she lays the seeds in their velvet beds, as she prunes the dead branches away to make room for new life, and she finds beauty there.

She begins to save the bones. They have no purpose now, replaced as they are with cunning coils of metal, and the waste never sat right with her. She boils and bakes

them until they are clean and dry, then grinds them down to powder. One morning she presents them to the gardener.

“For the roses,” she says. And that is the beginning of it.

Her business is death. She knows nothing of chlorophyll and vitamin D, of how sunlight can be food and serotonin both. The fire has always kept her workroom warm.

She can strip flesh with acetone and can dry a pelt with corn flour, and once this knowledge was enough for her.

The gardener makes a pile of dry branches and cannot bring herself to burn them. They are a puzzle now, a cryptogram waiting to be solved. She could stare for an hour and not fathom it.

She has watched through the clouded window. The taxidermist conjures life from dead things as easily as breathing. Why can she not do the same?

There is no cotton in the garden. In the autumn she gathers the soft remnants of clematis and rosebay willowherb, filling a muslin bag over weeks and days. When it is overflowing she leaves it on the doorstep with a note.

“For your stuffing,” it says. And that, too, is a beginning.

They circle one another. Slowly, like a poplar seed floating through the air, caught for good luck. Small words, small offerings.

The taxidermist finds a fresh-killed rabbit by the roadside, and turns its skin into gloves of soft leather. She leaves them on the doorstep so the gardener might no longer feel the bite of thorns.

The gardener cultivates plump tomatoes all through the summer, and she sets a punnet on the windowsill each Friday of the season. The taxidermist is pale and bird-boned, she thinks, too thin.

Winter arrives early, like an inconsiderate houseguest. One morning the taxidermist wakes to find the world stiff and rimed with hoarfrost, each blade of grass and ragged leaf petrified by the cold, and she knows the gardener will not come today. She will not come again before impossibly distant spring.

The taxidermist has known grief. For months after her husband passed she wore his absence like a veil, the lack of him shrouding her eyes. This grief is a living thing, many-legged and squirming in her belly. It rots and propagates at the core of her.

She has a roe deer to prepare today, but she cannot make it look right. Its skin lays oddly over its wire bones, glass eyes more lifeless than their predecessors were in death. The carcass hunches on her workshop table, one hoof lifted as though preparing to flee. After several hours of work the taxidermist cannot bear to look at it any longer. She covers it with a sheet and returns to bed.

The knock at the door comes with the dying light. Shawls and blankets weigh down the shoulders of the taxidermist as she walks the short length of the room, her breath clouding the air. She feels decades older than her years.

The drop in temperature has warped the wood of the lintel, and it takes her a moment to wrench open the door. It is dark, and snow is falling, and the dim glow of the fire does little to illuminate her visitor. This does not matter. She would know her anywhere. She would know her if her eyes were plucked from her skull and the sockets scraped clean, would know her through copper mesh and twin spheres of glass.

"Come in," she says. It is end and beginning both.

Later, when the snow has gathered in drifts against the clouded windowpane, the gardener runs her calloused palm across the taxidermist's ribcage.

"Will you do it for me, when I die?" she asks.

The taxidermist leans up on her elbows, frees a sweat-soaked lock of hair from the gardener's cheek. "Do what?"

"Like you do for the animals," she says. "Make me live forever."

"You think that is living forever?"

"Don't you?"

The taxidermist shakes her head. "Only a different sort of dead." She lays back against the pillows, stares up at the cracked plaster of the ceiling. "Bury me in the garden, when I die. Let the worms and the moles make a feast of me. Plant a rosebush on my belly so I might feed the roots. That is how you live forever."

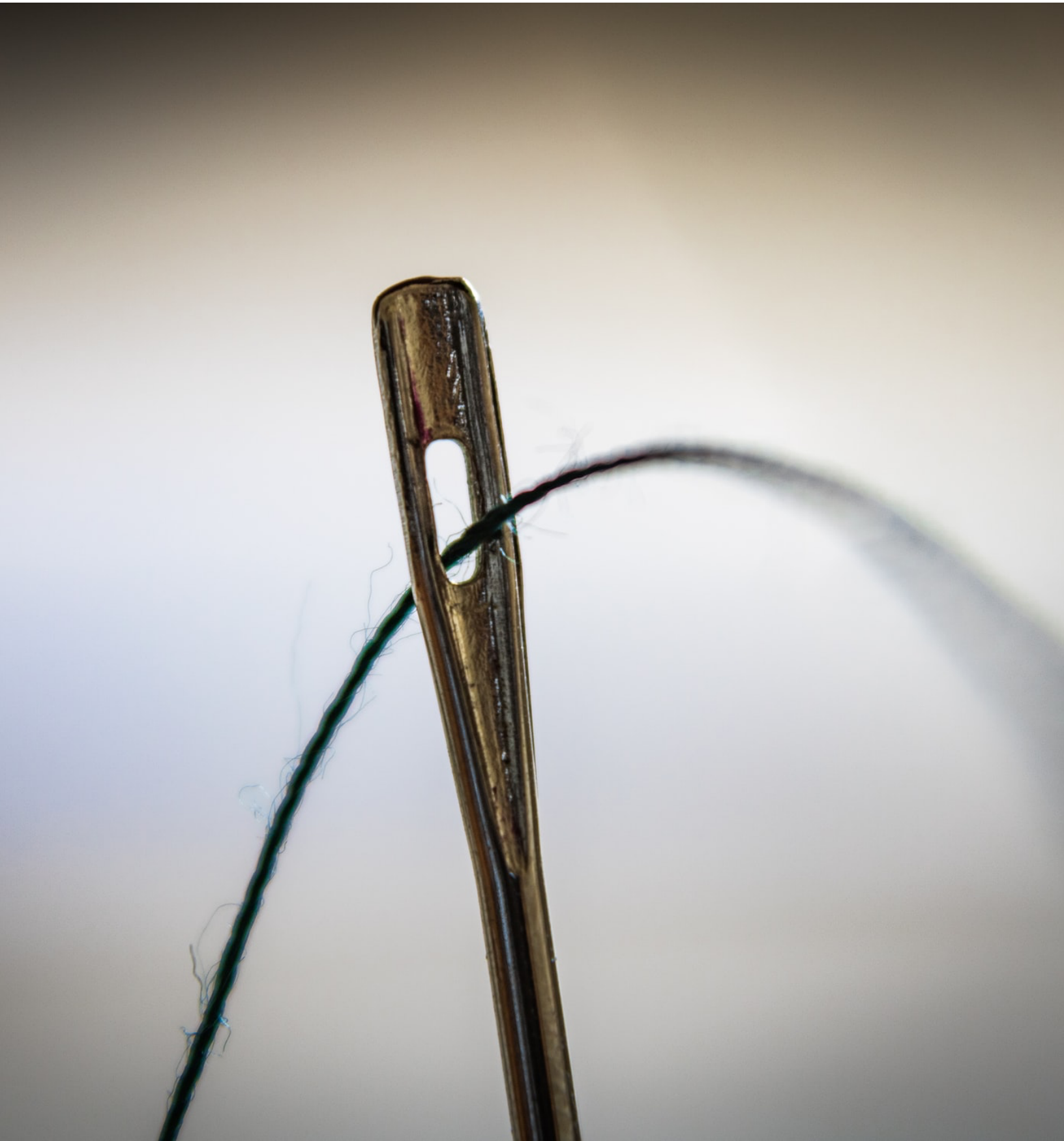
"Everything in the garden dies eventually."

"Nothing in this house lives to begin with."

"Except for us," the gardener says.

"Yes." The taxidermist smiles. The fine muscles of her face ache, remembering the small motion. "Except for us."

A hundred sets of eyes are sleeping now. Outside the snow has laid its mantle, holding the land in tableau. The clever hearts of dormice hardly beat at all. It is a small death. It will not last.



# Chris Haven

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## Chicken Little, the Later Years

So Chicken Little is sitting around, and that good for nothing Turkey Lurkey comes by and says hey, the sky is falling. Chicken Little says to Turkey Lurkey you're full of crap. And then Henny Penny and Lucy Goosey and all the other birdbrains come by and say the same thing and Chicken Little says I heard this story before and I'm not buying it. And so Woolly Bully says it's a metaphor, the actual sky isn't coming down in big blue chunks, but instead the world as we know it is coming unraveled. Chicken Little dislikes that metaphor and says the world was never a ball of yarn to begin with. So then Achy Snakey—where'd he come from—slithers up and says what is happening is the ground is being pulled away from underneath us. Chicken Little says you mean a rug and Achy Snakey says I said what I meant because the sky is less important to me than the ground. Then Schemer Lemur calls down from the tree and says Blight! Blight is the problem! Trees the world over will soon be felled by blight! Chicken Little rolls her eyes and says can't I get a minute's peace. Finally Groggy Froggy hobbles over and Chicken Little says if you say one thing about a shortage of lily pads, I'm gonna block you. Chicken Little tells them all to go back home, everybody already knows all these things, they're all happening to all of us at all times. They all go off muttering something about what a lousy storyteller she's turned out to be and what she keeps to herself is the sad thing about the stories. Wait till you find out what's happening to all the stories.

# Cloe Watson

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## Alone

I remember the Velveteen Rabbit  
and his sick boy because I'm a sick girl,  
and I just saw a black sky, bold  
in its purple shadow. But velvet  
can be any color, and I'm a woman,  
was a woman when I crawled  
to the bathtub, stopping just short  
to pass out in child's pose, my nose  
to the floor, hands pinned against  
my chest. When I woke my feet  
were wet, and in calling for my rabbit,  
my ears grew a bit longer and the tiles  
beneath me began to sprout green  
with a grief I've always known.



## A.C. Koch

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### My Fire Still Burns

Until she found the right word, she couldn't tell the story. Without exactly the right word, it would sound crass, or pathetic—the daydream of a delusional person. And although she could nearly taste the word, it wouldn't come. Min-ji sipped her pineapple juice through a straw and pressed her lips together in the hopes that the missing word would dissolve on her tongue and slip out of her mouth.

Deborah laughed. "Earth to Min-ji! Are you there?"

Min-ji smiled. "Sorry. I just can't find the word. It has the cat's tongue."

"You mean the tip of *your* tongue." Deborah peered from under her lashes as she stirred sugar into her cappuccino as if checking to make sure she hadn't flustered her with the correction.

Min-ji waved her hand. "Well, if it was on the tip of my tongue, it would be easy to find. So the cat must have it." She tucked her hair behind her ears and softened her words with a smile.

Deborah gave a glittery laugh. It was nice, Min-ji thought, to have a teacher who laughed and smiled and acted like a fellow human being—not like her old professors at Pusan National University who insisted on one and only one interpretation of any given French Enlightenment poem. Min-ji let her eyes drift out the window where the intersection crawled with cars and pedestrians. Downtown Seattle. The glass facades of the buildings across the street cycled through the ice creamy light of neon signs that shifted and buzzed and strobed. Late afternoon drizzle stitched the tall café window with fine streaks that caught the lights.

"So," Deborah said, placing her hands palms-down on the table in the way that signified the official beginning of their lesson, "tell me about your week."

Min-ji gave a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "Oh, I think this has been a very long week. But I brought something to show you." She pulled an iPad out of her bag and set it on the table with the screen opened on a grid of photos.

“Oh! The trip! You brought your Saipan pictures!”

Min-ji nodded. She tapped a photo and began scrolling to the side. She knew Deborah would want to hear comments about each, so she tried narrating. “Here is at the swimming pool. This is on scenic overlook. This is Song-il with the man who drives the boat for the fishing expedition.”

Deborah smiled at each photo as she watched them slide by. Shots of Min-ji in a flowery blouse, squinting into the sun. Shots of her husband, in an open-collared Oxford, staring straight at the camera. Jagged volcanic landscape in the background, sparkling sea, leaning coconut trees. Min-ji noticed Deborah’s smile faltering about halfway through the photos, and she stopped scrolling. “Maybe this is so boring.”

Deborah waved her hands. “No, Min-ji, it’s not, it’s really not. This looks like such a beautiful place. It’s just that—well, I notice that neither of you are smiling in any of these pictures.”

Min-ji shook her head. “No, we don’t smile in pictures. This is Korean tradition, I think. We must be serious.”

“Okay.”

“One day, our children may use our photos to put on the altar, when they honor us. We shouldn’t be...” Again, another word escaped her.

“Frivolous?” Deborah offered.

Min-ji clapped her hands and beamed. “Yes! We shouldn’t be *frivolous*.”

Deborah tilted her head and offered a tender smile. “But you know what, Min-ji? You’re so beautiful when you smile. Wouldn’t your kids want to see a picture of what you look like right now, with that smile on your face?”

Min-ji looked down at the photo on the screen. She and Song-il, standing stiffly side by side in front of the fountain in the hotel lobby. Her own face looked a lot like the photo of her mother that she set over the altar every year during Chusok: a straight line for the mouth, eyebrows like shallow parentheses over black eyes. “Well,” she said, “my children don’t exist yet, so I am not worried.” She could feel Deborah feeling sorry for her—for all Korean women—and the way their lives were supposedly so much more limited than the free spirit American girls who traveled the globe teaching English and sleeping with whomever they wanted and feeling no regrets.

It was like a hidden curriculum in their conversation lessons, a theme underlying everything they said. It made Min-ji want to say something snappy and decisive in her native tongue: We don’t choose who we are, we just live the lives we’re born into, and anyone who thinks differently is a privileged brat who has never heard the word ‘no.’ But Deborah wouldn’t understand a word of it, and if she said it in English it would come out slow and clumsy, without the snappiness, so why bother? She gave a rueful smile, and slid the iPad closer to Deborah so she could flick through the pictures at her own pace.

"You know," Deborah said while scrolling, "they say a single moment of happiness or decisive action creates another, and another, and then what you might have been faking becomes real." She looked up and grinned.

"Who's they?"

"What?"

"Who said that?"

"Oh, you know, just like, collective wisdom."

Min-ji made a thoughtful hum.

Deborah scrolled through a few more photos, then slid the device back across the table. "Saipan looks like a lovely place."

"Yes, it is a lovely place."

"So tell me, was it like a second honeymoon?"

Min-ji gave a vague nod that said yes and no at the same time. She was still thinking about the other story she wanted to tell, but now she wondered how Deborah would interpret it. Surely Deborah had drawn the conclusion that Min-ji and Song-il were an unhappy couple, standing in the tropics and scowling at the camera, shot after shot. What would she think then, if she told her about the old boyfriend she'd googled up and chatted with the other day? Deborah would surely leap at the chance to encourage her to betray her husband, throw herself into a sexual adventure, exercise her supposed freedom as a modern woman: all the stuff that Deborah herself would do, because her world contained no consequences. Min-ji inspected her nails and glanced out the window as horns brayed in the intersection. "Deborah, I need a word for a feeling. When you miss someone from a long time ago, but there is no way to go back and have what you had."

"Nostalgia."

"No, I thought of that one, but that's not it. It's a strange word, not so academic."

Deborah puckered her lips in thought. "Melancholy?"

"I like that word, but that's not it either."

Deborah gave her a narrow-eyed smile. "Why don't you tell me the story, and then maybe I can help you find the word."

Min-ji shook her head. "Maybe it's a stupid story. Much more boring than my Saipan pictures."

"I didn't think those were boring. In fact, I learned a lot about you from those pictures, and about Korean culture. I may be your English teacher, but you're my Korean culture teacher."

Min-ji nodded. She hadn't thought about it that way before. Deborah had lived in Seoul for a year, but had never learned the language and only knew a little about the food and culture. As far as Min-ji could tell, she hadn't interacted with anyone besides her fellow Westerners, and had returned to America with a vague sense of guilt over lost

opportunities. The idea made her raise her chin and fold her hands on the table. “Okay, Deborah. Here is my story. I knew a boy when I was in high school. He was a crazy boy, with a strange haircut that no one else had. And he wrote me love letters and hid them in my lunch box so I can find them when I’m eating with my girlfriends. It was such a scandal every time—it made me turn red, and everyone wanted to see what he wrote. I had to run away and hide the notes. But I read them later. They were very beautiful, I think. Like little poems, about me.”

Deborah cupped her face in her hands and leaned forward with a grin. “Wow, romantic! Is this a story about how you met your husband?”

Min-ji shook her head. “Young-kwang never spoke to me. Only the notes, every day, all year long. And then we ended up going to university together, and we got to know each other.”

Deborah raised her eyebrows. “You ‘got to know each other’? Meaning?”

But Min-ji just went red. “I think you know what I mean.”

Deborah clapped her hands together, twice. “Min-ji! I love this story!”

“And then we graduated, and never saw each other again. I got married and forgot all about Young-kwang. The end.”

Deborah raised her hands. “Oh come on, that’s not the end. What else happened?” Outside, a volley of car horns bleated.

Min-ji shrugged. “Just that I feel this thing, sometimes. This word that I’m missing.”

Deborah narrowed her eyes across the table. “Okay, Min-ji, go ahead and milk the mystery if you want, but I think something else happened. Did he get in touch with you recently? A fresh love letter, maybe?”

She looked away to avoid Deborah’s eyes. Let her think what she wanted. She had no intention of sharing the rest of the story. How she’d typed his name into a search engine and discovered him on the staff page of an advertising agency in Vancouver, B.C., head shot and all. Spiky hair, goofy grin. The same boy she’d known, but filled out now, and with distinguished wrinkles at the corners of his eyes. The chat thread that had turned steamy. The way it had felt to touch her own skin as if it were his, silky and warm. The racy photo he’d sent, the familiar shape of his cock, and the words he’d typed. The sudden gust of desire and fear that moved her to her delete the thread, block his name.

Nothing good could come from more of that. She sipped her pineapple juice to take the edge off the heat in her face, the smoldering excitement of just thinking about it. Her reflection watched her in the window. Out in the intersection, a silver car was stopped on the crosswalk, ignoring a green light. The cars arrayed behind it blasted their horns. “No, Deborah, no more love letters.”

Deborah gazed out the window as well. “Well, I guess you do sometimes just start to think about somebody from your past, for no reason. There’s no harm in that, you know.”

Min-ji hummed instead of disagreeing. She could see a man behind the driver’s wheel in the silver car. His forearms bulged with veins as he gripped the steering wheel, and it looked like he was flexing his jaws in some spasm of anger. All at once he yelled something and punched the center of the wheel. The sound of his voice barely registered behind the cafe’s glass pane, but Min-ji jumped at the suddenness of the man’s anger. Had his car died?

Deborah hadn’t noticed; she was watching beads of rainwater slide diagonally across the window, steered by the wind. “The problem is when you start thinking the past was something perfect, when that was never true.”

Min-ji watched the man throw the car door open and stomp into the crosswalk. He wore the uniform of a security guard, with a utility belt and holster, and he kicked at a puddle sending a sheet of water arcing onto the sidewalk. This was met with a fresh barrage of car horns from behind, and he threw his hands up and screamed a curse. This time Min-ji could make out what he said: “You think I’m an idiot?”

Deborah saw him now. She pointed out at the intersection. “What’s this? Happy hour backfire for this guy?”

There was someone else in the car. From this angle, Min-ji could just make out the edge of a skirt of someone sitting in the passenger seat. And then, like a fleck of white adding depth to a still-life painting, she saw a baby’s foot bob in the air on the woman’s lap. The woman adjusted the baby on her legs and leaned over the gear shift to honk the horn. The man in the security guard uniform stood in front of the car, getting soaked, shouting and whipping his arms around in wild gestures. Min-ji heard the phrase again—“You think I’m an idiot?”—this time directed through the windshield at the woman with the baby.

Deborah muttered, “Jesus, dude. Take a valium.”

Min-ji found she couldn’t look away. The man’s rage was Jovian. His flung his arms about like he was tossing lightning bolts across the city. Then he jabbed one finger at the windshield where the woman sat hefting the baby in her lap, trying to soothe its crying. And over everything, the unending honking of the car horns.

A uniformed policeman on the other side of the intersection began making his way towards the man. The man spun, held one palm up to the cop and pulled something from the utility belt that dangled from his waist. Min-ji, who had never seen a gun brandished in real life, gasped and clapped one hand over her mouth. The man pointed his black pistol straight at the cop, who crouched and held his hands up.

“You think I’m a fucking idiot!? Do you?”

The cop retreated while still in his crouch, like a crab with its pincers in the air. The man with the gun stomped towards the cop, then spun and pointed the gun, straight-armed, at the windshield of his car where the woman hugged the baby to her chest.

Min-ji, separated from it all by the insulating pane of the café window, pressed her forehead to the glass. Her breath fogged her view and she had to move back. Meanwhile, news of the psycho in the intersection rippled from table to table. People slid out of their chairs and headed for the back wall. Deborah grabbed Min-ji's elbow but she pulled away.

"Min-ji! Come on! Get away from the window!"

Min-ji could only shake her head. She stared at the man with the gun, the way his eyes bulged in his head and his veins throbbed in his neck. He stepped towards the car until his knees pressed against the front bumper. He brought up the other hand to hold the gun cupped in his palm. Min-ji stared at his trigger finger, just a flex away from firing. The cop now had his gun out and, still crouching, began moving into the intersection again.

"Min-ji! He's crazy! Get down!"

The crazy man was going to shoot the woman in the car if the cop didn't shoot him first. This was exactly the kind of thing people in Korea believed happened on a daily basis in the United States, and now it looked like they were right. "Don't get shot by some crazy black-skin drug dealer," her grandmother had warned her when she and Song-il had relocated to Seattle for his job. "Don't go out after dark, and only shop at Korean businesses, where the people will respect you." Min-ji had thought it was a ridiculous, racist attitude, but so far she hadn't ventured very far into the city on her own. There were a lot of black people, but none of them looked very scary. The guy with the gun was a stringy-haired white guy, and right now he looked scarier than anyone she'd ever seen. Pointing a gun at his own family. Without knowing what she was doing, she started slapping her palms on the window. The glass warbled and rattled.

"Min-ji! You want him to shoot us?!"

The man turned his head. With the gun still pointing at the car's windshield, his eyes swept across the sidewalk and fixed Min-ji where she stood on the other side of the café window. Her heart jumped when their eyes met. She imagined the feeling of a bullet plowing into her gut, tearing its way through her body to burst out of her back in a fountain of gore, mixed with the confetti of shattered glass. The cinema of it.

The man yelled something that she couldn't make out. He tossed his chin and yelled louder, looking right at her. Pale eyes, deep set, with dark patches beneath them as if he hadn't slept in days. Behind him, the cop crept closer, gun angled down and laced in both hands.

Min-ji made a gun shape with her thumb and forefinger. She touched her finger to her temple and held it there. The man cocked his head. A crooked smile appeared on

his face. He mirrored Min-ji's pose by putting his gun to his own temple. The cop, sensing the gunman's distraction, quickened his step. Min-ji uttered a prayer under her breath, a phrase her grandmother used to chant when they bowed down before the golden Buddha at Pomo Temple. A plea for enlightenment before death. A moment of decisive action, to save a family in jeopardy. Then she snapped her gun-finger up, as if firing a bullet into her brain.

The man's face got dark. He took a step forward with the gun still held to his head. The woman in the car was yelling one word over and over through the open driver's window. The man never took his eyes off Min-ji. He squeezed the trigger and the sound was a small pop. His head snapped to the side and his legs went out beneath him. He dropped to the pavement.

Min-ji sat down hard in her chair. A collective gasp went through the cafe, and then a taut silence as if everyone was waiting to breathe. The cop ran to the body, the woman sprang from the car, but Min-ji aimed her gaze into the tabletop. Wavy lines of polished woodgrain. Dull, interlocking rings of mug prints. Her body shook, her breathing sketchy. Deborah, hand clasped over her mouth, said, "Oh dear God," over and over. Rain pattered on the glass.

Song-il would be expecting lunch within the hour, but Min-ji couldn't leave. The cop who'd approached in the intersection came into the cafe as soon as additional police showed up, and he went straight to Min-ji and Deborah's table to ask for a statement. He looked young enough to be a college kid, with a shaving nick on his neck and frantic eyes that reminded Min-ji of a fish on a bed of ice. "You ladies witnessed what happened, am I right?" he said, voice high and tense. "You saw that he shot himself, right? I'm going to need both of you to stick around and give me a statement, okay?"

Min-ji nodded. Her heart was thudding, her hands shaking, and she didn't speak for fear of bursting into tears. The way the man had dropped like his puppet strings had been cut. Deborah had become a stream of babble and outbursts, which she directed mostly towards her phone—scrolling, scrolling, frantic for information. As more police arrived, the cafe transformed into an emergency response headquarters. The waiter started serving hot coffees to all the officials. The rain got heavier. EMTs covered the body and then shifted it into a bag and carted it away on a gurney, loading it into the back of a strobing ambulance. The intersection was shut down. Cops in ponchos gesticulated in the middle of traffic knots, horns bleating in chorus.

A spatter of rain fell on the table as two figures passed and Min-ji looked up. A female paramedic led the woman from the silver car to an empty table nearby. She was wrapped in a metallic blanket, bejeweled with rain droplets. The paramedic guided the woman into an open chair and then knelt to say soothing things amidst the clamor and



walkie-talking bleeping of the cafe. The woman stared into her tabletop like Min-ji had done, cocooned in shock. Her knees bounced and Min-ji realized she was trying to soothe the baby she cradled within her silver wrapping. The woman was no longer yelling, no longer crying, just seeming to breathe deeply through her shivers. Meanwhile, Deborah sobbed openly, pressing a disintegrating napkin over her eyes.

The rain pounded. Through the speckled window, Min-ji watched policemen place small orange cones on the ground near where the man's body had fallen. Evidence markers. An oily stain shone on the wet pavement.

The waiter approached the woman's table and spoke quietly with her. Min-ji studied her face. She looked to be in her thirties, Latina, with black hair pulled back in an unraveling ponytail. Her eyes were large and hollowed-out looking, but she was no longer expressing any outward signs of anguish. Music played dimly, Min-ji noticed for the first time. Andrea Bocelli, crooning.

Deborah, face slick with tears, seemed not to notice that the woman from the car was sitting just behind her. "That poor woman," Deborah moaned. "And her baby! Do you think the baby will remember what happened? My God."

The waiter returned to the woman's table and set a large mug of hot cocoa in front of her, topped with a swirl of whipped cream. The woman regarded it with that hollow expression, then slid the mug to the edge of the table and leaned down to sip it. Eyes closed. She sat back up with froth on her lip and a dab of whipped cream on the tip of her nose. Absently, she wiped it off. Then she swiped a finger through the remaining whipped cream and closed her eyes again as she slid her finger into her mouth.

Min-ji watched. The woman's expression softened as she savored the taste. When she opened her eyes again, she was looking straight at Min-ji. They shared a glance, and the woman's face resolved into something different. Not an expression of happiness, but a neutral look, offered to a stranger. A look that said, I'm fine, Everything's fine. Min-ji reflected it back. Sometimes you lose something, she thought, and you're better off for having lost it.

*Look*, he'd typed under the dick pic he'd sent as her heart raced and her finger moved to delete the thread. *My fire still burns for you*.

She could still taste him when she closed her eyes. "Bittersweet," she said quietly. That was the missing word, but Deborah didn't hear it. She was still talking, still processing, still shaking in her seat.

The ambulance departed with swirling lights but no siren. The oily stain went on bleeding into the wet pavement, becoming part of the street. Min-ji waved down the harried waiter, who paused with raised eyebrows.

She pointed at the woman's hot chocolate with its melting cap of whipped cream. "Please, sir, I'd like one of those."

# Megan Lynn Wilkinson

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## I Thee Wed

give me  
your name all  
the way to Nova  
Scotia sell me blue  
bead lilies  
populate the sacked  
city of my mind  
with swift wit  
and Chadron  
tilt your head  
show me  
bantering arousal  
pull and roll time  
like saltwater taffy  
repeating  
your granddad's risk  
and romance  
packed and ready  
to go hoisting  
standards and babies  
you illuminate  
and I will follow  
that glowing sea  
your dad's rare  
gift of high  
-pitched mischief

# Melissa Benton Barker

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## Mother and Son

### The Girl on the Bus

The bus winds round and round the mountain, up the mountain, down the mountain, the girl curled, asleep in the last seat, she missed her stop, she's been forgotten. The bus goes all the way up to the top of the mountain, place of cowbell, ash and fog. Then the bus goes all the way back down to the empty school at the bottom. The girl wakes but doesn't speak, white daylight all around her. What happens at the empty school? You are the girl. Or maybe you're not. This is a dream, until it isn't.

### The Boy Whines

The boy and the mother are on a hike, a hike the mother hates because it's so easy to lose the trail. The trail is barely a footpath, often muddled by fallen leaves but everyone says don't worry. The boy is only four. The boy is tired, so the boy whines but the mother doesn't slow. She cuts through branches and brush. She's determined. The boy throws his arms around the mother's legs but she doesn't let up, and he releases her. She lets him lag behind. She turns a corner, steps off the path by the creek, hides behind a tree trunk, waits to watch the fear on his face as he passes.

### The Head

A head bursts through the wall. It's the head of an ancient Greek philosopher. The head holds a key on its tongue. The head gives you a list of instructions. Except when it speaks it shoots blanks—the words have sound but no meaning. You wake up scraping the wall.

### The Boy Writes

The boy makes a book of cartoon characters. The characters fly out of his fingers. The main character has horns and an amazing eyebrow dashed across his forehead. The main character chases the minor characters and screams. The minor characters have wobbly

faces, wobbly hair. The boy names one of them “Oh No.” The mother knows the main character is really her, the mother. But the boy doesn’t know it—not yet—he doesn’t know it. The mother has all kinds of ways of hurting, of knowing.

#### The Chase

You are riding horses into the woods with your sister. The bearded men chase after you. You know they want your sister. The horses you ride are not well fed. No one has properly cared for them. You ride holding onto mane and rib; they are skeletal. But hungry horses do not differentiate between escape, opportunity, and leisure. They slow even when you stab your heels into their flanks, over and over and over. They halt full-stop and the smell of blood and dust breaks through their pores. They gnaw on grass while the tide of beards comes closer, closer. Your sister’s mouth opens. You will fall face first, your boots tangled in stirrups.

#### The Mother Worries

The mother’s worry runs laps around the house, unspools, then races back and wraps the house like a swaddling blanket or a bandage, but she can’t stop. The worry unleashes and stands beside her or on top of her or she rides it like a wave or it crashes over her or it transposes itself upon her and becomes her, until no one can tell the difference between the worry and the mother. What is the mother’s worry to the boy? An unstruck match. A boulder. An anchor. A muzzle.

# Jill Michelle

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## Underwater

She hides outside this white-walled room  
the never-painted nursery

grief pulling at her hems  
like a toddler.

She sits, swaddles it  
long enough for her funeral blacks

to ivy over. Unfinished flowers  
fall from her skirts. Red petals.

Motherhood, the bright bulb  
her moth-heart circles

though she knows  
it might kill her.

Family, her mermaid's dream of legs  
of underwater Ferris Wheels

spinning possibilities, turned  
sick circle, sad carnival of ovaries.

She wakes, another day to choke  
down her ocean of loss

the pecking thoughts:

*Was it because, because, because...?*



# Bronwen Griffiths

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## Cadair Werdd (The Green Chair)

Our father sat in the green chair for over a decade—its arms slowly turning black and frayed, the seat sinking under his weight. He weighed his words and spoke only when necessary and he used Welsh, his mother-tongue. All traces of English seemed to have vanished from his mouth like water leaking from a rusty pipe.

After our mother's death from cancer something broke in him. His muteness, his virtual absence, became like a millstone around our necks, a void in the centre where love should have been.

One day he wasn't there. We searched the house, the fields and the brook. His few belongings remained by his chair—a twisted pair of spectacles, a worn copy of the Bible, a half-eaten packet of digestive biscuits—but we could find no trace of him.

We decided to sell the house. Not because we needed the money or because of its shabby disrepair. There was a heaviness in the air. It felt like deep water. We floundered.

I returned a year later. There were blue Venetian blinds in the windows, a brass carriage clock by the front door.

No one answered the bell so I opened the side gate and walked into the garden. I was sad to see the honeysuckle and old roses cut-down, the lawn so severely trimmed.

Our father's chair, faded by rain and sun, sat perched on the bank. Below, in the brook, a millstone had settled. It had not been there before.

I sat and listened to the gurgle of the water and the woodpecker tapping on a distant oak. Then I retraced my steps, my feet light on the summer grass.

All I said to my sisters was, 'The house is changed,' and we continued on in our new ways.



# Kara Oakleaf

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## The Shadow Boyfriends

Vanessa is the first of the mothers to bring up her shadow boyfriend. You all watch the children from the park benches, eyes behind sunglasses and iced coffees in your hands, and she tells all of you how she still thinks of an ex, all these years later, how his memory follows her like a shadow, something shifting alongside her whenever she turns to look at it. She can't stop pulling at that thread of a thought, how easily she could have ended up with him instead of her husband, what her life would look like now if he was still the one at her side.

You glance at each other, give noncommittal sighs and raise your coffees to your lips or turn to call across the park to one of the children who's getting too close to the tree line where a family of foxes live, because none of you know what to say to such a confession. But later that evening, you all hear it—something faint under the sound of your own husband calling your name, the echo of different voice beneath his. How he used to say your name so quietly it might have just been a breath against your neck.

And the next night, a movement in the next room. The scent of him, that pine-sharp soap he used to use, hanging in the air, and you wonder if he's always been there, a shadow always just outside the frame, ready to spill over into your reality.

Yes, you say to each other a few days later, when Vanessa apologizes for bringing it up. Yes, we all have one, too.

One from way back in high school or college. One who showed up at the lake house where you vacationed with your grandparents every summer, until the summer he didn't. One who you never quite broke up with because maybe you hadn't quite been together, so if you somehow found yourself in last moment you saw him, you might still lean your head against his shoulder and feel him turn to kiss you. One who first dated an old friend of yours, and so you never told a soul, everything between the two of you a secret, and

now you can't let go because there is no one else to hold onto those moments that were only yours and his.

All summer, while your children chase each other through backyard sprinklers or clamor up and down the slides or wander the edge of the trees looking for the foxes, you tell each other the stories of your shadow boyfriends, conjuring them into the air around you as you speak their names out loud for the first time in years.

They all have one-syllable names, these shadow boyfriends. Sounds that land like a punch. They're Todd, Dan, Nick, Rob, Jack, Chris, but sometimes, you draw the sound out, your breath slowing over the vowel, or catch yourself whispering his full name. Nicholas. Christopher. And you can never tell if you're trying to soften the blow, or if you only wanted to hold the sound of him on your tongue for a moment longer.

Some of you have a long string of old boyfriends, others just one or two, but you all have only one shadow. Most of the boys from your pasts have faded away: because some were not who you thought them to be, because some hurt you in ways that twisted your old feelings for them into something rotten and easy to abandon, and because some were perfectly nice boys who you could not bring yourselves to love in the first place. But the ones who've become shadows, the ones haunting each of you now, are the ones who, in another life, you might never have left. The ones who wanted to stay in your hometown when you could only imagine a life elsewhere, the ones here for only that one semester before returning to a home country, the ones who followed their own work across an ocean. It was only the world that pulled you apart, and so there is a piece of you that cannot stop loving him. And with these women, all of you crowded next to each other under the blazing sun of a playground years later, you can finally admit it to someone who understands.

When you walk home at the end of the day, each of you slipping into your own houses with your children, you try to close yourself off to the memory of him, to ignore the stories you've been telling all day, but still you feel that shadow alongside you, feel his hands on you again as your mind reels through that first night, that last night, that time at the lake, and you're in your own house but the shadow is brushing up against you from a place where you are still with him, those moments still unfolding in a world just beyond your grasp.

He is seventeen and awkward when he first lays a hand on your knee. He is twenty-two and beautiful, even in his most threadbare t-shirts. He is twenty-eight and grieving, something broken down inside of him, but still in that brief window of time

when he could have recovered, could have found his way back to you. You're still waiting for what comes next, still so sure something comes next.

Vanessa's shadow is in town for the week, visiting his mother. She saw him climb into his parents' old Buick in the parking lot at the grocery store as she loaded her younger boy into the shopping cart, and when he drove past and saw her, stopping the car to roll down the window and say hello, decades of her life fell away. She was sixteen again and somehow as electrified as she'd been the first time he took her hand in his. Her eyes stare past you to some distant point across the playground when she tells you the story, over and over.

The rest of you see him at the park that weekend, out for a run while your children play. He raises his hand in a wave when he sees Vanessa, and every one of you waves back. He's an ordinary man, but none of you can take your eyes off him. You turn as he jogs past the park, around the bend in the tress until he disappears around the corner, a shadow again, but you'd seen the reality, heard the footfalls on the pavement, his solid mass moving across the earth, and remembered how real they all are, how easy it would be to go to them, fall into step beside them as if you'd never been apart. The possibilities shimmering in the August heat.

And when you turn back to the playground, your children are gone. The swings still, the sun bouncing a blinding light off the slide. One of the children's plastic water bottles toppled over and dripping a dark spot onto the pavement. All of you motionless, the silence shocking, and then it's broken again by footsteps, Vanessa's shadow returning, coming back up the path to the playground and jogging toward you.

"V?" he calls, and Vanessa turns toward him. "Hon, you ready to go? We've gotta get the girls to their practice."

Vanessa blinks at him, confused for a moment, and then turns back to you, opens her mouth as if to say something, but the thought is already gone. Her husband slides an arm around her waist, and she shivers for a second, but then smiles up at him as he leads her away, both of them waving to you over their shoulders as they head back toward their house to get their daughters. And you realize none of you are sure why Vanessa had been here at the playground in the first place. Her girls are older, teenagers busy with soccer and marching band who haven't played here in ages. You can't make sense of it.

But the rest of your children. Where are your children?

The playground is silent for another moment, then suddenly, two of you run for the street, the rest dash across the lawn, and the children's names are everywhere, all of you yelling for them at once in voices you barely recognize as your own. The empty park and all these screams.

And then the children emerge from the trees, spilling out into the open all at once. Scowls on their flushed faces.

“You scared it,” one of the oldest says accusingly, because they’d only been following one of the foxes, quieting their own voices and footsteps as they tracked it through the pines. You see the flash of red in the trees as it darts deeper into the forest, and then you all turn away and walk the children back toward the playground. Some of you look back over your shoulders at the trees, because something is still off. You’re certain you’re waiting for another boy to emerge, a child with freckles and pale red curls, but that can’t be right because you’re all holding onto your own children, everyone accounted for, and the image of that other boy is already turning to smoke, burning away under the late morning sun. And so you keep walking, clinging tight to your children’s hands—these small, sweaty, perfect hands—as you guide them away from the trees.

These children who for a moment had been erased from the world. Because what would become of them if the shadow boyfriends, if these other lives you’ve been playing out all summer, were real?

These children who can only be found on the path that led you away from him.

For the rest of the afternoon, no one mentions Vanessa, and no one tells another story about their shadow boyfriend. It’s only on the walk home that night that someone brings it up. ‘Maybe we should haunt them for a change,’ she jokes, and you all laugh before growing quiet again. All of you thinking the same thing.

From your own beds that night, the silent mounds of your husbands sleeping beside you, you dream yourselves rising from your bodies. It’s easy as breathing, and then you’re out of your houses, far from the rooms where you’ve felt them following you, flying through the night, and soon, you will find the shadows somewhere out there, in their own lives.

When you find them, you’ll pin them down, press their shoulders into their beds. They’ll look up at you with wonder and you’ll be the shadows this time. You’ll be the ghosts in the next room, you’ll crawl into the deepest corners of their minds and whisper their names. And when you are the shadows, you will always be able to find them where they are, to be with them in a place where they can never touch your children. And every time you go to them, you’ll remind yourself you can only stay for only a minute, only a sliver of time before you return home. But in those small moments when you haunt them, they will still be yours.

# Justin Lacour

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**Sunday, 9:35 a.m.**

The washed-out light

in the forest.

Color of a hangover.

There's an oak tree by the pond,

goldenrod and broken glass.

A woman like the sun, crying.

# Alex Starr

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## Bled

If a galaxy retains  
a memory  
of the universe  
then by extension  
so too the rind  
of a cocoa bean  
the steam that  
curlicues up from  
a rooibos ocean  
stitches sewed in  
hem of summer dress  
so too the haphazard  
ridges in tree trunks  
the hull of a ship  
so too scribbled verses  
so too you so  
too us so too



# Cayce Osborne

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## The Scientist's Daughter

### Stage I: Gestation

When the scientist learns she is pregnant, she tells no one. Her body begins to change. When the pregnancy becomes obvious, colleagues avoid her and do not offer congratulations. For a working scientist, a baby is a liability. She is proving true every unkind thought they've had about women being allowed in the lab.

The scientist does not read the usual books; she favors the *American Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* over *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. She does not consult a chart telling her what size her fetus is in relation to various fruits and vegetables, or participate in online forums filled with the frantic posts of other first-time mothers. The scientist has an ultrasound at the earliest possible date. She orders all the tests performed, even those not required by her doctor and therefore not covered by insurance. She likes knowing things. She is the designer, operator, subject, analyst, and reporter of this self-experiment.

### Stage II: Birth

When the doctors predict a difficult delivery, the scientist schedules a cesarean for one week before her projected due date and turns to her medical journals for advice on recovery. She makes a birth plan for her OB-GYN and requests a face-to-face with the anesthesiologist. She downloads a medical app that takes her step-by-step through the surgery. She watches it every day on the train home from her lab. The length of the animated reenactment matches the duration of her ride home; the final staple closes over the anime-mother's pelvic incision as the scientist unlocks the door of her one-room apartment. This symmetry brings her a comfort nothing else will.

The scientist's daughter emerges on schedule and pinkly perfect, like the baby dolls the scientist's mother insisted on buying her when she was young. The scientist did not dress them up or take them on outings or play pretend. She cut their hair and



scribbled them purple and pulled their limbs off one by one to see what would happen. To see what was inside, to see if they could be reattached, to see how it felt. She recorded her findings in a small book with *My Diary* written on the front in glittery script. She'd blacked out *Diary* and replaced it with *Discoveries*.

The scientist is impatient to leave the hospital, citing journal studies that say the risk of infection to her and the baby rises the longer they stay. The nurses, their saintly patience developed from years of dealing with know-it-all doctors, nod and remind her to hold the baby against her bare skin. The scientist picks up the child and pulls her gown off her shoulders. She has read many journal articles about the benefits of skin-to-skin contact.

The baby smells yeasty, like the *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* her lab-mates use as a model organism in their biological research. At this moment, she does not think, *My baby is a miracle*. Instead, and not for the first time, she thinks: *Science is not something confined to the lab, it surrounds us, always, everywhere. It is in us and of us*.

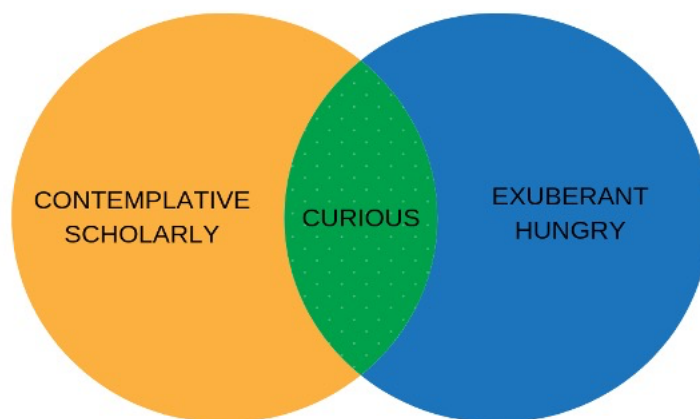
On the morning of the third day, the scientist takes her daughter home. They begin their cohabitation.

She does not ask friends or colleagues for advice on her newborn. She does not have friends, too busy to maintain relationships. Her colleagues are all men. Some of them are fathers. But to ask these men about the domestic domain would be akin to admitting a weakness. A deficiency in the skills she is expected to possess. This, she cannot do. She has already shown her vulnerability by becoming a mother.

### **Stage III: Early Adolescence**

They now share a new, bigger home outside the city. The scientist's daughter brims with raw emotion, a constant source of loud noises and rash decisions. The scientist studies her, turns to journals for advice on how to deal with such unbridled life, this tornado she has invited indoors. For this, the journals have no answers.

The scientist and her daughter possess opposite dispositions. The scientist keeps a journal, akin to her lab notebook but for the experimentation that takes place outside the lab, with her daughter. One day, she sketches a Venn diagram of notable characteristics, her own on the left and her daughter's on the right:



Curiosity is what led the scientist to her career. It is also what drives her daughter's life: the need to touch, to taste, to see, to feel, to grow, to learn. This overlap forges a delicate balance between woman and girl. An umbilical tether, nourishing both equally.

The scientist's daughter grows. She learns to speak, to walk. She learns how to be impatient. She seeks answers but is disappointed when they do not come quickly. She asks the usual questions—

*why is the sky blue*

*what's it like in outer space*

*why can't I breathe underwater*

—and the scientist considers them. She leaves her daughter with the question still on her tongue, to search her shelves for a scientific journal with a relevant paper. She reads the paper aloud. If the scientist's daughter is lucky, there will be a diagram or a figure to liven up the rows of tiny lines printed onto thin, yellowed paper. If the scientist's daughter is very lucky, a demonstration will follow—see Ex. 1.

**Ex. 1** The occasion on which the scientist's daughter made herself sick drinking Jolt cola.

Subject was age 12. She drank 48 oz. of Jolt Cola (150g sugar, 450mg caffeine) in one afternoon, while sitting on the sofa watching reruns of the American television program *The Office*. She then entered her mother's study, complaining of stomach discomfort. After an interrogation, the Jolt binge was discovered.

After verbally summarizing a recent study on the dangers of sugar consumption, the mother retrieved a bottle of antacid tablets from the medicine cabinet. She invited the subject into the kitchen and gathered additional items from the pantry:

distilled water  
four clear drinking glasses  
a spoon  
a pasta strainer  
one head of red cabbage  
a bottle of vinegar  
a small carton of baking soda  
a bottle of ammonia  
one bottle of Jolt cola

The subject remained silent except for sighs and groans, which the mother judged to be consistent with a pre-teen suffering stomach discomfort.

The mother chopped the cabbage and placed it into a kitchen blender along with 250mL distilled water. The resulting purple liquid, strained of particulate and poured into a series of four glasses, changed color depending on what substance was stirred into them. Ammonia and baking soda resulted in one set of colors (green, blue) while vinegar and cola produced different results (pink, violet).

The subject vocalized regret, and compared her stomach contents to “a crazy purple volcano.” The subject belched but the symptoms continued.

Only when the lesson had concluded, and the subject could repeat the relevant pieces of the experiment and recite its findings, did the mother remember to offer her the antacid to relieve her symptoms.

#### **Stage IV: Late Adolescence**

The scientist’s daughter is whining. This is not unusual at this stage. Her high school classmates travel with their families—79 percent of the families in this sample consist of a mother and father and at least two children—for spring break. The most popular destinations are Florida, the Bahamas, and Cancun. The scientist is taking her daughter to see the sequoias, to the only national park the two have yet to visit. The scientist’s daughter is not in favor of this trip. She wants an excuse to buy a new bikini, to show off her tan lines at school upon her return. She wants a tropical vacation like she sees in the movies. But the scientist does not take vacations, only expeditions and explorations, tours and treks. They did go to Mexico once, but to Teotihuacán, to explore the Aztec ruins. They did not spend any time at the beach.

Throughout her teenage years, the scientist’s daughter asked difficult questions—  
*why are other girls so mean*

*when is the right time to have sex  
why can't life just be easy for once*

—but the scientist cannot give the answers. She admits, *I don't know*.

For the scientist, *I don't know* is a beginning: of knowledge to be uncovered, of a trail to follow. The outset of a journey. She tries to find the answers for her daughter, but does not always succeed.

In school, *I don't know* earns the scientist's daughter small frowns (at best), stern looks (most often), or extra homework (at worst). Noticing this contradiction, the scientist's daughter comes to two important realizations, both of which are important steps toward adulthood.

1. Her mother does not know everything.
  - a. And that is OK.
  - b. Learning is a lifelong endeavor.
2. The hardest questions don't have definitive answers.
  - a. People can be mean for many different reasons.
  - b. Sex, both in understanding and in practice, is different for everyone.
  - c. If life is easy, you are not challenging yourself.

When it is time to choose a college, the scientist's daughter is only willing to apply to schools near the ocean. The scientist suggests Caltech, though with her daughter's unremarkable grades, acceptance is unlikely. Her daughter chooses the University of Miami. The day her letter arrives—ripped open, the happy news received with a squeal—the daughter borrows the car to drive to the mall. She buys an orange bikini.

The scientist finds the letter later, left on the hallway table in a joyful crumple. She has lost this final adolescent battle, but accepts defeat with her usual pragmatism. It is futile to quell a tide, especially one rising as swiftly as her daughter.

### **Stage V: Adulthood**

The scientist and her daughter live thousands of miles apart. It is the same amount of distance that has always lived between them, the emotional now made geographical. Their umbilical connection has thinned over time, become brittle with exposure to the elements. It has been replaced by ever-fickle cell phone connections—rarely used and subject to the daughter's willingness to answer her telephone.

Of the answered calls:

95 percent took place on birthdays and holidays.  
4 percent took place on a whim.

1 percent was a misdial the scientist's daughter pretended was intentional.

These calls eventually devolved into text messages. And then, the communication stopped altogether.

The scientist's daughter has worked at many different jobs, unable to stay anywhere for more than a year. She craves change, wants to be challenged, is drawn to the unusual and the artistic. She is running from her rigid upbringing, always.

A dancer on a cruise ship.

A face-painter at a Renaissance Faire.

A hawker of CBD oil.

She is lucky to have never lost the wild hunger of childhood—the hunger to seek, hunger to taste, hunger to live.

## Stage VI: Parenthood

The scientist's daughter will soon be a mother herself. The discovery of the baby stills her wanderlust. She was a drifting balloon and her baby, the tree branch that finally caught and held her still.

*He is the size of an avocado today*, she tells her coworkers at the acupuncture center, when she is 16 weeks along.

Her son's newborn head smells yeasty, like the rising bread in the bakery where she now works behind the counter. To her, he is a miracle. Because of him, she will never be alone.

When he gets older, he begins to ask questions—

*how do they make these Legos blue*

*why did we send a monkey to space*

*what makes ocean water salty*

The scientist's daughter remembers her own childhood questions, and pauses to consider the scientist for the first time in years.[1]

She recalls how her mother would have responded to her son's questions, the endless journal articles with their lengthy footnotes and unfriendly jargon; the home science demonstrations, undertaken to illustrate a key point; the answers, withheld until the very last.

*I don't know*, she tells her son. But this admission comes without shame. She has held on to her curiosity, the need to be satisfied, the tiny bit of her mother she still carries within. She is not ashamed of not knowing. *Let's see if we can figure it out together.*

And they do.

One rainy afternoon when all her son can do is mope and moan—*I'm bored, I'm bored, I'm bored*, as if saying it three times will manifest a solution, as if life were a fairy

tale—she goes to the kitchen in desperation, searching for a way to pass the day. She opens the junk drawer (twist ties, coupons, spent batteries), stares into the pantry (cereal, rice, apple cider vinegar), rummages through the fridge (skim milk, leftover lasagna, a red cabbage).

She smiles at the cabbage, and walks down the hall to knock on her son's bedroom door.

*Hey buddy, c'mere. Wanna see something cool?*

Ten minutes later, cabbage liquid and half-filled glasses are arrayed on the kitchen counter in front of them. They watch the purple liquid turn into a rainbow of colors, warring scents from vinegar and ammonia making their eyes water. This provides convenient camouflage for the nostalgic fall of tears the scientist's daughter cannot hold back.

*Why are the colors different, mama?*

She holds up a finger and goes to her purse. She retrieves her cell phone.

The scientist's grandson kicks the scuffed toe of his sneaker against the kitchen cabinet as he waits to see what his mother will do.

*Patience*, the scientist's daughter says to him. She listens as the phone begins to ring and smiles at her son. *If we are lucky, grandma will answer.*

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[1] *But how, you might be thinking, could she misplace her mother for so long?* The answer is this: Early parenthood is like a tsunami, pulling the new parent so far underwater that finding the surface feels impossible. But when it subsides, parenting also raises inevitable comparisons to one's own childhood.

# Dmitry Blizniuk

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## Death Is a Simple Thing

Here, in the countryside, death is simple and unpretentious.  
It goes without makeup, and  
a chipped log rattles  
under a dented axe.  
This low, big-boned tree stump  
(be careful, watch your step)  
is a guillotine for chickens.  
Feathers and down are stuck in the notches in the wood,  
like last unlit cigarettes before execution,  
or unsent letters to beloved ones...  
And autumn birches pose nude around the house:  
armfuls of freckles are thrown up to the clouds  
and hang there,  
on the long, equine face of October.

— Translation by Sergey Gerasimov

# Akshita Krishnan

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## chellame, kellame

*Author's note: Inspired by the tradition of the akam, or Tamil love poetry since the 1st century BCE, this lyric essay pays homage to the South Asian custom of having one's hair oiled by a maternal figure.*

**chellame:** noun; a term of endearment (familial and romantic) in the tamil language

the first time she opens her mouth, she says *chellame, nee enoda vazhka*. when she says something like that, i learn it, and when the syllables are coherent in my mind, i find the overwhelming need to submit to her every whim, give all of myself to her, because she's never said that to me before, and all i can seem to do is want, want, want.

slowly, she takes *thengai ennai*, warms it in the crevices of her hands, and wrinkled palms, wrought and veined, find their way into the coarse hairs on my head, gingerly carding through it, back and forth, back and forth, slicking me with the liquid.

stretched, i move into taffy, a moldable form of clay, the *ganesh* to her *parvati*. she pulls and pulls at me, until i become a *bomma*, dainty featured. i try to not let the sting get to me—everything is different from me in this body, and i couldn't imagine how much happier this makes her, a pile of fascia cut away from me, placed on the floor. i pretend that there isn't a laugh on her face.

the second time, she asks *chellame, evola azhaga iruken nu parthaiya?* but, i look at her like she speaks to me in a *bashai* that didn't raise me because i don't know what she is saying.

skin to skin, my body lies sprawled across her *thodai*, limped, a drum head, and she holds a *kathi* across my neck as she massages *ennai* into my scalp, pressing, but not enough to draw blood. the weight of the *kathi* feels like a baby hanging off of me, burrowing further into the knots woven on my shoulders, the ones her knuckles just pulled out.



this *pyaar* to me feels different—webbed with strings, *swami kayaru* i get caught every time i run a finger through it, knotted and tangled up. it comes with *arpanipu*. everytime i take a finger out of the thread, i feel a fire, i feel it burn me. but, underneath everything, there isn't a moment in this where i don't smile. she looks like i've never remembered, like there's purpose in her eyes. there's a selfish sort of content in that realization—i gave that to her.

the third time, she says *chellame, onna yen kittai vittuko*.

i want to ask her to pull off; i feel my breath thin, i feel my head spin itself into circles, but it's all so juxtaposed—i don't want to feel her *kai*, her touch, wave away from me because i think it's the first time she's moved across my skin like she hasn't owned it. the first time she's given myself first to me before *edu, edu, edu*. before all consuming. the first time she hasn't made marks across me.

she taught me that there's a *kathai* on every body, and as i stand in front of her *kannadi*, naked, i see it. i see it in the dents she tore, in the seams she hid from where i had to sew myself up.

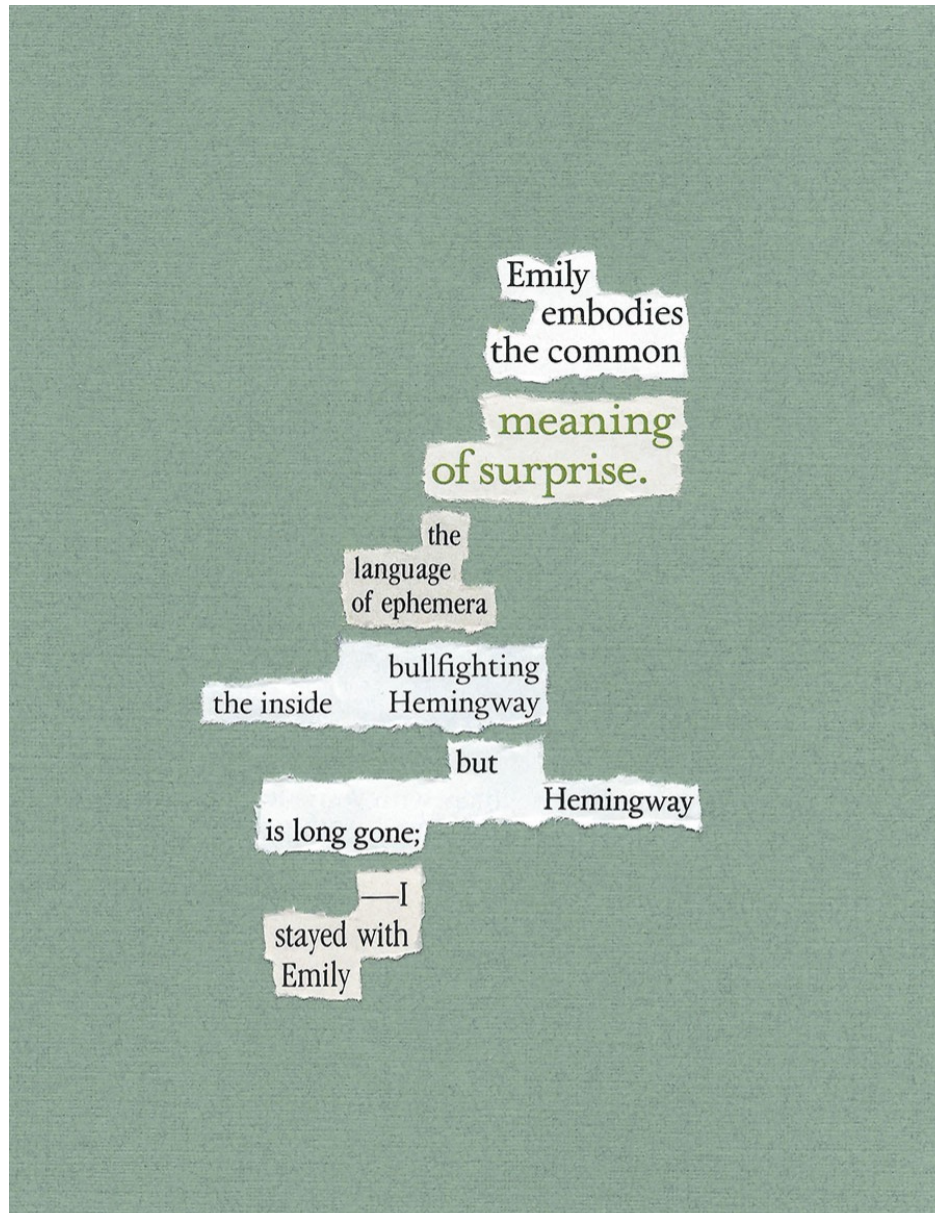
*porumaya*, she bunches my hair together, creating a *pinnal*. then, she threads *mallipoo* through it. puts *mai* under my eyes, a *pottu* on my forehead. drapes me in Kancheepuram. wraps it around my neck.

the last thing she says to me is *chellame, chellame—yen pattu nee. yen koodai iru*.

# J.I. Kleinberg

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## Emily embodies



# Jayant Kashyap

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**We only seek the blessings of those we love.**

Catacombs, Paris

When our lovers died, we gave them a piece of land,  
a cloth, a kiss, and prayer beads. So god would be kinder.

And warmer when the snow touched them coldly.

When it didn't work, we took them elsewhere in night-  
coloured clothes, and sat down to pray for days on end.

– We made rosaries out of skulls, filled the tunnelled  
walls with mirrored convexities of their faces,

later our faces. We remembered lines from almost burnt  
journals: *Nothing dies in the land of the dead. So*

*cold even the snow's unusual coldness doesn't seep in, or*  
*stay long.* We found in older letters words quietly hidden,

like *history isn't kind to the weak or to women; or history*  
*isn't kind.* So, now, we light up candles to make warm

the silence. We sing for them songs they have never  
listened to before. We leave words of grace at their bony

feet, kiss again their rusty cheeks goodbye. They  
understand that only some words can be so old, like

*eyes, love, death –*

*yeux, amour, mort.*



# Barrett Bowlin

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## Out for Blood (or Air, or Whatever)

You stumble through the gym doors, away from the people and into the almost-snow cold, skin so hot to the touch that steam rises off you into the night air. You hop the Red Line to Porter Square, where there's ten minutes before the commuter rail from North Station arrives, enough time to get water and a cheap bottle of ibuprofen from the CVS in the shopping plaza across the street. Your bones and fingers and wrists and skin ache when you touch hard surfaces: the railings, the doors, the stairs down to the platform.

You board the commuter rail and keep your eyes open just long enough to get your ticket scanned by the agent, and then you're slumped and sleeping against the window for the rest of the ride. The cold glass against your cheek is a mercy.

The train pulls in late to Wachusett, the new terminus on this line that sits at the base of the ski mountain. It hurts to wake and stand and stretch your fingers, to scrape away the snow that's fallen onto your car. The sedan's been sitting in the lot since the early morning dark, and now it's frosted in snow. Ice locks the doors tight. The engine rolls over just barely, but it starts up and putters out exhaust while you work on the windows and mirrors and lights, and then you're chilled and aching again as you wait for the engine to warm up on your drive home, ten miles under the speed limit on the roads that curve around the mountain.

When you get home, it's long after midnight. The children are asleep—your wife, too—but you rub their backs and kiss their heads goodnight as if they might remember this. And it's not until late the next morning, as you stumble downstairs and into the kitchen where they've microwaved eggs and toasted frozen waffles, that they ask what's happened to your face.

It's called 'petechiae.'

The tiny blotches and whorls of brown and red and purple-that-used-to-be-yellow that flood the skin after trauma.

It's a bruise pattern—a hematoma—where blood bursts out of the vessels and pools just below the skin.

Decaying freckles all over your face, spread across your cheeks and forehead, but not quite freckles, too big. More like dried splatter marks, or red and brown spray paint that's exploded out of the can rather than flowed, or a brown star map ancient sailors might have used once, the parchment made of human skin where a pirate once painted a route toward a buried cache of treasure.

"You look contagious," says your son.

They come with you to the bathroom mirror, crowd in behind you like concertgoers, pushing and shoving each other, and now you see what they see.

"Huh," you tell them. "That's never happened before."

You signed up for Brazilian jiu-jitsu at the age of 40 because of course you did. Because you missed the feel of rolling around on the mats like you did in judo. Because you missed having a certain discipline in your life, like what you got from karate. Because you wanted to feel less old.

"It's super low-key," your university coworker explained about the not-low-key-at-all franchise when she suggested you give it a try. Because this is Boston, where you work now and commute to, and you want to embrace it fully, like the act of bearhugging a musky and bearded best friend.

Except this time, everything creaks and kind of hurts—waking up, walking, standing for too long, not standing long enough—which you take as proof you need to get back into the piles of bodies. To get tough again—if not leaner or fitter or healthier in the slightest, possibly better at learning how to roll around on the ground and hold people in weird, uncomfortable positions—and if that's not the soul of Brazilian jiu-jitsu, what is?

You tell your children, "I'm taking a special class downtown. There's a good chance I'm going to come home sweaty."

"You're old, dad," your daughter sometimes says.

"Yeah, dad, you're old," says her brother.

"I feel old," you say.

After work one Friday, you grab your backpack and gym bag and dignity. You walk with your coworker to the tiny gym in the Financial District, where the coworker's boyfriend is training for his next fight. The guy's got a MMA fighter's look—huge deltoids, an off-center nose that seems to have been broken at least once, a spirit animal tattoo that spans from his arm to his nipple; what is that? a tiger?—and there's a hunger

in his eyes that you've only ever seen in people who are cutting weight in preparation for their next big fight. He looks focused and centered and a little dehydrated.

While your colleague learns how to kick heavy bags from a man who teaches in Portuguese—"chute!" sounds like 'shoot!' and is easier to hear over and over again than the plain old "kick!"—you and her boyfriend stretch and roll and learn how to get under grips and out from holds, and, most importantly, practice the fine art of choking the hell out of your partner. The grips in BJJ are different from what you learned in judo and have more of a knife-edge to them. They are, you learn, meant to make your opponent submit as quickly as possible.

Rear-naked and cross-collar chokes that cut off circulation through the carotids, scarf holds or lapel chokes that strangle an opponent's windpipe and squeeze the jugulars: there are a buffet of ways to turn off someone's lights.

Rear-naked chokes aren't actually meant to cut off the airway. Applied correctly, they work like a tourniquet on the blood coming into and out of the brain. One clamp of a forearm on the side of the neck, shoved against the jugular, stops the blood from getting from the head back to the heart. Everything keeps pumping, but there's no place for the blood to go. Instead, it pools in the brain and neck and swells like water building up through a fire hose. The other clamp is applied on the opposite side of the neck, by the bicep against the opponent's carotid artery. The oxygen supply from the heart gets dialed down to a trickle, and if the hold is locked in good and steady, loss of consciousness happens in about ten seconds.

Get the opponent on the ground and add in a couple of hooks from behind—where the attacker positions themselves like the world's heaviest backpack, their heel stapling the opponent's leg to the mat, making it hard as hell to buck or twist or roll out of the grip—and they're trapped until the lights go dim and the sound fades away, or until they tap.

Everything slows and drops right up until that moment, down to that line of: *Can I still get out of this?* But everyone in class is courteous and careful and lets go the second they feel the slap of a desperate hand on open flesh.

"Keep going until you can get out of it," the instructor says. "Keep reaching, keep pulling at the arm. Find that breakaway spot at the wrist." And so you all do this one maneuver, over and over, switching out partners and roles each time you get it right.

By the end, you're breathing like you're down to one lung, your throat's raw, and there's a slice in your skin near the sternum from where someone's thumbnail nicked you during a grip gone wrong. You won't notice until later, but you're bleeding onto the white lapel of your gi. You plan to tell the children this while slipping in the fact that at least you didn't lose consciousness.



Here, rolling on the gym floor, it's marvelous what your fingers want to do after long moments of gripping onto gi lapels and cuffs and sleeves. When you and your partners switch roles, the muscles in your fingers curl into arthritic claws, burning, talons reaching into the air for nothing. You want to relax your tendons but you can't, no matter how hard you try.

This inability to let go reminds you of a game from when you were little.

Stand in the middle of a doorway and push your arms against the door jambs, hard as you can, backs of the palms flat against the wood. Hold it. Keep holding it. Give it at least 30 seconds for the trick to work. Keep going, keep going, keep going, and you're there. Now step out of the doorway and release your arms. Feel them rise up and away from you on their own accord, a compulsion in the body you can't control, wings waiting to take flight.

The deep circles of purple-red-yellow-brown-green under your eyes feel like they should hurt when the children poke at them in the morning.

"Does it hurt?" your son asks.

"No," you tell him. "Stop it."

"Poke," says your daughter, touching the bruise under your left eye once more. "Poke."

You remember judo classes from back when you and the family first landed in the Northeast and your daughter was an infant. You remember the care you and the other judoka gave to your opponents' necks and trachea when applying chokeholds in the introductory lessons on strangulation: nami juji jime (the cross strangle), gyaku juji jime (the reverse cross strangle), kata juji jime (the half-cross strangle). Revered words in Japanese, memorized without context or syntax by gaijin and whispered in hot breaths across close inches. Inside the Lincoln Street gym, the grammar flooded back, a common tongue between judo and Brazilian jiu-jitsu. Everyone was as careful as lovers trying something new in the bedroom.

You wonder what made last night's practice different from the rest, what made you look like you were beaten in a street fight. Age or applied pressure, or lack of technique or precision of technique? Or is this what happens to your body now?

"Your students are going to wonder why you've got two black eyes," your wife says.

"I'll tell them I got my ass kicked," you say, which is true.

"You look like a raccoon," she says.

But the dark bruising under your eyes, the purple pools of ecchymoses, will be gone by Monday morning, and so will the droplets of petechiae. What remains is the

soreness under your skin and in your bones, and the stinging memory of almost losing consciousness over and over and over again.

The gym stays busy with activity, and you imagine it's like this every hour it's open. Small cells of work and practice and labor happening in each enclosed space. One of the younger instructors has his most recent MMA match playing on the flatscreen hung in the rafters of the entrance, which always threatens to fall on the display case of belts and silkscreened t-shirts available for purchase. The babyfaced instructor is tall with arms that reach out like cables and hang down from his sides, before he whips them up to begin what looks like the second round of his fight. An entourage, dressed in their own gi tops and gym shorts, watches with equal parts compliments and notes on what he should try to avoid in the next fight.

Back near the far windows, two tanned women stretch and pull squats in the Smith cages, a guy with a linebacker's build runs knee-lifts over a rope ladder, and a 4th-grader with brown, shoulder-length curls shadowboxes with his private trainer. The five of them dance around each other in the confined spaces, sometimes spilling out to block the walkways into the locker rooms, where your work clothes perch somewhere next to discarded sandals and brogues and steel-toed boots.

In the largest padded area, the older grappling instructor lowers his voice, gathers his charges in close, and tells you all how to get out of a rear-naked choke:

*Your opponent has you from behind, one arm around your neck like a garrote, their other hand on the back of your head to apply pressure.*

*Dig your chin down into the crook of their forearm and pump your shoulders up as high as you can. Get some leverage in there.*

*Now reach back and grab the arm that's cinched in behind your head with both hands and pull it over your head. This will break the lock.*

*As fast as you can, seize the arm around your neck and pull at the wrist. It's the weakest point in the hold. Keep that chin pointed down to the crook and your shoulders up and pull like your life depends on it because it just might.*

*The fun part happens if you're able to catch their wrist and hold onto it. And the really fun part is when you can put this thing into reverse.*

The mass of you roll on the mats and pull tight on each other's wrists and necks and arms. You twist and move and sprawl away. You bury heels in the meat of each other's thighs to spread them apart like spatchcocked meat. You slide forearms around necks like thick, ropey scarves, and you pull and constrict, and you wait patiently for the sound or feel of a tap-tap-tap, and you do this again and again and again so you won't forget.

You feel the pressure of those arms and elbows as they tighten like slip knots around your neck, over and over, and you'd think there'd be a countdown in your head, 10-9-8, but there never is, 7-6-5, because you're too damn worried about passing out and failing at this, 4-3-2, or working too hard to pull away from that palm on the back of your head, grabbing and ripping at sleeves or wrists and yanking hard because if you don't, your opponent will win.

At the end of your first night at the gym, you slide home on the 10:40 train out from North Station—the second-to-last ride of the night, before the stacked silver cars stop altogether—bruised, sore and sweating and stinking of rubber mats and feet and coffee breath and strange cologne and other feet. Of rough toes and elbows and knees and heels used for leverage. Of the runoff from bodies that made the plastic and rubber below them slick to the touch. Of other men and women on the mats and locker rooms, where clients come dressed in one uniform—dresses, loafers, or slacks and belts, or bespoke suits of broadcloth, or hoodies and sweats—and then roll and kick and punch and pull in another (thick gi tops and durable pants, obi strapped tight around the waist, lycra sports bras and tights that wick away sweat), before shaking hands, dressing, and slipping from the tiny gym on Lincoln Street out into the night.

You get in late. You warm up with a hot shower that drains the tank, and then you pad through the nighttime to check on the children, your daughter first because she's older. There's a photo of her in your phone, taken the night she earned her junior black belt in karate, the toothy smile on her face caught in the flash. You're there, too, sweating and dripping and red-cheeked, tired and somewhere near the end of your training as a purple belt.

There were the bruises she would collect from every practice, concentrated near her wrists and forearms, black-brown swirls born out of defensive postures. There were dark splotches on her shin, too. She was getting taller faster than you could keep up with, and the sessions at karate sculpted her shoulders and arms and legs. Tonight, she sleeps with her mouth open, dreaming, the crease in her worried brow smooth until morning.

In the room across the hall, your son sleeps on his side with his back to the door. The covers rise and fall with each breath. You rub his back. His skin, too, is a patchwork of scrapes and nicks and bruises. His teachers say he likes to slide on the waxed floors of the school gym. He comes home with constellations of hematoma, each of them a story he can't remember.

This is what it means to play: to wrestle with the other children, to collect and return their punches and kicks. To thump against walls and floors, to slam into immovable fields and dig into the flesh of pliable objects. To feel pressure on the body

and have blood vessels burst at the skin, to come home with black-purple-yellow evidence.

Exhausted and dehydrated and bruised, you wonder: how much longer do you have this in you?

## Contributor Notes

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**Melissa Benton Barker's** fiction appears in *Longleaf Review*, *Moon City Review*, *Cleaver*, *Best Small Fictions*, and elsewhere. She is the flash fiction section editor at *CRAFT*. She lives in Yellow Springs, Ohio.

**Brett Biebel** teaches writing and literature at Augustana College in Rock Island, IL. His (mostly very) short fiction has appeared in *Hobart*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *The Masters Review*, *Wigleaf*, and elsewhere. It's also been chosen for *Best Small Fictions* and as part of *Wigleaf's* annual Top 50 Very Short Stories. *48 Blitz*, his debut story collection, is available from Split/Lip Press.

**Dmitry Blizniuk** is a poet from Ukraine. His most recent poems have appeared in *Rattle*, *The London Magazine*, *Pleiades*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Eurolitkrant*, *Poet Lore*, *NDQ*, *The Pinch*, *New Mexico Review*, *The Ilanot Review*, *National Translation Month*, *EastWest Literary Forum*, and many others. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he is also the author of *The Red Forest* (Fowlpox Press, 2018). His poems have been awarded RHINO 2022 Translation Prize. He lives in Kharkov, Ukraine.

**Barrett Bowlin's** essays and stories appear in places like *Ninth Letter*, *The Rumpus*, *Salt Hill*, *Bayou*, and *War, Literature, and the Arts*. He lives and works and rides trains in Massachusetts.

**Bronwen Griffiths** is the author of two collections of flash fiction and two novels. Her flash pieces have been published in a number of online magazines and print anthologies. She is currently working on a novella about a woman in a lighthouse. She lives in East Sussex, UK.

**Chris Haven's** prose appears in *Electric Literature*, *Jellyfish Review*, *CHEAP POP*, *Cincinnati Review* *miCRo*, and *Kenyon Review*. One of his stories is listed in *Best American Short Stories* 2020, and his debut collection of short stories, *Nesting Habits of Flightless Birds*, was published by Tailwinds Press in 2020. *Bone Seeker*, a collection of poems, was published by NYQ Books in March 2021. He teaches writing at Grand Valley State University in Michigan.

**Jayant Kashyap** has received nominations for the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net, been shortlisted for the Poetry Business New Poets Prize twice and won prizes at the Wells Festival of Literature and the UK Poetry Society's Young Poets Network. He has published two pamphlets—*Survival* (Clare Songbirds, 2019), *Unaccomplished Cities* (Ghost City Press, 2020)—and a zine, *Water* (Skear Zines, 2021), and his poetry appears in *POETRY*, *Magma* and *Anthropocene*, among others. / @jaydkash

**J.I. Kleinberg's** visual poems have been published worldwide in print and online journals, including *Atlas & Alice*. An artist, poet, freelance writer, and three-time Pushcart and Best of the Net nominee, she lives in Bellingham, Washington, USA, and on Instagram @jikleiberg. Her solo exhibit of visual poems, *orchestrated light*, was featured at Peter Miller Books, Seattle, Washington, in May 2022.

**A.C. Koch** is a teacher, writer and musician whose work has been published in literary journals such as *F(r)iction*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Sequestrum* and forthcoming in *Analog*. After spending about fifteen years living and working overseas (France, South Korea, Mexico), Koch resides in Denver, Colorado, working with language learners and making music with Firstimers, a power-pop ensemble.

**Akshita Krishnan** is a high school student who likes to use writing as a form of escapism. She grew up across multiple continents, but now, she calls a little suburb out of Dallas, Texas home. Her work has most recently been featured in *Miniskirt Magazine* and *Fifth Wheel Press*.

**Justin Lacour** lives in New Orleans and edits *Trampoline: A Journal of Poetry*. He is the author of three chapbooks, including *My Heart is Shaped Like a Bed: 46 Sonnets* (Fjords Books 2022) and *This Fire*, forthcoming from Ursus Americanus Press.

**shannon layne** (she/her) is fourth generation Humboldt county-raised, and her earliest memories are of redwoods. She lives with her wife in Northern California. (twitter: shannonlaynee)

**Melissa Llanes Brownlee** (she/her), a native Hawaiian writer, living in Japan, has work published or forthcoming in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Reckon Review*, *The Hennepin Review*, *Cheap Pop*, *The Razor*, *Milk Candy Review*, *Lost Balloon*, and *Cotton Xenomorph*. She is in *Best Small Fictions* 2021, *Best Microfiction* 2022, and *Wigleaf* Top 50 2022. Read *Hard Skin*, her short story collection, from Juventud Press. She tweets @lumchanmfa and talks story at [www.melissallanesbrownlee.com](http://www.melissallanesbrownlee.com).

**Jill Michelle's** latest poems appear/are forthcoming in *Bacopa Literary Review*, *BoomerLitMag*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Funicular Magazine* and *Tipton Poetry Journal*. Recent anthology credits include *The Book of Bad Betties* (Bad Betty Press, UK) and *Words from the Brink* (Arachne Press Limited, UK). She teaches at Valencia College in Orlando, Florida. Find more of her work at [byjillmichelle.com](http://byjillmichelle.com).

**Lauren O'Donoghue** is a writer and community worker based in South Yorkshire. She is currently a member of the Creative Writing MA programme at Sheffield Hallam University. Her short fiction has recently been published in *Planet Scumm* magazine and the *Cranked Anvil Short Story* anthology.

**Kara Oakleaf's** work has appeared in *Necessary Fiction*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Booth*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Matchbook*, and elsewhere, and has been selected for *Best Small Fictions* and the *Wigleaf Top 50*. She received her MFA at George Mason University, where she now teaches and directs the Fall for the Book festival. Find more of her work at [karaokleaf.com](http://karaokleaf.com).

**Cayce Osborne** is a writer and graphic designer from Madison, WI. Her writing has been published in *Exposition Review*, *Typehouse Magazine*, *Defenestration*, *Write Ahead the Future Looms*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, and elsewhere. She is included in several story anthologies, including: *Pizza Parties* and *Poltergeists* from 18th Wall Productions, *Triangulation: Habitats* by Parsec Ink, and *Monsters Monsters Monsters* from Hellbound Books. Cayce's first mystery novel, *I Know What You Did*, will be published by Crooked Lane Books in summer 2023. When not writing, Cayce spends time hanging out with her husband and two sons, reading library books, walking her dog, and subscribing to way too many streaming services. You can visit her online at [cayceosborne.com](http://cayceosborne.com).

**Hari B Parisi** (formerly Hari Bhajan Khalsa) lives in Los Angeles with her husband, working as a partner in their healing center. She is the author of three books of poems, most recently *She Speaks to the Birds at Night While They Sleep*, winner of the 2020 Tebot Bach Clockwise Chapbook Contest. Her poems have appeared in numerous publications and are forthcoming in *New Plains Review*, *Qu Literary Magazine* and *New York Quarterly*. Her website is [haribpoet.com](http://haribpoet.com).

**Mandira Pattnaik's** fiction has appeared in *DASH Journal*, *Citron Review*, *Watershed Review*, *Passages North*, *Miracle Monocle*, *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *Atlas and Alice*, and *Best Small Fictions Anthology* among other places. Four-times Pushcart Prize-nominated, thrice for *Best Microfiction*, and for *Best of the Net*, her fiction has been translated and highly

commended by editors including Honorable Mention in CRAFTFlash Contest 2020, and Highly Commended at *Litro Magazine* Summer Contest 2021. She writes columns for *Trampset* and *Reckon Review* and blogs at [mandirapattnaik.wordpress.com](http://mandirapattnaik.wordpress.com)

**Allison Renner's** fiction and photography has appeared in or is forthcoming from the *Daily Drunk*, *Six Sentences*, *Rejection Letters*, *Discretionary Love*, *MicroLit Almanac*, and others. She can be found online at [allisonrennerwrites.com](http://allisonrennerwrites.com) and on Twitter @AllisonRWrites.

**Iona Rule** knows that zebras are black with white stripes because her brain likes to hold onto useless facts like that. She has had work placed 2nd in *Bath Flash Fiction Awards*, and has work published or forthcoming in *Fractured Lit*, *Janus Literary* and *Lost Balloon*.

**Alex Starr** is a writer in the San Francisco Bay Area. Alex's poems have been published in *Vallum: Contemporary Poetry*, *Snapdragon Journal*, *The Literary Bohemian*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Zoetic Press*, *The Write Launch*, and *Meat for Tea: The Valley Review*. Prior recognitions include the Dorothy Sugarman Prize in Poetry, George Harmon Coxe Award in Fiction, and Barnes Shakespeare Essay Prize from the Cornell University English Department. Alex holds a B.A. in Philosophy/English from Cornell and Oxford where he co-led the Mansfield College Poetry Society.

**Anthony Varallo** is the author of a novel, *The Lines* (University of Iowa Press), as well as four short story collections. New work is out or forthcoming in *One Story*, *DIAGRAM*, *New Letters*, *X-R-A-Y*, *The Normal School*, *Pembroke Magazine*, and elsewhere.

**Cloe Watson** is a graduate of the MFA program at Bowling Green State University. Her work has been published in *Blue Unicorn*, *The Windsor Review*, *Oakland Review*, *Grand Little Things*, *The Racket Journal*, *Wingless Dreamer*, *Beyond Words Literary Magazine* and *Defunkt Magazine*.

**Megan Lynn Wilkinson** is a poet, writing teacher, and cultural enthusiast with a master's degree in creative writing from The University of Southern Mississippi. In her endeavors to convey experience through language, she considers ideas of humanity, empowerment, and generational progression. Her poems sharpen the bones of womanhood as an ecology of matrilineage and somatic wisdom, a knowing that is instinctual and relational.



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