



ATLAS & ALICE

Letter from the Editor

I am quite terrible at pinball, yet I have a hard time avoiding it whenever I'm near an arcade. The image on the cover is one I snapped of a pinball machine I especially enjoy called *Attack from Mars*. Lots of aliens and loud sound effects. In a way, the machine is the opposite of the intimate writing featured in issue 22, all of which we published on the website in the winter and spring. Then again, there is a sense of the outsider in some of these pieces, too, looking for a place of happiness in this bizarre rock we all inhabit.

May these words find you doing something you love. Maybe that means playing some pinball?

XO,
BW

P.S.: This issue marks the end of assistant creative nonfiction editor Arielle McManus's tenure at A+A. She is off to new adventures, and we wish her the best. Arielle is a hell of a good editor.

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Issue 22, Winter/Spring 2023
Atlas and Alice Literary Magazine
Sioux City, Iowa
www.atlasandalice.com

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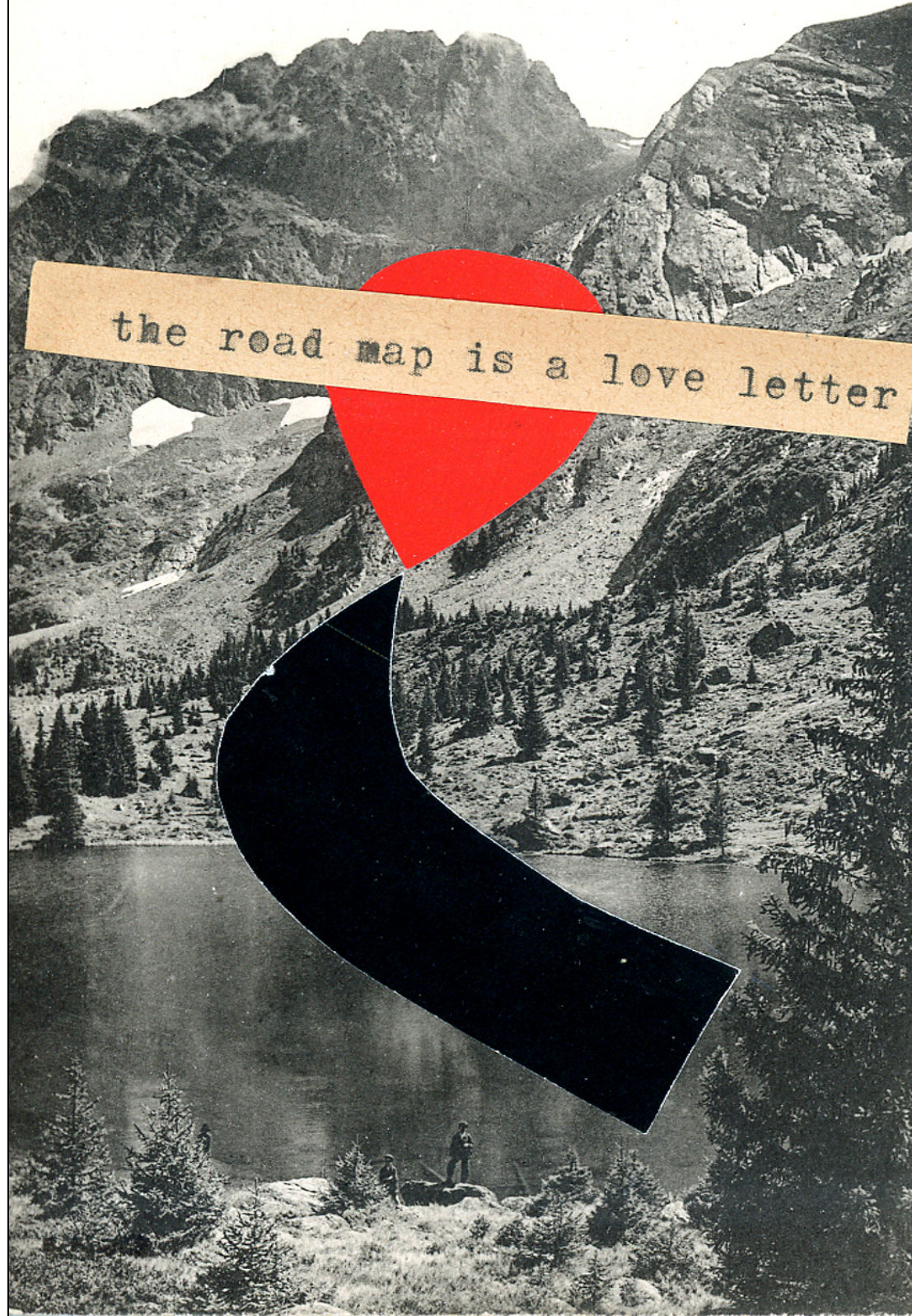
Sarah J. Sloat and Dina L. Relles

Stay Tender

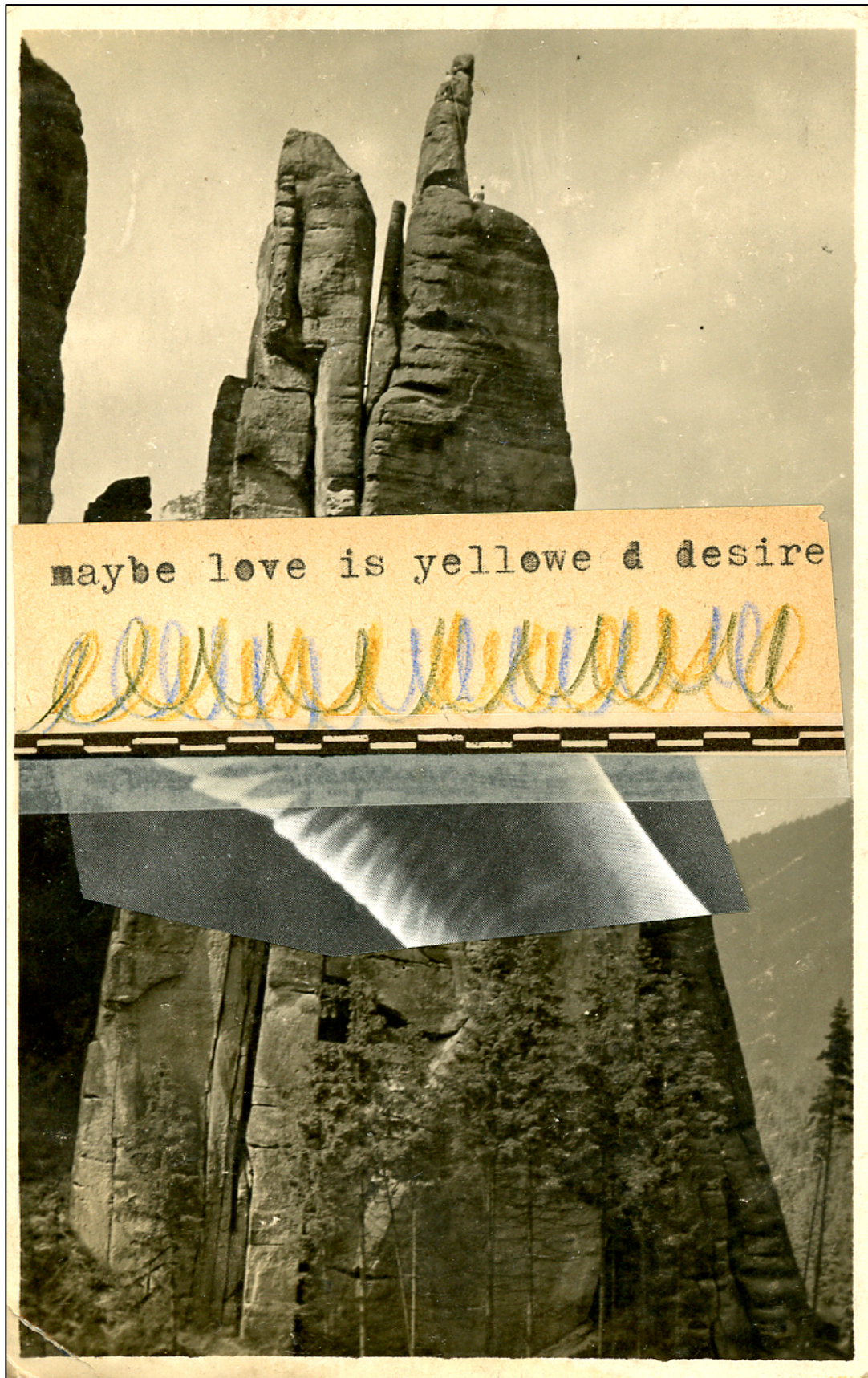


Road Map

LE DAUPHINÉ 27 — Environs de GRENOBLE - Massif du Taillefer
Le Lac Corcelet et le Taillefer (altit. 2861 m.)



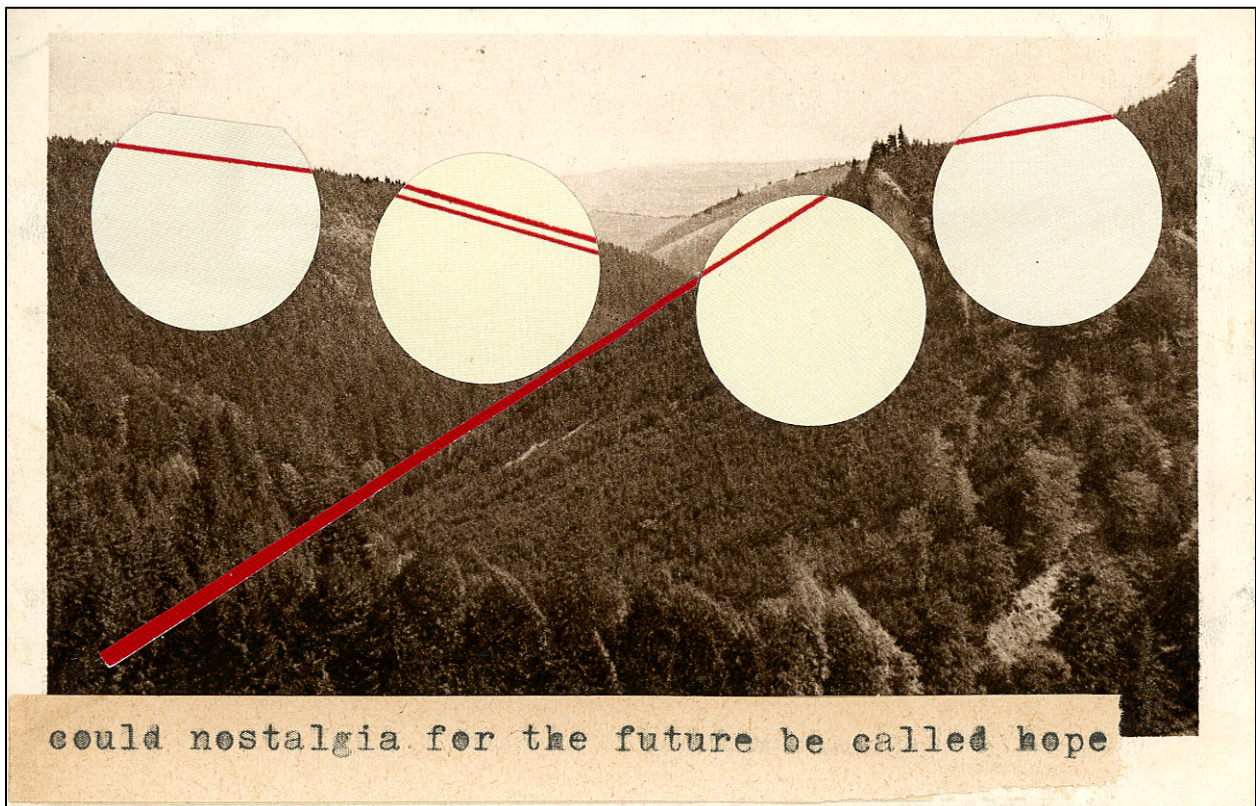
Yellowed Desire



Feminine Urge



Nostalgia



Rosaleen Lynch

Making Marys

The first Mary is missing her head. I clean the nozzle, pick off the hardened thermoplastic halo that's clogged and erupted in a mushroom cloud, and drop it in the scrap to be recycled and reset the 3D printer to start again, but I watch as the polymer filament threads through the moving heated spout, and liquid layers like lava, hardens into a tiny hollow head, and then the veil, builds up around it with a new halo attached, and the mechanised arm retracts, a hair-thin umbilical cord of plastic pulling to snap, like an alien antenna I snip when I glue Mary's head onto her shoulders, paint the body a Virgin-Mary-blue and white, and give her my mother's face. I paint my wife's face on the next, my own on the third, and stand the trio open-armed in the window, to dry. One more Mary and we'd be in Bunty, Mam would say, some comic about good girl things she read as a girl, until Misty came, with its parallel universes and alien seeds.

Growing up in seventies Ireland, Mam said Marys were everywhere. Statues were not just in churches or grottos or the holy water font in the hallway, but in schools and the doctors and the corner shop. Everywhere had a small shelf, the footprint of a base of a Mary statue. Marys floated on walls everywhere, centre stage and open-armed amongst butchered pigs and chickens, between library books on paganism and the paranormal and politeness and purity, overlooking pharmacy shelves of women's products concealed in packaging that promised more than it delivered and not what women needed. 'And there were so many of us Marys,' Mam said. 'So many we had to use surnames or second names to tell us apart.' Mam's name Mary McCarthy, and her sister was Mary Anne, and her cousin Mary Beth, and her friend Mary Wang, though her friend's first name wasn't really Mary at all—just what the nuns called her when they couldn't pronounce her name. And Mam took Dad's name when they married and the nuns took religious names when they became the brides of Christ, like Sister Mary Joseph. And priests married them all but didn't marry at all. And Mam was kept busy with church and holy days, and after mass, she took off her Sunday best, sharpened the good scissors and lay in front of the

black-and-white TV to cut out paper dolls and clothes with tabs and seasonal accessories from the back of Bunty, until Misty came and introduced her to parallel universes and alien seeds.

I paint Marys with the faces of women I know, and don't notice the spill vent in the tray is filling, until the alarm goes off. Half a Mary is standing in the tray. I click her out of her holder and lift the lid off the tray, shaking the contents, a dozen or so wobbling plastic ovoids the size of marbles, but they're plastic instead of glass or stone or clay, or the walnuts Ovid played and I pick one up and though it's oval, it has a slight turn of a pear but no stem or markings. I pour them into the recycling chute and press resume and watch.

It's May, Mary's month, and in seventies Ireland that meant Mam's family saying the rosary every night after tea, and it's still how she measures the length of twenty minutes, and back then she would recite her prayers, sing-song along, while making up stories in her head of Mary's adventures as if Mary was in Bunty instead of the Bible, as if she was a girl instead of a mother, as if a baby wasn't more important than her, until Misty came along and took her to parallel universes and showed her alien seeds.

Mam crowns Mary with hawthorn in May and I remember when I used to give her bunches of the white blossom to put in a vase, she wouldn't let me bring them inside the house, and she put them on the window ledge in a milk bottle instead so everyone could enjoy the flowers, she said, and we could see them from inside. And these piseogs of hers, she gave us, like throwing salt, knocking on wood, and crossing our fingers, and I grew up thinking that if other celestial powers exist, that Mary, in a parallel universe with alien seeds, could've grown up to be so many things other than the mother of God.

May of '77, Mam prayed for the girl who disappeared. The girl was six. Never got a chance to read Misty unless maybe in a parallel universe with alien seeds. The girl was six and Mam was ten and Mam waited to see if the girl was connected to someone she knew before she worried, and that summer she wasn't allowed in the long grass, or down the back road, and because the drawn-out days meant night took too long to bring her home, she had a curfew—the six o'clock angelus bells, and when she went back at school, she found no one knew this six-year-old Mary, so she admits she didn't care, she said there were so many Marys, real and fictional in the world, nobody cares about a Mary they don't know. So when crop circles appear and Paddy Doherty says she was taken by aliens, no one corrects him, and Mam said she wondered if six-year-old Mary went looking for the aliens or if when the aliens came looking, they found her, an outlier in a family of ten. And then one day the story turns and six-year-old Mary is now the alien that came from an alien seed from a parallel world and just returned.

We call our comic and kitsch store *Making Marys*. The biggest seller is the *Make Your Own Virgin Mary*, customised with any face. *The Pity* is my favourite. Michaelangelo's one in St. Peter's has the Virgin Mary holding a supine Jesus on her lap whereas ours

holds another Mary. We sell a surprising amount of Kalashnikov Marys. The gun resting in her outstretched hands, giving it up. But her actions might be different in a parallel universe with alien seeds.

My mam prays for us, for the sacrilege of making Marys and the marrying of two, like on our holy communion day, aged seven holding hands, us in two white dresses like our two white dresses on our wedding day and I tell my mam that we've broken with patriarchal tradition. We're women who won't be the mothers of children or the wives of men. We're changing our surname to one we've chosen. Not in irony, but in solidarity with all the women who gave up their lives to men. We choose the last name—Mary. Of course, in a parallel universe with alien seeds, we choose Misty.

An ovoid rolls off and catches in the corner of the tray and I pick it up. It's missing a layer of the outside curve and it looks like the beginnings of a shape in a womb. I drop it in the chute to be recycled. I ask Mam what happened to the six-year-old Mary who got taken by aliens? Was it Paddy Doherty? Another ovoid drops. Mam asks me, 'Do you know my confirmation name is Mary too? Not after the Bible Mary, as your grandmother thought, but a Bunty Mary. Guess which one?' I say all of them, and it's a good answer I can see from her expression. I peel off the layers of the ovoid and find the outline of another curled-up beginnings of a foreign body in the centre. It reminds me of the alien eggs we had as kids. I ask Mary, my wife, if she set the 3D printer to make immaculate conceptions? Her 'what the fuck' is a hard no. The machine keeps making them. I turn it off and check underneath, by the *Made in the USA* sticker, and flick the *Return to Factory Settings* switch and set it upright again and before I can plug it in, it starts up again, making another Mary, and this time as the plastic ovoid falls, Mary cracks and falls apart and it starts all over again, creating another Mary in the hollow carcass of her body, the internal trusses torn, flapping threads now trapped in a new body that cracks before it's even finished and another starts in the empty shell.

Mam listens now more than talks and nods along when I say that maybe in a parallel universe with alien seeds there's a machine making Mistys, and maybe in the parallel universe with alien seeds Bunty isn't full of good girl things and six-year-old Mary is really taken by aliens to a better world, *deus ex machina*, and maybe, in the final, final, final scene, in this parallel universe with alien seeds, Mary Magdalene is made God.

Gary Fincke

Marking the Solstice

Because I was born on my mother's birthday, our parties were divided into day and night. My friends, full of cake and ice cream, left before dinner. My mother's friends arrived at twilight, drinking wine as the mid-summer sky went dark. But each year, at noon, before either party began, she asked me into the yard to wait for the moment she said the sun would pause before its annual slow decline.

Our birthday was June 21st, and I was eight before I learned that the solstice didn't happen on that day every year. Because I loved seeing her so happy, I never told her I knew which years we were late, that the sun had changed directions the day before. I loved that impossible story she told while we waited for twelve o'clock and the tolling of the bell from the church three blocks away. "It's as far north as it ever gets," she would say, "and now it begins to scuttle backwards, like our astral sign, toward winter."

The summer before I started high school, the solstice was June 20th—Gemini, not Cancer—but she called me, as she always did, a few minutes before noon. By then, I'd learned that her body, like the sun, was already crawling backward toward ice. What would kill her had begun in her arms and legs, medicines that might slow, but could not ever cure, in the purse that clung to her each time she left the house. What I also knew, by then, was that crabs, nearly always, walk sideways, not backwards. That if you thought about that the right way, it meant they stayed in the same place, not coming or going.

That June, standing near the living room picture window, she paused for a moment to show me two old towels that had been wedding presents, ones worn so thin by fifteen years of use that the sunlight filtered through them. She handed me one and kept the other for herself. "Nothing is gone," she said, "if you keep it." She led me to the dining room clock she wound daily and asked me to turn the key. On our way through the kitchen, she pointed out the old rotary phone and said it was as good as new. Outside, we walked past the ancient station wagon she said would last until I would learn to drive on it, mastering the stick shift that the world was forgetting.

Then, in the yard, noon about to arrive in the year that would mark the middle of my time with her, she handed me the key to the three rooms she rented for us until I was seven. “You’ll thank me someday,” she said as the church bell began counting to twelve. “And keep this one, too,” she said, handing me a thin, but heavy key I’d never seen before, the one, she explained, to where she had lived with my father for a year without me. Where those towels we were holding hung thick and bright. Where, after an evening shower, she often wrapped her body inside one for warmth as she walked to the bedroom to part the wedding-present sheets and unlocked herself, welcoming the possibility of me into this world.



Mikki Aronoff

Kin

~ after Li-Young Lee

Tonight, as all nights, my dog claws and burrows under the covers, whimpers and wrestles head-to-head with day's demons. Is that memory's nightwork? Soon, still. I reach to make sure he's breathing, touch the soft ruff of his neck. He turns on his back, offers his chest for stroking. He wears his heart like an old sweater.

My cousin excels at packing, arrives lacquered and tanned, bubbling pearled opinions. She reads me like a comic book, fells me with every pressed and folded directive she pulls from her suitcase, along with presents I'll stow with the others in the attic until her next inspection.

Gram asks for a head skritch while she hems my skirts with her yardstick, croons words in syntax I can't grasp. Mother hangs back in the doorway, scoffs Old World trying for New. Bubbe's teeth clack as she folds the hem, sticks pins, slips into Yiddish into soldiers into sabers into steel. Needles fly from her mouth, thread ties her tongue. What is unspoken rips. Mother winces with every scissored glance. My fingers oily from her mother's scalp.

Screech of knife, and the sausage on my plate hisses like a neck laid bare. Reek of dung, of hooves chopped at the knuckle. And ravening butchers with latexed hands keep slicing, stuffing. I've had it with dread, its char. Its loneliness like bones.

Ashley Hajimirsadeghi

AZADI

tomorrow it is november & tell me when the october sun sets one last time, you will open our windows. we will do everything we were not once allowed to do: eat gheimeh with bare hands, drowsily sing love poems we'd make up on the spot. dance barefoot under the broken, flickering lamp in the dusty study room, sweeping the last shards of daylight beneath our calloused heels. & maybe we will adopt a cat someday, a little calico kitten like the ones we'd seen on all the old foreign shows & movies, sit in the windowsill with a book & chai in hand, cat sunbathing in the dying day. we will smile at passing strangers on the street below, even on a moonless night, singing & shouting & offering more of ourselves than we could ever possibly give. tell me a miracle, not a story I've heard only 1,001 times before. a bedtime tale I won't cry listening to—all beauty, no bloodshed. I want to press play on the radio & dance, fall in love with what you have to say. please, we've had enough sadness to last us a lifetime.

Joel Hans

The Times I'll Trade Time with the Crows

A long, long time ahead, the crows'll give me time in exchange for my children's possessions—my son's owl bathtoy, the Crayons my daughter will've tried to sharpen with the safety scissors. The crows'll warn me not to bite into time itself, but rather put the bluesea chewblet on my tongue and let time dissolve into me, or it'll be too much time to deal with at one time. I'll wait until I'm alone, my son and daughter in bed and my partner pecking at his PlayStation. Time'll taste like the time before it rains.

Over time, time'll inch me back through my thirties. The second C-section scar'll disappear, then the first. The stretches of sex'll get better and my partner'll never suspect a thing, always remarking at *how time just passes by so much faster now that we're older*. He'll just keep photographing water for the ultrarich, making more than enough to money support the whole family, which'll feel like an insult that's been workshopped to perfection.

Things'll change in the yolk of my twenties. I'll bring my kids to the grocery store and the other patrons'll look at me up and down, doing the mental gymnastics to calculate how young of a teenager I'll've been when delivering them—worse, conceiving them. They'll shake their heads as they stare into the anchorage of eggs. I'll also lose my job, because HR'll start to wonder about the veracity of my resume, how I gained so many years of experience at such a seemingly young age.

But I'll love the kids more. I'll stop wishing I could transpose myself to the backside of the moon just for a full stop of solitude. Playtime'll become our happiest time. My daughter'll build me a castle from Lego and I'll make myself small, crawl inside, and learn to rule. My kingdom'll be threatened by a dragon, but after enough marshmallows, the dragon'll reveal himself to be my son, who I'll have lost and found and lost. On the carpet, with them beside me, I'll find a laugh I'll've thought I lost.

At nineteen, I'll kiss my partner for the last time. He'll only let me drop a glancing peck on his cheek while he'll aim his eyes at the coming haboob, as though he'll believe

his spouse, who he'll've known since he was eighteen, will be delivered back to him though a downpour. Thanks, my partner'll say, as he'll become my father.

As I'll sprawl back toward prepubescence, the crows'll ask how I'm doing with all their stolen time after all this time. I'll tell them how I'll love my son and daughter more now they'll be my siblings, how fun it'll be to have all my firsts for a second time. First makeout with someone other than my partner-father, first time sneaking out of the house, first time riding a bike without training wheels, first time losing a tooth, first time going in the big potty, first time writing my own name, first time seeing someone in the process of drowning, first time first time going in the little potty. The crows'll keep giving me all this time you'll never even think to lock away, no matter how hard I'm warning you behind of time.

Lastly—firstly—I'll trade the blanket I'll have made myself thirty years ahead. When the crows'll bring time to the windowsill, I'll barely be able to reach I'll've become so small. They'll nod their beaks and wish me good time. Until next time.

I'll wait until my siblings are playing somewhere else in the house before taking the chewblet of time in my mouth. I'll roll it around my toddler tongue. I'll've just a few teeth, but my quartet of incisors'll be just enough to bite straight into time itself.

Which'll be a deep enough dose of time to begin again. I'll look at the world freshly. I'll be able to tell my siblings *I don't like you* and not carry a year of guilt for it. My bones'll regrow down known avenues. My teeth'll fall out in search of better replacements. I'll do toddlerish things, like toddle over to my father as he'll rest at the end of a long day of photographing water, lift his shirt, put my finger down his belly button. His eyes'll entangle me, and I'll cradle his cheek and say a childish thing, like, *nice*, but I'll mean: *Isn't this nicer now that we've started over?*

When we're tucked in, my siblings'll talk largely about Mother. How little they'll remember. Fits and silhouettes. Instead, I'll tell them about New Mother, who'll be coming any time now. She'll have snappy high-fives, hug like a vacuum, wear a different color every day of her life. She'll love us how we'll deserve. She'll be everything I'll haven't and will've never been.

Brother'll coo.

Sister'll giggle.

New Mother'll hold us so high in the sky and she'll never, never, never think, What if I just let you go?

Nicholas Grider

Stock Footage: A Love Story

Here is a picture of a studiously thin white man in a light blue button-down Oxford shirt, tan slacks, and tasseled loafers. He stands in the light gray void of an empty office, not quite smiling, not quite distressed. He is giving you his thumbs up to the extent that he can, having been tied up in big cartoon sailor ropes to indicate that life and work are stressful. Here is a picture of a charming unnamed man being held hostage by American gumption, but in a fun way. This man may or may not be your dad or the devil or both, but he is American, and he's very proud of you.

Here is some time-lapse footage of you growing into yourself as both your home/work environs and the smiling citizens who inhabit them steadily increase in cost.

Here is a short clip of a shower head pointing downward spraying cold water in a minimalist bathroom, the looping clip locating immanent cleanliness in an approximate and eternal now. Here is a clip of part of a wholesome young man's face being shaved. Here is a picture of a towel dropping around precisely tan ankles, a proposition that clean adult white men are, if not universal, then a form of humanity easily understood. Here is a picture of a closet being opened to reveal professional attire in a variety of grays and whites and slate blues. Here is a picture of the crumpled "how to tie a tie" photocopy diagram issued to all the young clean white men in your demographic at the cusp of pubescent responsibility.

Here is stock footage of adulthood defined by adventure. Here are evidentiary photos of you pulling your merino wool socks up and keeping your pale blue dress shirt carefully tucked in.

Here is a picture of business people, arms outstretched, cleanly beckoning you into their fold. They want to celebrate, and they want to explain what being alive is like without having to be specific, and they want to warn you about the man in tan slacks, the one being held hostage by the demands of life, but in a fun way. Do not trust him, your glossy colleagues inform you. That man, while fun and clean, is a traitor and a spy. He is not your dad, they remind you, even if he is your dad. His growth charts and quarterly reports are dark magic, they explain. Beware of the cheerful white man in tasseled loafers gliding across the hard carpets of office interiors. Wherever he goes, your colleagues inform you as they strap on bone-white conical party hats for a generic milestone celebration, he sows chaos in his wake. Here is a picture of the people who love you attached to a guide about what the dark arts are and what steps to take to avoid them.

Here is a picture of the countryside through which you run at dawn to keep your body alluringly unremarkable and your heart a frictionless engine as expensive as a designer watch. In the background of the picture, America is waiting in the form of a cheerful populace. Everyone is rooting for you. Nobody is nervous anymore.

Here is a short film about how to stand out from the crowd without being noticed. Here is an instruction manual on how to be your own man. Here is an audio clip of a clean white man in business attire reminding you that you're only as real as you think you are, like unicorns and Jesus and love.

Here is a photograph of a calendar including a reminder of sunshine. Here is a licensed photograph of an unmarked "outdoors" that always approves of you and calls forth to you to have PG-13 escapades inside its borders and acts as both a place where the only rules are fun and self-improvement, and where wilderness is mostly a buffer zone between small accumulations of achievement in a clean and modern office park and studious cleanliness at home.

Here is the film clip of you going through your organized folders of self-pity documentation and marking the pages with a precise black Xs every time you recognize your face.

Here is a stock photo of your friends at an upmarket sports bar raising a toast to turning into their own dads instead of turning into your dad, which would be more than the normal amount of dads for any given clean young man and henceforth disrupt the natural order of things, requiring dark magic to bind reality back into a tidy, glossy pile of opportunity costs.

Here is a stock photo of the natural order of things. Here is a high-res image of the entire world. It is waiting. What is it waiting for? Maybe for a happy ending. Probably for you.

Here is a picture of a man who is attractive in an unthreatening way and nice in a controlled and strategic way and who is dressed, like all clean medium men, in a suit and tie flattering enough to make him appealing without making anyone else jealous, even your dad, who is still proud, even if he is still being held hostage by sinister forces and struggling with life-work balance. The clean young man, who might be or have been a version of you no longer recognized or within reach, stands in a clean white void with similar people, who also probably have names. They are either celebrating a decisive victory or are about to do so. What are they celebrating? They cannot be sure, but they want you to know how proud they are of you. They want you to read this important article about the importance of Community Feelings as it relates to working in beige and gray cubicles vs. at home in shadows surrounded by ideal but ephemeral children and pets.

Here is a home movie of your clean dad telling you to blow out the candles on the cake, reminding you he raised you to be the end of the world, telling you he's pretty sure you're brave enough to survive, and handing you a photocopied sheet of "how to tie a tie" instructions so you have reading material when you lock yourself in the garden shed in an effort to delay (or learn to endure) a future overstuffed with sunny days and spacious waiting rooms.

Here is a picture of the night sky. Like your dad and the small armageddon he raised you to be, it is inevitable but not permanent.

Here is a picture of you standing in front of the mirror smiling at your own face while you tie your favorite necktie, which is gray with decorative geometric flecks of slate blue. Here is a picture of you with your forehead against the mirror, necktie tied, hands shaking, mouthing the phrase *everything means something* over and over like a fact or an affirmation or a spell.

Here is a picture of public sunshine. Here is a picture of everyone you love doing a large group victory lap around an authorized fire. Here is a stock image of a friendly community surrounding you to lift your spirit in song and remind you to make sure you're working hard enough.

Here is a short film of a world in which friends are always being introduced and parties are always starting. Here is stock footage of at-hand but unnamed threat. Here is a picture of you staring at yourself in a department store mirror and telling yourself maybe everything is your fault.

Here is a picture of a thin white man in tan slacks and tasseled trousers tied up with cartoon ropes on your clean and minimal bed. He doesn't mind waiting, he says. Here is a picture of him telling you what he has been waiting for: he has been waiting for you to be ready. Here is a picture of the man telling you not to untie him, or anyone else. Here is a picture of a thin white man in a suburban bedroom offering to share some special knowledge and make some special promises just to you.

Here is a montage of stock footage of comfortable white men gently reminding you that you belong to them.

Here is a picture of the nice white man who is normal and clean and undefeated telling you he's more than happy to hash out who is or is not a hostage, and of whom, but reminding you to disrobe and take a shower first.

Here is stock footage of an apocalypse that either is you or includes you as courtesy.

Here is a picture of victory. Here is a picture of stains being cleaned from the bathroom tile, of magic knots tied and untied, neckties tied and untied, celebratory hats and low-calorie cakes. Here is a picture of Instagram candles that smell like your childhood home. Here is a picture of your loved ones holding candles, standing around you in a circle, celebrating an achievement, telling you you get what you wish for, wanting to just let you know that as long as you are very careful and very clean and very still, and as long as you never stop working, you will never die.

Here is stock footage of you as a clean young cishet white man, increasing the after-market value of everything you touch. You are not only this man, but you always are.

Here is a stock footage of your childhood home. It is now an unfathomable void.

Here is picture of a thin white dad-like creature showing you its ropes. Its haircut is efficient and its pores are clean. It promises you that, after a while, even being alive doesn't hurt. It promises you being relatable is the source of your dark power. It lifts its ropes and promises it will leave the lights on when it's done.

Here is a picture of what it looks like to live forever. It is an elegant windowless museum beyond the end of the known world in which both your thoughts and your bones consist entirely of right angles, in which your secrets are soundproof and your gray flesh shines. The employees polishing your right angles remind you not to worry. The museum guards remind you as long as you exist you can never go home, but you probably shouldn't want to anyway.

Réka Nyitrai

Wild flowers

This morning
I tried to count
the bees that live inside my head.
I tried to figure out
why I feel loneliest
surrounded by people.
Then, I imagined
being a ghost,
carrying flowers
to the graves of my loved ones.
Flowers with puckered lips.
Flowers with teeth.
Flowers that bite off the shadows' nose,
and roam the fields
collecting bones.

Liza Olson

Sidewalk Sprout

I don't want to write about a scales-falling-from-the-eyes moment because there wasn't one, or only just one. I don't want to focus on the pain of not fitting a mold I was never going to fit, or give the trans portrayal that's expected, because the pain of making the transition, for me, was never going to be as acute as the pain of how others took or might take the transition, the subtle shifts in social interaction, the tiny ways perfect strangers will cut you to pieces, the people you'll lose that you never expected to lose, but the ones, also, who surprise you by staying. Because the inconvenient truth is, there is no one trans experience but there are enough overlaps where you can discern the pattern as you're going through it, commiserating with others in the middle of it, celebrating microscopic incremental changes and comparing pictures from just a few weeks ago, seeing the malleability of biology, the no-words joy that comes from starting to see your body the way you always wanted it to look. Because one thing that cis people might not want to hear but might need to hear is that transition isn't painful and hard, or rather it is but not for the reasons they imagine, that given proper support and compassion I've seen people blossom, seen it in myself despite everything I've had to climb through to get here, because growing up poor has a way of making you resilient if it doesn't first break you down completely, so I'm one of those sidewalk sprouts defying logic and sense, root system spreading beneath concrete, and I'm starting to realize that deprivation was readying me for this, only it's not the test I expected, and E has got me crying over the tiniest things now, and then laughing at the tears, feeling the hardness I'd cultivated over the years crack and crumble. I think of the earliest cracks in my egg: my fascination with stories of transition at a very young age, the immediate way I connected with Frank from *Rocky Horror* and Angel from *Rent*, the freight train of puberty and being told these mood swings were normal hormonal changes, and so figuring hating my body had to be normal too, assuming everyone got this way sometimes then downing a bottle of cologne at 14, wanting to end the pain, but it only leaving me with a burning throat and stomach,

feeling stupid and telling no one. I figured it was normal to want to be something and someone else, and I think now of the irony of being put in an all-boys Catholic high school. Now, I'm happier than I've ever been, becoming myself without the implied end that always hung over every day before, the time-is-running-out immediacy and daily ticking time bomb of life pre-transition. The knot in my stomach and buzz in my head that I took as normal, which went away within a day or two of starting hormone replacement therapy. I don't want to dwell on the hard things, but I also don't want them to keep happening to people like me. I don't want more to suffer because of societal ignorance and lack of compassion the way I and others have. Because trans people have always existed, and we're not going to go away because others will us to or try to legislate our existence from us. If all of us were wiped off the planet tomorrow, more trans people would still be born, and they would find their way to the same realization as us. They'd still write and draw and sing and claw their way out of what they've been given, what they've been told to accept. So I don't want to dwell on these things because this isn't my story, or it's at least not all of it. I want to focus on the joy that's possible, the way my friends and family light up when I do, their excitement at getting to meet me. I want to write about the new friends I've made and the grace I've granted myself, the ways I've allowed myself to heal when all I used to do was hurt. I want to talk about how my grandmother and great aunt, twins nearing 90, call me by my name and pronouns, immediately correcting themselves if they slip up, their genuine curiosity and delight at seeing me so happy. I want to write about how my little brother made me cry with a "first" birthday card that was as beautiful as it was affirming, how my best friend didn't bat an eye when I told him I was trans, how he and his wife have been nothing but supportive and incredible. I want so badly for these stories to be the norm, for my future trans family to have the love and support and basic human decency they need and deserve.

Laila Amado

Complete Blood Count

The time you cry in a stall of the girls' restroom in middle school. The walls are dismal beige and a telephone number of someone called Tasha is scribbled on the wall in black ink. There is a bright red blotch on the crotch of your panties. Your friends are waiting for you; their laughter echoes through the hallway. You think you might be dying. You stay in the stall until your friends get bored and leave, and the school goes quiet, and you hear the cleaner pushing her trolley at the far end of the hall. Then, only then, you roll up a wad of toilet paper, stuff it in your panties and run home, sobbing.

The time you sit on the toilet in your college dorm scrutinizing the pristine whiteness of your panties. It's that time of the month, but your period is not coming. The thought of going out to buy a pregnancy test makes you feel vaguely unwell. You text your boyfriend. He doesn't respond, never calls you back. When you manage to corner him in the hallway, he avoids looking at you. One week later, you're sitting in a green plastic chair at the clinic. Alone.

The time you wail like a banshee in the bathroom of the house bought together with your husband. The sage tiles and the carefully chosen flower prints shift in and out of focus. There is a deep burgundy stain on your panties. It shouldn't be there. You're on your seventh week—the last one—of your third pregnancy. "How long will you keep trying?" asks your mother when you call her.

The time you swear in the bathroom of the house for which the mortgage has been paid in full. Your children are off to their respective colleges and the last day of summer is quiet. You're staring at the clean crotch of your panties. No sign of blood. Your face is on fire. Hot lava is spilling down your chest, promising to burn everything.

There is a bright red blotch on the satin of your panties. Your last period was fifteen years ago. The walls of the bathroom stall at the airport close in, a dismal beige, and you take a deep breath, buy a tampon from a vending machine, straighten your dress, take the connecting flight to attend your son's wedding. You'll set an appointment with the doctor when you get back. You hope you still have time.

Mileva Anastasiadou

A Bird Has Grown Inside My Throat

It started chirping the day my husband got jailed. I thought it came to celebrate my freedom, that it'd soon sing. The bird started talking instead and soon enough I could barely utter a word as if it took over my voice. As if I lost me.

It's obviously a parrot, I tell the doctor. The doctor asks what the bird says. I tell him it says stuff my husband said. As if he had that parrot hidden somewhere and put it inside my mouth before they got him. *Like what?* he asks. I bow my head, remain silent. I don't repeat those words because they hurt, they hurt more than that lump inside my throat. The doctor nods like he understands, then asks me to open my mouth. He checks inside, it takes him long, he takes pictures, he sighs and sighs. As if he can't find me.

He says we'll have to surgically remove it, he shows me the pictures, *not only does it talk like him, but it also looks like him*, I say. The doctor looks away, like he's just thought of something, he says, *we can't take it out, you'll have to spit it out*, and it's my turn to sigh, I wouldn't have kept it in, if I could take it out. As if he read my thoughts, he says it happens often, sometimes we swallow voices, voices that cage us, he'll give me meds that'll make me stronger, that it'll take time. He frowns while he advises me not to get attached to the bird. He means like I did with my husband but he's kind enough to not use those words. I shrug and say I'll do my best but he already looks outside the window. As if he can't see me.

I try to beat the bird that caged me, but it's a strange battle, we're used to birds in cages but not to birds as cages, I scream and scream like the doctor said I should, to silence the bird and get it out, and I get stronger, but freedom doesn't come easy, as if my husband found another way to keep me trapped, caged, even from a distance, and I know now that it may take time, but I will get rid of the bird inside my throat, I'll spit it out and I'll be free.

Beth Gordon

(Invertebrate) (Damage)

Resist swallowing. The cells beneath your tongue are thick with seraphim. They will slide answers between your teeth. Cavities are collateral damage. Follow

the surgeon's voice through the invertebrate circle of circles.

The *ouroboros* is just another

lost snake

in this scenario. A pilot without brakes. Follow all instructions: at this speed oceans can kill.

Tin pan your way
through the river of marigolds.

Assemble an army
of tulips. This is not a drill.

Moisés Delgado

Preparing for the End of the World

It is 2012 and the world is ending. New York is underwater, the earth is splitting below LA's feet, and here in Omaha, Nebraska, the sky is dark and touching ground—skyrocketing cars out of this orbit, untethering chain link fences, splintering our home open. But we are safe. Our home has been stripped (by us) of all that matters—photo albums, birth certificates, a wooden carving of the Virgin Mary carefully packed into backpacks along with water bottles, Gatorade, saltine crackers, bananas, Band-aids, rubbing alcohol, Advil, Vicks VapoRub, prayer beads. We've been long gone. Two weeks on the road in case of traffic jams, families like us escaping, and to spend two weeks with US landscapes even if they haven't always been the home my parents were led to believe they'd be, but nonetheless, this has been home. To not say goodbye, on our terms, to the flatlands that have homed us for a decade and a half would be a kind of grief we wouldn't know how to maze our way out of. This is what I imagine we're all thinking as we watch *2012*. When John Cusack steps on the gas pedal, we think my dad can do the same, swerve and drift our Jeep to avoid falling into the pits of hell as the interstate thunders open. Maybe it's just me plotting how to get us seats on those massive ships when we don't have much money. I'm thinking of how I'll learn to safely crash a plane in case our plane runs out of fuel. I'm thinking of how I'll finally need to learn to do more than drown—learn to hold my breath for five minutes. I'm thinking of how I'll lose everything. I am thirteen. I believe in God enough to think we could survive, but not enough to think He'll prevent the world from ending. In seven months I'll graduate middle school. In ten months I'll be in high school. I am thirteen, and I think I like boys. And it is terrifying. I'm thinking of how I might not have to erase that part of myself after all. When the world is ending, I'll purposefully slip as we're boarding the ships and disappear with my shames. I'm thinking of how I'll prepare my mom for that now, so she'll be capable of pushing forward when I am gone. The world won't end in three years, of course, but we will lose our home in five years, and I'll simultaneously convince myself

I was right to always expect loss and chastise myself for not expecting enough of it. I'll feel as empty as our ashened home, but that will be in the future. We're driving home from the theater. A smooth sail down Cornhusker at this time of night. The road empty, lit by orange lampposts, fast food signs, and the moon rising out east over Iowa. *2012* will get a 39% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, but we're easily entertained by action-heavy movies, so we thought it was good. We're ready to head to bed. We don't yet know what worries will come over the next few years, but that's okay—all I am thinking is how I ate too much popcorn. All I'm praying for is no red lights.

Joshua Torrence

Love Song

The boy pulled the boy out of the tree.
Dragged him out by his ankles, kicking
And wild, clinging to the dead bark
Where he had slept for ten thousand years.

But hunger. But thirst. But tongue, dry
As a midwinter day. The boy pulled the boy
Into his arms. Warmth and drum and thaw.
The boy buried his face in the boy's chest

Because the sun was too loud, and the geese
Would not stop calling, and waking up was
A wound, a red word etched on the boy's
Bare thigh. This boy, these arms, what were they

Here for? What had they come to do? They held
Him. He held him, and walked through the deep
Snow, out of the gray woods. The boy took on
The boy's strange scent. Oak. Oak and sweat.



Karly Noelle Abreu White

Sea Born

William was gone, which meant it was time for the sisters to get to work.

He seemed to run their every day and hour when he was present, but as soon as he left, it was like the spell was broken. They were a team again.

The sisters were Ida and Jericho, and they looked almost nothing alike. Jericho was as stout as the walls of her name, with her hair hanging down her back in long braids, and her arms roped with muscles from a lifetime of hard work.

Ida was tall and willowy, her skin was mottled with vitiligo, and her dark brown hair rose in a puffy halo from her head.

Both sisters shared eyes as black and endless as the night sky.

They lived in a small white house by the sea on a small outcrop of rock. A few times a day, one sister or the other would pause in her work of hanging laundry or carrying firewood, and stare across the waves, unfathomable longing in her gaze.

Then she'd turn back to her task.

There was much to do. William's visits were unpredictable, edged in uncertainty. He stayed sometimes only a single night, other times a month or more. He showed up unannounced, the sight of him lit a flame in the sisters.

He was poison to them. With subtle glances and nods in one direction or the other, he'd bestow favor upon Jericho, or Ida, whomever his whims led him to prefer that time, and the other would feel a jealousy as wide as the sea.

During the worst visit, William spent every waking second with Ida, rising from her bed only to eat and piss for three days, and Jericho found herself eying the racks of knives and ocean waves, tears tracking down her face. She hadn't been certain if she'd wanted to kill him, or her sister, or simply herself.

But sometimes Jericho was the preferred sister, and Ida found herself inventing elaborate poisoned stews and pies in her head, and always, always eyeing the waves.

But when William was gone, all animosity disappeared as if it had never been. Neither sister discussed the thoughts they had when he was present, and they never talked at all when he was near, pitting them against each other.

It was too painful to think about, the weakness he brought them to. They'd been warned, in their youth, to never let a man come so close to them. They'd just never considered the same man would ensnare them both.

Since he was gone now, the sisters laughed and sang and the house was almost merry. It was a gloomy, damp place, and the ground was hard and bore little fruit for them, but they loved one another's company, and when the mood struck, Ida sang well, and Jericho picked flowers, and there were bowls of fish stew and fresh bread always baking, and life was good, they could sit by the fire and knit, and sometimes, when one stared after the waves on the horizon a little too long, the other could come and clasp her hand and lead her away, to hang the laundry, or show her back to her mending, or, sometimes, to play a game of mancala, to sing, to tell tales.

They could always count on one another.

As Jericho took their dresses off of the line, she tried, studiously, to keep her eyes off of the water, and instead looked at the sky. It was gathering grey, as it almost always was. This was a harsh land, and a cold wind blew most of the year. Today was no different, and she watched birds, black against the grey, envying their freedom. The laundry all gathered, she hurried back inside, where she found Ida boning a fish.

"Gonna rain tonight," Jericho said.

"I expect so," Ida said, not looking up from her work.

"Looks like squirrels got into the apple bin again," Jericho said.

"Too bad," Ida said. "Was looking forward to making cider."

Jericho closed her eyes, inhaling the scent of the fish. Salt and brine. When it was so fresh, it wasn't unpleasant. It merely smelled like life. Like home.

"Was thinking tomorrow would be a good day to work on the fence, but if it rains, then..."

She trailed off. Ida wasn't listening. Ida's eyes were unfocused. She'd cut her palm somehow, her blood running out on the board, bright and red.

"Jesus, girl," Jericho said, pointing at her hand.

"Oh," Ida said, her reaction so nonplussed she could have been commenting on the weather.

"Get it wrapped up, you idiot!"

Ida nodded and wrapped a kitchen towel around her hand. The blood soaked through sooner than Jericho would have thought for a cut that didn't look that deep.

"What on earth has gotten into you?"

Ida shook her head. "Too much water in the air, maybe."

"Too many rocks in your brain," Jericho muttered.

Then she stopped. She felt that invisible thread pulling on her spine.

William.

She looked over at Ida, her eyes suddenly sharp, her back straight. Yes, it was definitely William.

He walked through the kitchen door with no ceremony.

“How are my girls?” he asked, his voice deep in his booming chest. His skin was white and looked suited to the rocky, cold land they were in, blending in wonderfully with the clouds and stormy sea.

The sea.

No; William. Jericho’s heart beat fast just looking at him, soaking him in. His brown hair curled with salt wind, and he smelled like earth. His eyes were the color of summer leaves. His hands were calloused with hard labor. He was a sailor, of course, and came to port on the wily whims of the waves. He looked from one to the other of them.

He kissed Jericho on the mouth, long and hard, and she felt her knees grow weak from the effort of kissing him back. He tasted like whisky and oh she wanted to drink it in.

Then he released her and gave a long kiss to Ida too.

She felt the rush of pleasure fade as she watched him kiss her, that faithless bitch. She seemed to enjoy the kiss as well, all giddy and girly when he parted. It made Jericho want to spit.

He pulled them both in close to him, and Jericho tried to focus on his warmth, on the earthiness of him, on his scent. But it was difficult when that other person was so close to her. The heat of embarrassment and rage she felt was unbearable. To share a man with your own sister. To have her never back down, never concede. And she couldn’t be the one to do it. Jericho had seen him first. He was hers, by rights.

He’d taken his boat out to sea, and caught her in his net, just a few miles from this place. He was handsome, and lonely, and his hands were big. When he hauled her up, his surprise at what he’d captured was enormous. He untangled her, speechless. He’d stared long and hard into her golden eyes and pulled her into the boat. “What are you?” he asked when he found his voice.

She had never seen a human man before, and found her heart beat faster when he looked at her like that. Nothing had ever made her heart race like that.

“Yours now,” she said, without thinking.

He’d kissed her mouth, and he’d tasted like honey and wine.

She had never wanted it to end. She journeyed closer and closer to shore, every time letting her guard down as he put his hands in her hair, his mouth on her flesh.

“Don’t go back to the water,” he said the last time.

“I have to,” she said. “It’s my home.”

“Make your home with me,” he said. “Come be with me, I’ll build you a house.”

She shook her head. “I have a sister. She needs me.”

“She can come too.”

“No she can’t.”

She, stupid girl, explained about their skins. How he’d have to catch her, steal her skin. How he’d have to seduce Ida, the way he’d seduced Jericho.

He did. He told her it was for her, to build her house.

She watched from the water as he pulled up her sister, dragged her onto his boat.

“No,” she murmured, her heart tortured. And she wasn’t sure if she pitied herself or her sister more.

She’d determined to prevent her sister from going back to him, to prevent herself from returning to his boat or the shore, to put it all behind her. But it was a big ocean. Bigger than the land could ever be.

William pulled away and looked at them both. “It’s been so long,” he said, giving them each a grin.

“How long will you be staying?” Ida asked, not able to keep an edge of desperation from her voice, her cut hand long forgotten.

Jericho smirked, wanting to exploit that weakness she heard in her voice.

“Well, it’ll depend on how good you girls are,” he gave Ida a wink. He moved to touch her hand, and lifted the towel from it.

“Now how did you manage this?”

This time, he looked up at Jericho, as if asking her for the events, instead of her sister.

“You know how clumsy she is,” Jericho offered, a wicked grin on her mouth.

William gave her a smile that made her heart melt, and patted Ida’s hand and none-too-gently. “She is indeed,” he said.

“Get it cleaned up and finish up the dinner,” William said, all warmth gone from his voice.

“Jericho,” he murmured, “Come with me.”

It wasn’t really lovemaking with William, so much as fucking. When he was spent he rolled over and stared at the ceiling. Sometimes he’d be ready again in a few minutes. Other times he’d go right to sleep. Jericho was rarely satisfied, and yet something about it was as intoxicating as the rum she’d tasted in her youth. She never had her fill of him. She lay panting where he’d left, half-hanging off the edge of her bed, her clothes still on her, merely shifted hurriedly to the side in his urgency to get at what he needed. She felt

like a prostitute. Like a concubine. She ran her hands over herself, desperate for the release he wouldn't give her.

"William," she murmured.

"Yeah," he said to the ceiling.

"All those other ports you visit," she began. Her throat constricted. "Are there girls in them too?"

He sat up and looked at her, studying her face. He grasped her wandering hand, hard. "Does it matter?" he asked.

"It does to me," she said.

He chuckled. "What a man does when he's away from his home is his business alone. What you need to worry about is what you do when I am here," he said. He suddenly pulled away from her, and left the room.

Ida had finished dinner by the time they got back. It must have, Jericho thought, been a quick dish. They sat at the table. William held court at the head of the table. He told stories about his travels, about the sun-burnt islands they sailed to, the brawls he stopped—or started. He didn't mention the girls, but of course there were girls. Jericho thought of sailing to those distant lands. She'd never even been on a boat. She longed, instead, for the water. The sun was setting and she found her gaze wandering.

"Jericho." She heard his voice coming from his chest more than his mouth, and it warmed her like fire in the wood stove. She looked at him. "I asked what you girls have been up to since I've been away?"

"Oh," she said, her fingers teasing at her dark braids. "We been thinking about planting some pumpkins over by the back fence."

He studied her, and she wondered if he knew where her mind had been. Who cared. He kept them on this little outcrop of land surrounded by the sea. It was only normal they'd think of it. Normal.

Jericho saw Ida looking at her, and her eyes were wide and full of something ill. At first, Jericho thought it was that old envy that swept over them in William's wake. But it was something else.

Something like terror.

"Girls, I'm starting to think you don't like living out here all by your lonesomes."

That snapped Jericho's thoughts back to the here and now.

"What do you mean?"

"I've been eyeing a house in the city, nice central location. Easy walk to the markets. You could make some friends of your own kind," he said.

Your own kind.

Ida opened her mouth to respond, sheer panic on her face.

"I don't think they'd take kindly to that," Jericho said thickly. "There aren't folks like us here," she said carefully.

William pursed his lips. "No," he said thoughtfully. "I suppose not."

"We like it here, really," Ida said in a rush. "And it's away from the other men," she added.

"Now there's a thought," William said. As if he hadn't thought of it already. "I would like to keep what's mine away from prying eyes."

Ida nodded with a little too much enthusiasm. "Yes, and we like living quietly, you know. No need to make a fuss."

William nodded. He looked unfavorably at her hand, before turning his gaze back to Jericho. "You like it here too? It's not... too far from the mainland?"

"I like it just fine," Jericho said, looking just past his right shoulder. Then she made her gaze simpering. "Because it's where you live."

That did the trick. His shoulders loosened and his gaze went soft. He took her hand. A thrill shot through her, despite their pre-dinner ablutions. She looked over at Ida, and felt the overwhelming urge to scream at her to leave, to let William take her here, on the table if he must.

But she said nothing. And Ida stared only at her hand, ashamed.

After he downed a glass of whiskey, William went to bed. Ida and Jericho didn't speak, each settling into nightly chores, Ida scrubbing pots and pans, and Jericho mending a pile of shirts William had brought her. She sat in front of the fireplace, watching the flames. Fire was so foreign to her. As was the desire to put her hands into it. She wondered how it felt. Her heart was heavy as a stone. She listened to Ida in the kitchen, trying to muffle her quiet sobs as she cleaned.

Her anger at her sister seemed to dim slightly with William asleep. It had boiled down to mild annoyance.

"You can stop now," Jericho murmured.

"I can't, you know that."

Jericho did.

Tears were salt water.

They were still sea born, after all.

The day broke and William announced he was going to town. Both sisters assembled in the parlor, both had, by unspoken agreement, dressed in their Sunday best to see him off. They always did when he was home, never knowing if he'd leave in the morning.

"Is there anything you girls need?"

Jericho went through her mental stock of the house. Flour, sugar, salt...

"Ribbons," Ida said suddenly.

William raised an eyebrow at her, his gaze soft and even indulgent, fatherly. "And why, pray, do you need ribbons?"

Ida looked at her hands, and then back up at him. "So I can look my best for you."

William gave her a smooth grin, and turned to Jericho. "And for you?"

Jericho was so disgusted with her sister's display that she could barely sputter out, "Bacon. The larder is low."

William's face closed at this practical need, and his face became blank.

"Ribbons and bacon. Very well."

He was off soon after.

Jericho tried not to fume about the ribbons as she went about the day's tasks, tending the garden and feeding the hens.

She saw Ida staring out to sea, and didn't even reprimand her.

"We could leave, couldn't we?" Ida had asked her once, her hands on the glass of the window.

"You're welcome to try."

Her sister had looked back at her with slumped shoulders and shadowed eyes. She'd never suggested it again.

William was gone until late into the night. Ida excused herself after a silent dinner of seaweed stew, leaving Jericho alone in the study. She'd come here many times for comfort in the intervening years since her capture. She suspected William didn't have much use for the books, but he'd noticed that they kept her sated, and brought one or two back every trip. She liked stories of adventure best, faraway lands. She hadn't known how to read, her kind had no use for it beneath the waves. But they were also quick learners. She had taught herself, and Ida besides. But tonight, the books offered no comfort. She thumbed through well-read tomes. *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Mystery of Udolpho*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. All of them had provided an escape from the four walls and the endless longing. But tonight nothing was enough. She stared into the dying fire, the lighted embers growing in her gaze. Fire was a fascination. Born of the sea, she wondered if she could die by it.

She was in this gloomy posture when William entered the room, smelling of whiskey and smoke and other womens' perfumes. She made to turn, but he caught her hand, and brought his mouth, all hot and wet and reeking, to her neck.

She submitted, closing her eyes.

She could be forgiven for not noticing when Ida entered the room, when she took up the small paper bag, and withdrew the ribbons.

As William's calloused hands began to paw at her, suddenly he hitched backwards and made a wet gurgling noise. His hands continued to grab at her, but now it was for dear life. Jericho's gaze couldn't turn towards him to see what was going on, but she heard Ida's soft voice.

"Thank you for the pretty ribbons. Don't I look my best now?"

William wheezed. Jericho's mind was reeling. "Ida?" she murmured. "Ida, what are you—"

“Let her go,” Ida said, and to Jericho’s surprise, he did. She threw herself away from him and saw her sister, ribbons pulled tight around William’s neck. His face was going from red to purple. His hands were scrabbling against her sister’s scrawny ones, but Ida didn’t budge.

“Now release her for real. Where is her skin?”

William wheezed again, but Ida didn’t let up her grip. Her knuckles were white.

Jericho could scarcely grasp what was happening. She felt a sudden urge to push her sister off of William even now, but she held her ground, watching the horror in front of her.

William weakly lifted a finger, pointing to the fireplace.

Ida shook her head. “Show us,” she demanded, leading him, by the neck, across the room. He pointed again, not the fireplace—the chimney.

“Jericho, this is your chance,” Ida hissed. “Don’t waste it.” Jericho scrabbled to the fireplace, looking at the flames desperately, and around the room. “Hurry!” Ida snapped, “He’s damn strong.”

But no. Ida was stronger still. Jericho was in awe. But she couldn’t stay. She dashed into the kitchen, grabbing a bucket of water from the table. Sloshing it around, nearly spilling half, she threw it on the fire. It wasn’t fully doused, but she didn’t care. Her fingers scrabbled up the chimney, and her heart pounded. She felt the sleek, smooth skin. She pulled it out of the fireplace. It was dark and brown as she was. And wrapped inside it, the smaller, mottled skin of her sister. Foolish William. He should have hidden them separately.

“I’ve got them, come away,” Jericho said.

Ida shook her head. “Take them, and go. I’ll be right behind you.”

Jericho hesitated. “But you don’t need to deal with him anymore. He’s nothing now.”

Ida shook her head, and Jericho saw the pain in her sister’s eyes. How had she been able to overcome William? What was it costing her?

“I’ll meet you in the waves,” Ida repeated, glancing at the embers smoldering on the floor beside the fireplace. William was still struggling against her. Jericho looked at him. What a pathetic figure he cut, after all.

“I’ll meet you in the waves,” Ida murmured again. “Be quick.”

She ran through the house, out the door, into the good night air. The waves called to her from below, and she wrapped herself in her glorious skin, feeling herself transform into her true self as she hit the water below.

She had left Ida’s skin for her at the cliff’s edge, sure she’d find it and join her soon, and they would revel in the water together, finally free.

When she looked back at the house, it had lit up, so much more than a sea-bound house should have. Fire licked at the windows, the doors. She could scarcely understand what she was seeing, as the whole place quickly became engulfed.

Jericho waited. But Ida never came. The air was cold. The waft of smoke hit her sensitive nose, and she dove under water to get the sting out of her eyes and mouth.

Unsure what else to do without her sister, Jericho began to swim, and lost herself in the feel of the water, churning around her body, her free, sleek, seal's body. She believed she would never take off her skin again. She swam and swam and swam until the grief and loss were nothing but more sea. Tears were salt water. And she was sea born, after all.

Lillie E. Franks

The Encyclopedia of Endings

- And they lived happily ever after.
- And she returned to her old town and her old life, where she finally realized that, wide as the world is, sometimes the grass is greenest right where you started off.
- So he skipped away, jumping from one planet to another planet, until he disappeared into the heavens where he's still having adventures today.
- And she never said, "Thank you!" to a cat again!
- But she died.
- But both of them died.
- But in time, they all died.
- And they lived happily, at first.
- The ending is always the thing that matters. There is nothing to anything but the finish. Each wave is broken and forgotten, but the last wave, and only the last wave, leaves itself sculpted into the land forever. Tell me the ending only, and don't bother me with the rest.
- But when he awoke, he realized it had all been just a dream.
- And that is the reason that, to this day, people keep forks on one side of the plate and knives on the other.
- But when she fell asleep, she realized it had all been just a life.
- And though they never saw each other again, they remembered each other all their lives.
- And though they never saw each other again, they remembered how they seemed to each other for what seemed to them forever.
- Every moment is the last moment, fed into transformation. Every moment is fed to the next, which is finally fed to the ending. Even I am real, and I will end, and my ending will make me real.
- But the only thing in the whole house was a single pot made of clay, with a small,

triangular chip missing from the corner of the rim.

- So she retraced her steps over the cool, evening sand, and the ocean bid her goodnight.
- And yet, he knew in his heart that something had been lost, something that would never be found again.
- The difference is, there is no waiting in endings. I am always waiting, until the ending, and then, finally then, I only am.
- And some people say that her head is still in the forest to this day, weeping for her lost family.
- So the bloodied sword fell to the ground, singing out with a sound that was almost music.
- And they were remembered in this story, which I have now told to you.
- And if you think I'm telling a lie, just ask the moon. She was there, and she saw the whole thing.
- But every thought is an ending. It is an end to thinking, which is simply waiting with an open mind. I am ending over and over. I am always returned to reality.
- Outside, snow fell over the streets and the people of the city; it was a gentle, soft snow, which laid them all under a silent curtain of smooth white.
- And none of them ever knew the truth, except for the old man in the cabin, who told no one.
- But it was already too late.
- But she didn't quite make it.
- But he had never had a chance at all.
- There is always waiting. Even an ending is just waiting for the next beginning. Even I am nothing but a waiting.
- And it all was, ever after.
- For every true ending, there are a thousand false endings. Every long wait, and even some short ones, pretend to be eternal. They are simple moments, but they put on the cloak of ending to awe us into silence, which is waiting.
- The bullet flew across the room towards her, until it had crossed half the distance, exactly half.
- The waves rose, higher and higher, over the dam, but they did not spill back down. They just kept rising, up and up and up.
- So the tyrant was deposed, and a new and just king sat on the throne, to stand victorious forever.
- And the stars shone, as they always shine. The stars shine forever.
- There is an eternal state of things, a kind of waiting that goes on forever and will never be abandoned. To wait like this is to escape false endings.
- I cannot wait eternally.

- “But no one cares about what came before,” he said. “All that matters is who wins in the end.”
- False endings are held together by two things: art and power. And art is surrounded by power.
- And they lived, ending to ending to ending to ending.
- So justice was done, and the miscreants who sought to destroy the peace of our world were foiled, once again.
- Because our government is imperfect, but it can only get better the more we dedicate ourselves to it.
- We all know false endings so well. We have all been surrounded with them, and one piece of us must wish to know the rest of the story.
- However, a judge rejected the family’s civil lawsuit.
- But that’s just the way some people are. You couldn’t help them, even if you tried.
- The board of executives did not respond to requests for comment.
- Because where there are no true endings, there are also no fake endings. There is only quiet, uneasy waiting.
- She walked the road slowly, going, with each step, not forward, but away.
- But though he never saw her face again, it was neither his last time fighting a monster nor saving a village.
- But she had waited long enough; it was time to try again.
- If I must do one thing, it is to sift the true endings from the false endings. I must believe that there are true endings, because I must believe that there is something other than waiting.
- And the throngs celebrated long into the night, that they had won over those who would oppress them, and that no one would, ever again, stand over anybody else and call themselves master.
- Far away, the guns and tanks rusted, because the people did not need them anymore. They needed only each other, face to face and person to person.
- The doubters called this utopia; but the people answered, “Yes, because we all must die, and only utopia is worth dying for.”
- And I am happy, not just in this moment, but for all moments. Happiness is a condition, not a feeling, and I have reached it.
- So why am I surrounded by the rotting odor of fake endings? I know this scent too well to ignore it, but why? Why does the truth still not free me from waiting? Is there nothing besides waiting?
- And one day, the sun will grow large, and it will swallow the Earth inside of itself.
- And one day, the sun, with the Earth inside it, will burn out and grow as cold and dark as the space around it.
- And the sun will not be the first star to burn out, nor the last, but there will be a last,

and after it, there will be no more stars.

– And then, in the cold and silence, there will be waiting.

– But even this is not an ending.

– But there was never a true ending.

– So he repeated, “Tomorrow is another day,” and for once it meant something to him that it had never meant before.

– But endings are more than trickery.

– But that was as far as she would go, she decided, because she was better than that, and because it was time that she acted like she was better than it.

– But there is something other than waiting.

– And so although all the universe was dark, one star came together and shone; it was the last star, and there was nothing in the universe to dim its light.

– But there is beginning.

– “But a law is not justice,” the voice cried to the people who gathered around. “Only justice is justice, and nothing must stop us from seeking it.”

– Because I am not made of one ending but every ending, and I have brought myself to an end a hundred times. Every moment that I stand fully in this moment and see that everything I was has already been consumed, I come to an end. An ending is beginning, which is a reaching forward, away from what has ended and into what is possible. I am always ending and beginning, beginning and ending, and every ending is as real and as fake as every other ending. Ending to ending to ending to beginning.

– And I live.

– And you live.

– And we live.

– And the stars shine over us.

– And we live.

– And we begin.

Annie Stenzel

Come, cup of tea, and bid me write morning

Every day, a portal opens, only
to snap closed, catching part of me—
a camera's shutter, a piece of origami
folded with more passion than skill.

Every day, what of the words snipped
out of a mind teeming with words?
Ah, listen! how often language rings me
like a sympathetic bell.

Clasped hands, surely you remember
every touch from the bewilderment
of butterflies who chose as a landing place some
stretch of skin—your wrist, or cheek, or shin?

Dear hands that have never touched
a harp's strings; hands that would never wish
to wield a dagger—can you at least speak truth
using this nib that scritch on a naked page?

Jennifer Lai

Portrait of a Normal Nuclear Family

As with last Sunday, and the Sunday before that, and the Sunday before that, the husband and wife are shopping for toothpaste.

It's one of the few activities where they are civil to each other. If there's anything that annoys the husband more than the wife nagging him to put away the damp boxers she finds under their duvet (after she's begged him not leave them for the kids to find when they sometimes rush into their bed after a nightmare), or to put away his dishes (after they've sat in the sink so long the scraps have turned as dark as the hair on the naked women in the videos he furtively streams on his phone during their pastor's sermons on repentance) it is making a scene—especially when the leggy brunette is working, the one with the impossibly large breasts. The one he thinks his wife doesn't know about.

It also makes them look like a normal, nuclear family.

The daughter chooses a watermelon flavor, the son, a tube with smiling dogs. Travel size, the mother reminds them because they'll be back next week. The children never question why they come to the store so often. They know better than to ruin the good thing they have going—a trip to the ice cream shop next door where, if they behave, their mother allows them anything they desire (even waffle cones the size of their heads), compliments of the owner, who does anything the mother desires.

Sometimes, the wife wishes her husband was more perceptive. Sometimes, she thanks Jesus he's not.

After dinner, the mother squeezes out toothpaste for her children. Tells them the blob is called a nurdle. Smiles when the word makes them giggle. Then she brushes along with them. She brushes and brushes and brushes until all she tastes is mint.

Ruby Rorty

Silhouette

I want to put on a lampshade and light up the room. All my stories will become shadow acts:
rabbit and coyote, rabbit and coyote.

Katie M. Zeigler

Papier-Mâché Moai

He said he'd made them with his hands and his brain, as if the two were owners of the same small business. I was anticipating a tool shed, or a series of small pinch pots arranged on a wooden shelf, so I curled the excitement at the back of my throat like a slingshot. He disappeared to turn on the outdoor lights, wet grass blue in the night sky. Once illuminated, he made a sound, almost a whoop, and I took them in, at first unsure what I was seeing.

Two moai, erect, their chiseled faces long and solemn.

"Like Easter Island," he said.

I had read about the moai with my grandmother in a book called *Strange Stories, Amazing Facts*. We'd pored over it, tales of the Great Pyramids blending seamlessly with the Shroud of Turin. I'd been fascinated with the theories surrounding the statues' creation and purpose. Now, faced with two, that fascination turned to something like apprehension.

"It's just papier-mâché," he continued. He slapped the cheek of one to show me, the sound it made empty, artificial. They stood almost ten feet tall, distinct against the peeling ping pong table and assorted broken lawn chairs. Beer cans lay at the base of one and the other sported a UVA baseball cap, jauntily positioned atop its flat head. They were, I hated to admit, quite well done, the eyes sunken beneath broad foreheads as if staring off into the middle distance.

We'd met that night at a bar in Washington, D.C. It was 1997 and I was relatively new to dating. I'd had boyfriends in the past, but always long-term, usually long-distance. Now, living on my own for the first time, I tried desperately to suss out the parameters of dating. Going home with men after bars, dance clubs, dinners. Trusting strangers enough that I'd get into their cars and worry more about my breath, my hair, my nylons than what might lay around the corner from this Arlington house that he shared with six other men.

On the way to his house, the windows were rolled down and my hand swam in the humid Adams Morgan air. Now, in the silence of the backyard, fireflies limping around the long faces of the moai, I shivered before stopping myself, worried he'd mistake it for awe.

"So?" he asked, his teeth white against the porch light.

Before I could speak, he pulled my body toward him and I could hear the raucous laughter of his roommates inside. All the posturing I'd performed at the bar—the eye contact, the Jack and Coke sipped daintily through a small straw—felt simultaneously nauseating and ominous.

"Let's go inside," he said, and I thought about how some believe the moai were dragged across the island, a miracle of muscle. Once inside, the living room window offered a perfect view of the larger of the two statues, and while his roommates dissolved into bedrooms and behind closed doors, the watchful eyes stayed on me, immovable and dark.

Now, almost twenty-five years later, I remember the argument within my own head. I was an adult, capable of making my own decisions when it came to my sexuality. I was borne of phrases about waiting for marriage and I had abided, offering up news of my virginity to lovers as an apology as much as a boundary. In retrospect, I was scared. Of my body and its pleasures. Of what men might do to it. Of what the relinquishing of it might mean. So my body became a line drawn on the earth, guarded and ridiculed by the lesser of my friends. But in my early twenties, it felt like a skin to shed, tossing aside the rind to expose something fresh and untouched.

But the room smelled of beer and the music he'd selected was unrecognizable, and I found myself protecting that skin, ultimately telling him I needed to use the restroom and sneaking out the back door, the streetlights curving toward the intersection where I'd find a cab to take me home.

As the moai watched, I considered what I knew of them. I had read that they face inward, to protect their own people. They gaze not at the churning sea, but across the island, watchful and silent. I put my hands in my pockets as the cab approached, afraid to remember that their legs were buried, deep within the bedrock, unable to walk away.

Tommy Dean

Fastened to the Curve of the Earth

The sand fastened to her body, invading the spaces between limbs, magnifying the sound of her heart in her ears, matching the crush of the waves. Faith is old enough to worry about death, but young enough not to notice the boys looking at her long, sturdy legs. In May, they finished a lesson on the ancient Egyptians. Embalming and sarcophaguses, a belief in an afterlife. Her father piles the sand, careful to keep it out of her eyes. He sculpts her body in a square, hiding the particular curve of her body. Lately, she's been wondering if she embarrasses him, that biology is somehow letting him down. She no longer helps him delouse the chickens, and curls her lips at the smells in the barn. She still wears her boots and collects the eggs, but the posters on her bedroom walls are of pop singers, their eye makeup smoky, and enticing, secrets they weave into their lyrics excite her spirit, get her singing at the top of her voice, her yearning seeping through the walls like an invisible gas, waking him up to the heartbreak of her future, somewhere beyond the farm.

But here, he has her trapped. Her idea, so he's happy to pin her down, to meld her to the Earth, to stop her orbit. She feels this, the desire to cage her like his livestock, but she doesn't know how to name it, so they spend the week at the beach, her mother flashing her toes in the sun, reading magazines about the end of days, her axis spinning away from them. Faith, a minor planet between them. The gravity that holds them together.

Faith counts clouds that scrape across the sky, wondering how long she can stay in this cocoon, each second feels like the burning of hot water, her scalp itching, her legs wanting to be free, to run down the length of the beach, making them all watch her under the sun, hoping they think of chariots, of the riches where land meets the sea.

Contributor Notes

Laila Amado writes in her second language, lives in her fourth country, and cooks decent paella. Her stories have been published or are forthcoming in *Best Small Fictions 2022*, *Rejection Letters*, *Milk Candy Review*, *Gastropoda*, *No Contact*, and other publications. In her free time, she can be found staring at the Mediterranean Sea. Occasionally, the sea stares back. Follow her on Twitter at [@onbonbon7](https://twitter.com/onbonbon7).

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Tommy Dean is the author of two flash fiction chapbooks *Special Like the People on TV* (Redbird Chapbooks, 2014) and *Covenants* (ELJ Editions, 2021), and a full flash collection, *Hollows* (Alternating Current Press 2022). He lives in Indiana where he currently is the Editor at *Fractured Lit* and *Uncharted Magazine*. A recipient of the 2019 Lascaux Prize in Short Fiction, his writing can be found in *Best Microfiction 2019* and 2020, *Best Small Fiction 2019* and 2022, *Monkeybicycle*, and numerous litmags. Find him at tommydeanwriter.com and on Twitter @TommyDeanWriter.

Moisés Delgado is an MFA candidate at the University of Arizona, where he serves as senior editor of *Sonora Review*. His prose appears in *Gulf Coast*, *Hobart*, *Puerto del Sol*, and elsewhere. Moisés loves the moon, board games, and strawberry conchas.

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Monkeys or follow her on Twitter at @onyxaminedlife. She loves anything that is not the way it should be.

Beth Gordon is a poet, mother and grandmother currently living in Asheville, NC. Her poems have been published in *Poet Lore*, *Citron Review*, *SWWIM*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Moist Poetry*, *Okay Donkey* and others. She is the author of several chapbooks including *The Water Cycle* (2022, Variant Literature). Her chapbook, *How To Keep Things Alive*, is forthcoming from Split Rock Press in 2023. Beth is Managing Editor of *Feral: A Journal of Poetry and Art*, Assistant Editor of *Animal Heart Press*, and Grandma of *Femme Salve Books*. Twitter and Instagram @bethgordonpoet.

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Ashley Hajimirsadeghi is an Iranian-American multimedia artist, writer, and journalist. Her writing has appeared, or is forthcoming, in *Passages North*, *The Cortland Review*, *Salamander*, *RHINO*, *Salt Hill*, and *The Journal*, among others. She is the Co-Editor-in-Chief at *Mud Season Review* and a contributing writer and critic at MovieWeb. She is a six-time Best of the Net nominee, two-time Pushcart Prize nominee, and runner-up for the Arthur Flowers Flash Fiction Prize. Her work can be found at ashleyhajimirsadeghi.com

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Rosaleen Lynch is an Irish youth and community worker and writer in the East End of London with words in *Craft*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Jellyfish Review*, *EllipsisZine*, *Mslxia*, *Litro* and *Fish*. Rosaleen was shortlisted by Bath and the Bridport Prize, won of the HISSAC Flash Fiction Competition and the Oxford Flash Fiction Prize, and can be found on Twitter @quotes_52 and 52Quotes.blogspot.com.

Réka Nyitrai is a spell, a sparrow, a lioness's tongue — a bird nest in a pool of dusk. She is the recipient of a Touchstone Distinguished Books Award for 2020 for her debut haiku volume *While Dreaming Your Dreams* (Valencia Spain: Mono Ya Mono Books, 2020).

Liza Olson is the author of the novels *Here's Waldo*, *The Brother We Share*, and *Afterglow*. A Best of the Net nominee, Best Small Fictions nominee, finalist for Glimmer Train's Very Short Fiction Award, and 2021 Wigleaf longlister in and from Chicagoland, she's been published in *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *Cleaver*, *Pithead Chapel*, and other fine places. One of her proudest achievements was getting to run *(mac)ro(mic)* for four incredible years. Find her online at lizaolsonbooks.com or on social @lizaolsonbooks.

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Sarah J. Sloat is the author of *Hotel Almighty*, a collection a visual poetry published in 2020 by Sarabande Books. Her poems, prose and collage have appeared in *The Journal*, *Tupelo Quarterly*, *Sixth Finch* and elsewhere. You can keep up with her at sarahjsloat.com, on Twitter at @SJSloat and on Instagram at @sjane30.

Annie Stenzel (she/her) was born in Illinois, but did not stay put. Her full-length collection is *The First Home Air After Absence*. Her poems appear in *Atlanta Review*, *Chestnut Review*, *Gargoyle*, *Kestrel*, *Lily Poetry*, *On the Seawall*, *Rust + Moth*, *SWWIM*, *Thimble*, and *The Lake*, among others. A poetry editor for the online journals *Right Hand Pointing* and *West Trestle Review*, she lives on unceded Ohlone land within walking distance of the San Francisco Bay.

Joshua Torrence is a queer writer studying English and psychology at Washington College. His poems have appeared in *Swim Press* and the *Oakland Arts Review*. He self-published his first poetry collection, *I Have Never Been Reconciled*, in April 2020. He splits his time between Baltimore County and Chestertown, Maryland, tap dancing and tarot reading in his spare time.

Karly Noelle Abreu White is a writer whose work has been featured in a variety of publications such as *Fathom Magazine*, *The Belladonna*, *The Raven Review*, *The Unmooring Journal*, *Writers Resist*, *Untangled*, *Nothing Held Back*, and *Pieces of Me*. She holds a Bachelors in English Literature from Biola University and lives in Southern California with her husband, two children, and fussy cat.

Katie M. Zeigler holds a BA and MA in English from Stanford University and an MFA in Creative Writing from St. Mary's College. Her short fiction and non-fiction has been published in a variety of outlets, including *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *The Centifictionist*, *Digging*, *Griffel*, *Wilson Quarterly*, *Fish Anthology* and *Stanford Magazine*. She won the Stanford Magazine fiction contest, was a finalist in Glimmer Train's short fiction contest and placed second in *Fish Anthology's* international flash fiction contest. She currently teaches creative writing at Diablo Valley College and serves as the Editor in Chief of *NiftyLit*.

Cover Photo: Ben Woodard

Interior Images: Kartik Gada (15) & Kevin Wenning (35)



JACKPOT

CAPTAIN 1

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