FRUITSLICE

ISSUE 1 WINTER 2023



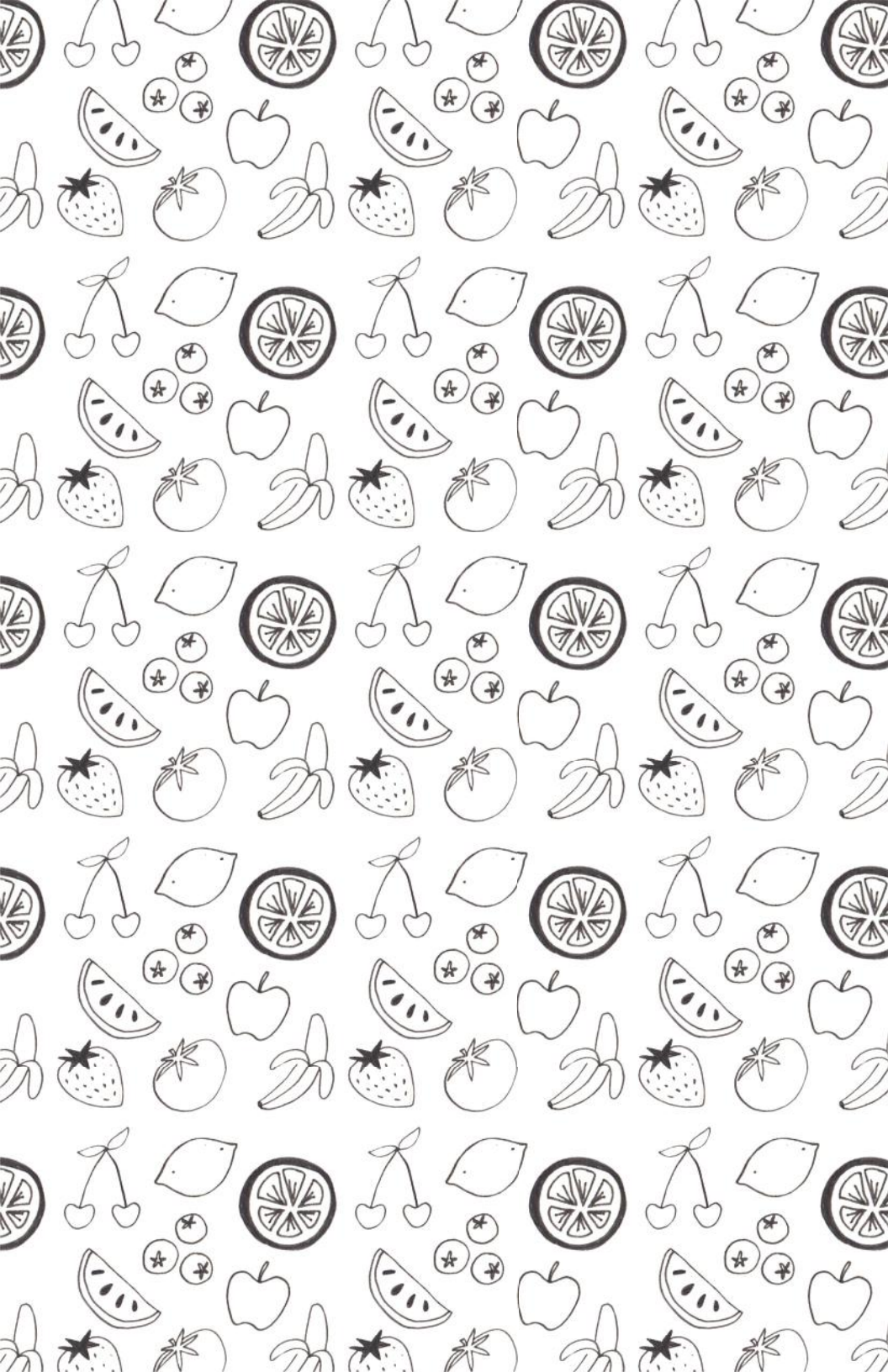
FIRSTS

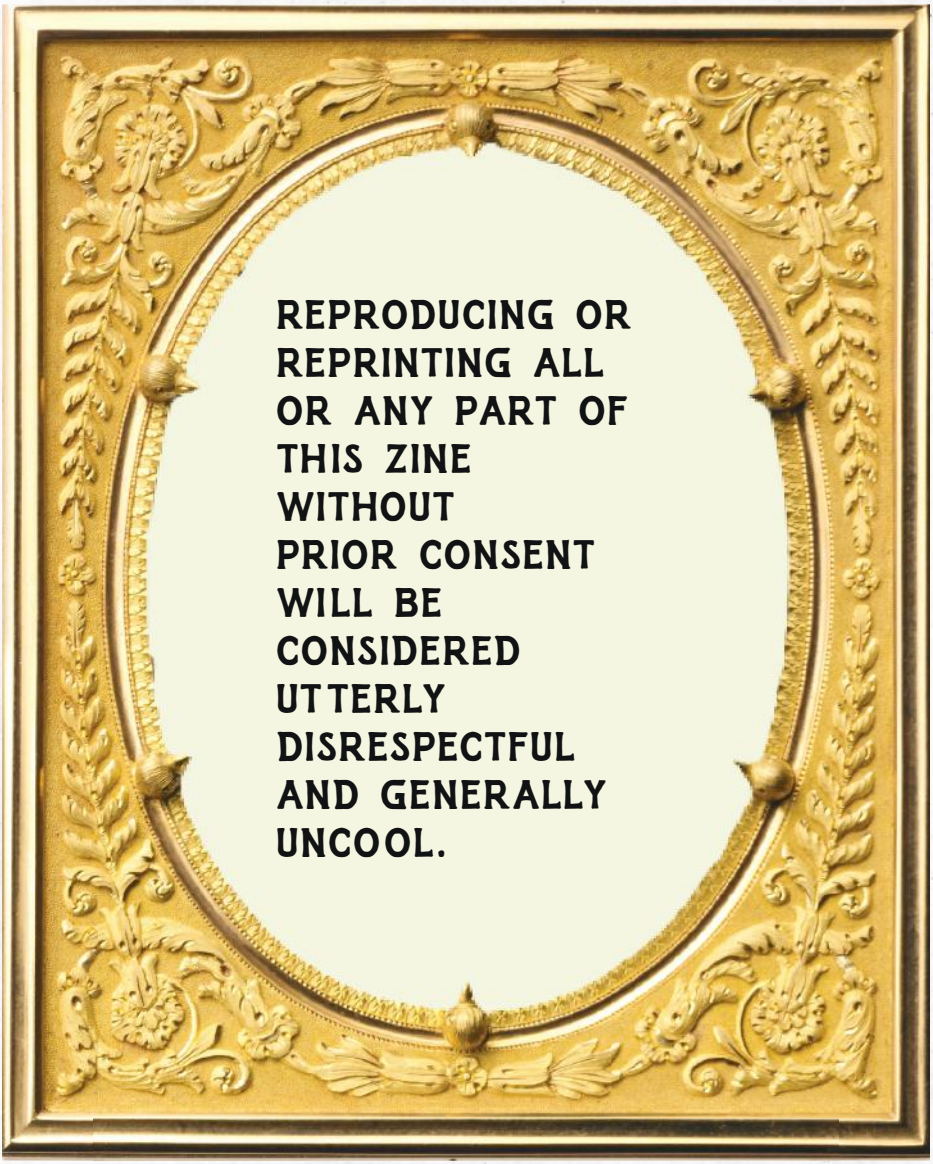


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DEDICATED TO THOSE MOMENTS WHERE YOUR FRIENDS ARE BEING SO COOL AND FUNNY AND PROLIFIC, YOU THINK, “WE SHOULD START A PODCAST”.



A Letter from the Editor

THERE'S A PART OF ME THAT'S MUCH WISER THAN MY CONSCIOUS SELF. SHE CHOSE THE THEME, "FIRSTS."

I SIT AT THE COFFEE SHOP AND SORT THE SUBMISSIONS IN AWE. I AM HONORED TO PLAY A PART IN PUBLISHING THESE PIECES.

ONE EMAIL SUBMISSION READS, "DEAR MYSTERIOUS TEAM BEHIND FRUITSLICE..."



AFTER READING THIS, I AM STRUCK WITH THE MOST AGGRESSIVE CASE OF IMPOSTER SYNDROME. IT OCCURS TO ME I HAVE YET TO SHARE ANYTHING ABOUT MYSELF OR MY TEAM. WE HAVE PLANS TO INTRODUCE OURSELVES ONE AT A TIME ON SOCIAL MEDIA, BUT I CANCEL THEM IMMEDIATELY!

THE NARRATIVE I START TO BUILD GOES SOMETHING LIKE THIS: IF THESE WRITERS KNEW I HAD NO FUCKING IDEA WHAT I AM DOING, THEY WOULD NOT HAVE SUBMITTED THEIR WORK TO ME. I AM NOT UP FOR THE TASK AND I CANNOT BE TRUSTED.

LUCKILY, THIS NARRATIVE WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO FEED WHILE READING THE BEAUTIFUL WORKS IN THE ISSUE—EACH WRITER REMINDS ME HOW MAGICAL AND MESSY IT IS TO TRY SOMETHING FOR THE FIRST TIME.

I REPEAT THE TITLES LIKE MANTRAS AND LET THE THEME GUIDE ME.

BECAUSE I AM A BEGINNER.



THANK GOD.

I WANT TO EXTEND THE DEEPEST GRATITUDE TO THOSE WHO STUMBLED UPON THE CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS, EMBRACED IT, AND PLACED THEIR FAITH IN US.

- CHLOE OLOREN



WELCOME TO THE MESSY WORLD OF FIRSTS. AT FRUITSLICE, WE INVITE YOU TO EMBRACE THE UNKNOWN, CULTIVATE A BEGINNER'S MIND, AND FIGHT AGAINST PERFECTIONISM.

FRUITSLICE IS A COMMUNITY JOURNAL FULL OF SLICES: LITERARY, LIFESTYLE, MAGAZINE, SOCIAL COMMENTARY, COLLABORATION, AND AN INTIMATE PEEK AT THE LIVES OF THE FRUITY.

GO AHEAD! TAKE A BITE :)

THIS PUBLICATION WAS CREATED AS A WAY TO DOCUMENT AND ARCHIVE ALL THINGS QUEER JOY, QUEER LOVE, QUEER EXPRESSION, AND QUEER ART. WITHIN THESE PAGES YOU'LL FIND WORK FROM OVER 50 QUEER CONTRIBUTORS FROM ALL OVER THE WORLD.

FRUITSLICE IS A CELEBRATION OF:

BEING GAY
HAVING FUN
LOVING YOUR FRIENDS
BELIEVING IN YOURSELF
WRITING IT ALL DOWN
TAKING UP SPACE

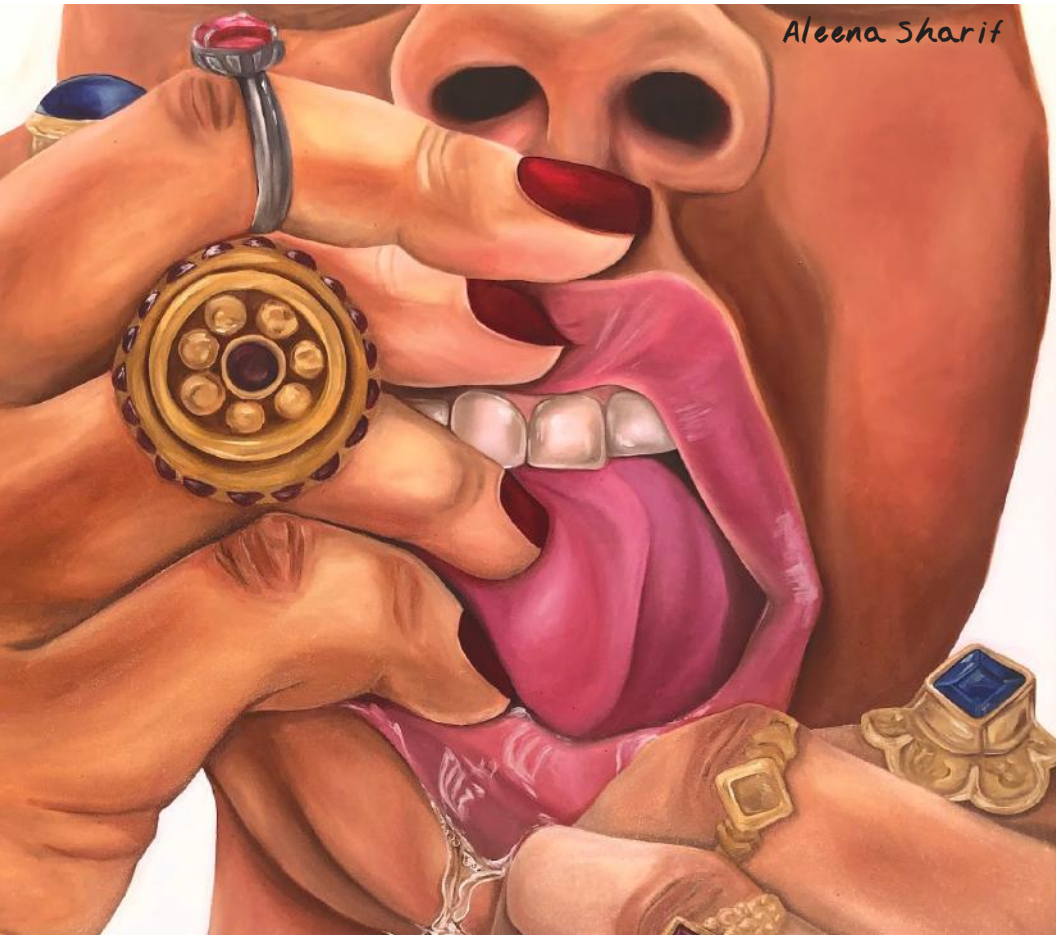
FRUITSLICE IS A BACKLASH AGAINST:
ASSHOLES
STUPIDHEADS
HOMOPHOBES
GEORGE SANTOS
THE HATERS



Ais Russell



THE FOOL.



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THE VERY

BEGINNING

Rizwan Akhtar

Genesis

THINGS I DID REMAIN THINGS ONLY
WHEN WORDS GREW OUT ABRUPTLY
LANGUAGE BECAME THE NEIGHBOR
WE BUILT A POOL AND A GARDEN
A MOWER CHIPPED IN FOR WAGES
SOME WINDS ALSO HEAVED US
AND THE BLOOD PUMPED INSIDE
RAINS MULTIPLIED CURIOSITY
SKY ADDED US WE SUBTRACTED
SILENCE THERE CAME A MOMENT
SOULS TOOK BIRTH ACCIDENTALLY
UNDER SKINS WE STORED LIMBS
MADE LOVE THE LAST SHIPMENT
WE RECEIVED AFTER IMAGINATION
I CANNOT SAY ANYTHING ABOUT TIME.

An Editor's Advice

LET ME COME CLOSE TO A POEM
ON A PAGE, A COMPANY OF
WHITE WORDS (A WOMAN FAKING
LOVE SCENE TO A CAMERA AND
TOO MANY RETAKES) THE POWER
OF REPETITION IS YOUR PRIVILEGE
SHOULD ALSO PARE DOWN SILENCE

LET'S NOT USE QUOTES INSIDE
WE ARE ALL SERVING A PURPOSE
TO THE LANGUAGE AFTER IT EXPLODED
ON OUR PALATE; EVER AFTER SOIREES
OF SOUL AT HAUNTS, BEECHES, BEDS
LOVE NEEDS MORE THAN LIMBS, AND
DON'T TAKE THIS TO YOUR HEART,

A MANUSCRIPT NEATLY TIED
COMES UP WITH HEARTBREAKS
SOME INSINUATIONS.

Rizwan Akhtar


Michelle Plotkin



I've been preparing my apartment for my first cat.
It's like preparing for a child; a newborn baby. Food area in the kitchen, litter box in the bathroom, bed on the bed. I've held back on it for so long (in many ways waiting for the cat to find me – preferably when least expected and to my complete surprise), and to finally be taking steps towards bringing one home is strange.
Oh, I guess I'm doing this now.
This thing I've dreamt of for so long.
Which in many ways has shown me something about myself: I wait.
How I stifle or dull my own goals and ambitions and plans.
How impossible making a decision seemingly becomes when I convince myself that I won't have this same goal a month from now (I do and I will).
How strange.
I don't want to be like that anymore.
The preparation is exciting though. There's still much to do.
But I'm going to lean into the excitement in the meantime.
I'm going to be a mother soon.

Truxton Ivory



Tesoro

Holly Payne-Strange

THE FIRST TIME I HAD A CONVERSATION IN ITALIAN,
I THOUGHT I WAS GOING CRAZY.

WORDS SPILLED FROM MY MOUTH LIKE A HOT SPRING,
SEEPING UP FROM MY CORE.
I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW WHAT I WAS SAYING,
I JUST KNEW
I WAS BEING HONEST.
IT WAS SOUND, AND SECRET, AND MEANING BEYOND DEFINITION.
IT WAS TERRIFYING, AND EXCITING, AND SEEMED A MIRACLE.
THERE WAS NO THOUGHT, NO PRE-PLANNING,
JUST FEELINGS,
SOME BASIC TRUTH BUBBLING OUT OF ME.

AND WHEN THE MAN SMILED,
AND NODDED,
AND SPOKE,
I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND IT.
I COULDN'T HAVE TRANSLATED WORD FOR WORD.
BUT I GOT IT.
IT MADE SENSE,
SOME PSYCHIC MESSAGE IMPORTED INTO ME
KNOWLEDGE WATERING A GARDEN
THAT BEFORE HAD ONLY BEEN DUST.



I LOVE ITALIAN. I'M BETTER AT IT NOW.
BUT I STILL CHASE THAT FIRST CONVERSATION,
SIPPING AT GREEK AND GULPING DOWN MANDARIN,
EXCITED FOR THAT MOMENT
WHEN LANGUAGE SEEMS TO DISSOLVE,
AND MAGIC ARRIVES.

Hi I'm Ais, I'm an addict and an alcoholic.

TWO AND A HALF YEARS AGO, IT WAS SPRING BREAK AND I'D BEGUN TO REALIZE THAT I HAD ABSOLUTELY NO CONTROL OVER COCAINE. I GREW UP IN LA AND I WENT TO A LITTLE COLLEGE IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. I CHOSE IT PRECISELY BECAUSE IT WAS LITTLE AND IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, WHICH I THOUGHT WOULD MAKE IT HARD TO GET DRUGS AND WOULD KEEP ME OUT OF TROUBLE. IT DIDN'T. I UNDERESTIMATED MYSELF—I HAD A DEALER IN A WEEK. BUT MY COKE DEALER WAS HARD TO GET A HOLD OF AND MY STASH NEVER LASTED AS LONG AS I PROMISED MYSELF I WOULD MAKE IT LAST—SO I TURNED TO ALCOHOL AND WHATEVER OTHER DRUGS I COULD GET MY HANDS ON.

IT'S SPRING BREAK AND I'M VISITING HOME. BEING IN LA MEANT UNFETTERED ACCESS TO ALL THE COCAINE I COULD WANT, AND I WANTED SO MUCH. IT SHOULD HAVE OCCURRED TO ME A LONG TIME AGO THAT I HAD NO CONTROL, BUT I'D NEVER WANTED TO STOP SO I NEVER REALIZED I COULDN'T. BUT IT HAD BEEN YEARS SINCE DRUGS HAD TAKEN ME HOSTAGE AND MY NOSE WAS ALWAYS BLEEDING AND MY HEART WAS ALWAYS RACING AND I WAS SO VERY TIRED. BY NO MEANS DID I WANT TO STOP FOR GOOD, I JUST WANTED TO DO LESS... OR STOP AFTER A CERTAIN HOUR OF THE DAY... OR TAKE A LITTLE BREAK. TURNS OUT... I COULDN'T! I WAS SCARED. I FELT POWERLESS. THE WHOLE POINT OF COKE WAS IT WAS SUPPOSED TO MAKE ME FEEL POWERFUL!!

AN OLD FRIEND FROM HIGH SCHOOL UNEXPECTEDLY REACHED OUT, AND WE MADE A PLAN TO GO TO DINNER. HE HAD RECENTLY GOTTEN SOBER. HE TOLD ME ABOUT AA AND I FOUND MYSELF ASKING A LOT OF QUESTIONS. I DIDN'T KNOW WHY I WAS ASKING SO MANY QUESTIONS. YOU'D THINK THAT REALIZING I COULDN'T STOP DOING COKE WOULD MEAN REALIZING I WAS AN ADDICT,

BUT THE THOUGHT HAD NEVER OCCURRED TO ME. HE STARTED ASKING ME QUESTIONS ABOUT MY DRUG USE. I TRIED TO LAUGH IT OFF LIKE I ALWAYS DID. HE DIDN'T LAUGH WITH ME. INSTEAD HE TOLD ME I WAS GOING TO DIE. THAT CERTAINLY WASN'T THE FIRST TIME I'D HEARD THAT, BUT IT HAD NEVER SCARED ME. I WASN'T SCARED WHEN DOCTORS WERE LECTURING ME AFTER I AWOKE FROM OVERDOSING ON SOME "MYSTERY PILLS" MY DEALER GAVE ME AS A GIFT. I WASN'T SCARED WHEN FRIENDS CUT ME OFF BECAUSE THEY COULDN'T WATCH ME SLOWLY KILL MYSELF. I WASN'T SCARED WHEN I WAS GETTING CALLED INTO THE DEAN'S OFFICE FOR "COMMUNITY CONCERNS ABOUT MY ALLEGED SUBSTANCE MISUSE." FOR SOME REASON, THIS TIME, I WAS SCARED. I KNEW HE WAS RIGHT.

I AGREED TO GO TO A HEROIN ANONYMOUS MEETING WITH HIM. I DON'T KNOW WHY I WENT. I WAS STILL CERTAIN THAT I DIDN'T BELONG THERE. I WAS SURE THAT MY INABILITY TO STOP DOING DRUGS WAS VERY DIFFERENT FROM ANYONE ELSE'S INABILITY TO STOP DOING DRUGS. YET SOMETHING WAS DRAWING ME TO THAT MEETING. MAYBE IT WAS CURIOSITY. MAYBE IT WAS THE DESIRE TO CONFIRM THAT I WAS IN FACT DIFFERENT. MAYBE IT WAS GOD.

A FEW DAYS LATER I SHOWED UP TO THE PARK AND STOOD AT A DISTANCE WATCHING THE PEOPLE SMOKING AND LAUGHING OUTSIDE OF THE REC ROOM. THERE WERE SO MANY OF THEM AND THEY WERE ALL SO DIFFERENT. WHAT I KNEW ABOUT THE 12 STEP PROGRAMS CAME FROM BRIEF REFERENCES I SAW IN MOVIES, AND I HAD EXPECTED A GROUP OF SAD OLD MEN WHO WOULD SIT IN A CIRCLE IN A CHURCH BASEMENT, REMINISCING ON THE GLORY DAYS. BUT EVERYONE LOOKED SO COOL AND THEY LOOKED HAPPY TOO. IT SCARED ME. IF I HADN'T BEEN A LITTLE DRUNK, I WOULD HAVE TURNED AROUND AND LEFT. IT HADN'T EVEN OCCURRED TO ME THAT MAYBE I SHOULDN'T DRINK BEFORE A MEETING—I WAS SURE IT WAS SUFFICIENT THAT I WASN'T ON HEROIN.

I FOUND MY FRIEND, WE SAT DOWN, AND THE MEETING BEGAN. THE SPEAKER WAS AN OLDER MAN WHO LIVED A LIFE VERY DIFFERENT FROM MINE, BUT SOMEHOW IT WAS LIKE HE WAS TELLING MY STORY. HE TALKED ABOUT HIS RESTING STATE BEING RESTLESS, IRRITABLE, AND DISCONTENT. HE TALKED ABOUT HOW WHEN HE USED DRUGS FOR THE FIRST TIME, HE HAD FIGURED OUT THE SECRET TO TOLERATING LIFE. HE TALKED ABOUT HOW DRUGS EVENTUALLY STOPPED MAKING LIFE TOLERABLE AND RELIEVING HIM OF HIMSELF, BUT THEN HE COULDN'T STOP. HOW BY THAT POINT, HE USED DRUGS BECAUSE HE HAD HATED HIMSELF AND HE HATED HIMSELF BECAUSE OF HOW HE USED DRUGS. HE UNDERSTOOD ME. I WATCHED THE ROOM NODDING AT WHAT HE WAS SAYING AND I REALIZED THEY ALL UNDERSTOOD ME. BY THE END OF THE SPEAKER'S STORY, I HAD CRIED OFF HALF THE RHINESTONES I HAD GLUED AROUND MY EYES, AND I KNEW NOW THAT I HAD WHAT THESE PEOPLE HAD, AND I FELT SOMETHING THAT I HADN'T FELT IN A VERY LONG TIME: I FELT HOPE.

THE SPEAKER BEGAN TO CALL ON PEOPLE TO SHARE AND WHEN I LOOKED UP I SAW MY HAND IN THE AIR. I DIDN'T KNOW HOW IT HAD GOTTEN THERE AND IT WASN'T COMING DOWN— AS HARD AS I WILLED IT TO. HE CALLED ON ME AND I SAT STILL, GRIPPING MY SEAT FOR A MOMENT BEFORE WALKING TO THE FRONT OF THE ROOM AND BEHIND THE PODIUM. I STOOD THERE FOR A WHOLE MINUTE, WILLING WORDS TO COME OUT, BUT ALL THAT CAME OUT WERE SOBS. FIFTY FACES STARED AT ME WITH COMPLETE UNDERSTANDING. THEY STARTED TO CLAP AS I STOOD THERE SOBBING.

I FINALLY SPOKE. "I NEED TO SAY THIS NOW BEFORE I TALK MYSELF OUT OF IT." I SAID IN A SHAKY VOICE. "I THINK I'M AN ADDICT." I LOOKED AT THE POSTER OUTLINING THE STEPS AND SAID, "I AM POWERLESS OVER COKE AND MY LIFE IS SO UNMANAGEABLE AND I'M GOING TO TRY TO STOP... I PROMISE I'LL TRY."

AFTERWARDS PEOPLE SWARMED ME IN THE PARKING LOT. THEY HUGGED ME AND GAVE ME THEIR PHONE NUMBERS AND TOLD ME TO CALL. THEY SAID ALL SORTS OF OMINOUS THINGS LIKE "YOU CAN'T GET SOBER BUT WE CAN." I THOUGHT THEY WERE INSANE, BUT I NODDED LIKE THAT MADE PERFECT SENSE TO ME. THEY TOLD ME THAT I WAS INSPIRATIONAL AND BRAVE AND THAT THEY BELIEVED IN ME. I DID NOT BELIEVE IN ME AND I DON'T THINK ANYONE WHO KNEW ME DID EITHER SO IT FELT GOOD TO HEAR THAT SOMEBODY DID, EVEN IF IT WAS A BUNCH OF SEEMINGLY INSANE PEOPLE. THEY TOLD ME TO KEEP COMING BACK. I LIED AND TOLD THEM I WOULD, BUT I WAS PRETTY SURE I COULD FIGURE THIS THING OUT ON MY OWN WITHOUT GOING THROUGH THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TORTURE OF APOLOGIZING TO PEOPLE AND TELLING SOMEONE ALL MY SECRETS.

I'D LOVE TO TELL YOU THAT I NEVER USED AGAIN, BUT I DID. MANY TIMES. IN FACT, I USED THAT NIGHT. AS I WAS DUMPING THE REST OF MY STASH DOWN THE TOILET, I GOT A LITTLE BIT ON THE TOILET SEAT AND I AM EMBARRASSED TO INFORM YOU THAT THE NEXT THING I KNEW, I WAS SNORTING IT. THAT'S FAR FROM THE MOST DISGUSTING THING I'VE DONE IN MY ADDICTION. COCAINE ADDICTION IS REALLY NOT AS GLAMOROUS AS LANA DEL REY HAD LED MY TWEENAGED SELF TO IMAGINE.

WHAT I CAN TELL YOU IS I KEPT MY PROMISE. AFTER THAT NIGHT, I NEVER STOPPED TRYING MY BEST, EVEN WHEN MY BEST WASN'T ENOUGH TO KEEP ME SOBER. WHAT I CAN TELL YOU IS THAT AFTER THAT NIGHT, DRUGS STOPPED WORKING. THE DELUSION WAS SHATTERED. EVERY TIME I RELAPSED I KNEW EXACTLY WHAT I WAS DOING AND ALL I COULD THINK ABOUT WERE ALL THE FACES OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO BELIEVED IN ME. AS SOON AS I GOT HIGH I WISHED THAT I WASN'T.

EVENTUALLY I GOT SOBER. I'D LOVE TO TELL YOU THAT AS SOON AS I DID, IT WAS HAPPILY EVER AFTER. I FEEL LIKE THAT'S WHAT I'M SUPPOSED TO SAY, BUT IT'S NOT TRUE. IT WASN'T UNTIL I STOPPED DOING DRUGS THAT I REALIZED EXACTLY WHY I STARTED DOING THEM IN THE FIRST PLACE. THAT'S THE THING ABOUT ADDICTION, THE DRUGS AREN'T THE PROBLEM. THE DRUGS ARE THE WAY THAT YOU ARE ATTEMPTING TO COPE WITH THE PROBLEM.

THE PROBLEM WAS THAT I NEVER GREW UP. UNDERNEATH IT ALL, I WAS STILL A 10-YEAR-OLD GIRL, TERRIFIED OF EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE. THE PROBLEM WAS THAT SO MANY PEOPLE HAVE HAD SEX WITH MY BODY WHILE I WAS TOO DRUNK TO NOTICE, AND I REMAINED TOO HIGH TO NOTICE THAT IT HAD TRAUMATIZED ME. THE PROBLEM WAS I HAD NEVER FELT LIKE I BELONGED ANYWHERE, AND I FELT LIKE IF I DIDN'T PUT ON A SHOW TO MASK MY TRUE SELF, NOBODY WOULD EVER ACCEPT ME, MUCH LESS LOVE ME. THE PROBLEM WAS THAT WHEN I LOOKED AT WHAT LIFE HAD TO OFFER, IT DIDN'T FEEL LIKE ENOUGH TO MAKE IT ALL WORTH THE TROUBLE.

THE PROBLEM WAS THAT WHILE EVERYONE ELSE WAS LEARNING TO REGULATE THEIR EMOTIONS AND INTERACT WITH OTHER PEOPLE AND LEARN WHO THEY ARE, I WAS GETTING HIGH. SUDDENLY I WAS 20 YEARS OLD BUT I WAS ALSO KIND OF 15. THE PROBLEM WAS THAT ALL I COULD EVER THINK ABOUT WAS MY FUCKING SELF! MY PROBLEMS AND MY RESENTMENTS AND MY SELF PITY AND WHAT EVERYONE THOUGHT OF ME AND WHAT I WANTED AND WHAT I WASN'T GETTING AND HOW UNFAIR IT ALL WAS. THE ONLY WAY I KNEW HOW TO STOP THINKING ABOUT MYSELF WAS TO GET SO DRUNK OR HIGH THAT I COULDN'T THINK AT ALL.

I CAME INTO AA THINKING THEY WOULD PITY ME AND CODDLE ME AND NURSE ME BACK TO HEALTH LIKE THE HELPLESS LITTLE BABY THAT I THOUGHT I WAS. THEY DID NOT. I REMEMBER CALLING MY SPONSOR WHEN I HAD ABOUT 3 WEEKS SOBER THE FIRST TIME AROUND AND WHINING TO HER ABOUT ALL MY PROBLEMS.

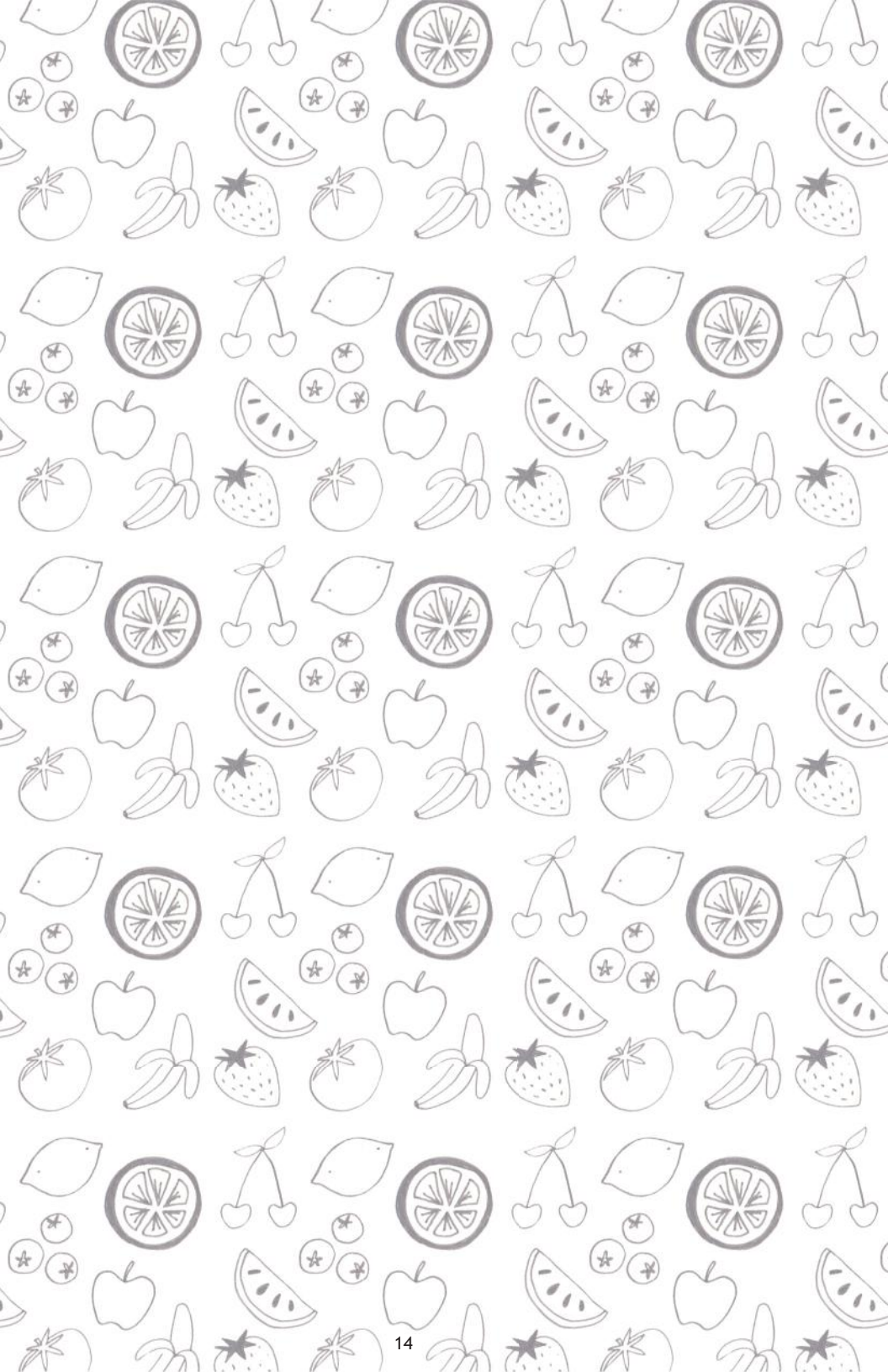
I ASKED HER WHAT TO DO AND SHE TOLD ME THAT TO FEEL BETTER I'D HAVE TO STOP TALKING ABOUT MY PROBLEMS. SHE SUGGESTED I CALL SOMEONE AND HELP THEM WITH THEIR PROBLEMS. I TOLD HER I COULDN'T POSSIBLY BE HELPFUL TO ANYBODY, I WAS ONLY 3 WEEKS SOBER! SHE SAID "THEN CALL SOMEONE WITH 2 WEEKS SOBER, YOU KNOW MORE THAN THEM." I THOUGHT THAT WAS THE RUDEST THING I'D EVER HEARD. BUT I DID IT. AS ALWAYS, SHE WAS RIGHT—IT DID MAKE ME FEEL BETTER. IT TOOK A WHILE FOR ME TO BE HUMBLE ENOUGH TO JUST FOLLOW ALL OF AA'S SIMPLE INSTRUCTIONS, BUT AFTER A FEW RELAPSES I WAS SUFFICIENTLY HUMBLED AND WILLING. NOW IT'S BEEN A YEAR, AND EVERYTHING THEY PROMISED ME IS COMING TRUE. I AM LIVING A LIFE BEYOND MY WILDEST DREAMS.

I GO TO A MEETING ALMOST EVERY DAY NOW AND I INTRODUCE MYSELF AS AN ADDICT AND AN ALCOHOLIC AGAIN AND AGAIN, AND I BELIEVE THAT SO LONG AS I DON'T FORGET WHAT IT WAS LIKE TO SAY IT THAT FIRST TIME, I'LL HAVE 1 YEAR SOBER ON DECEMBER 19TH.

THANK YOU FOR LETTING ME SHARE.



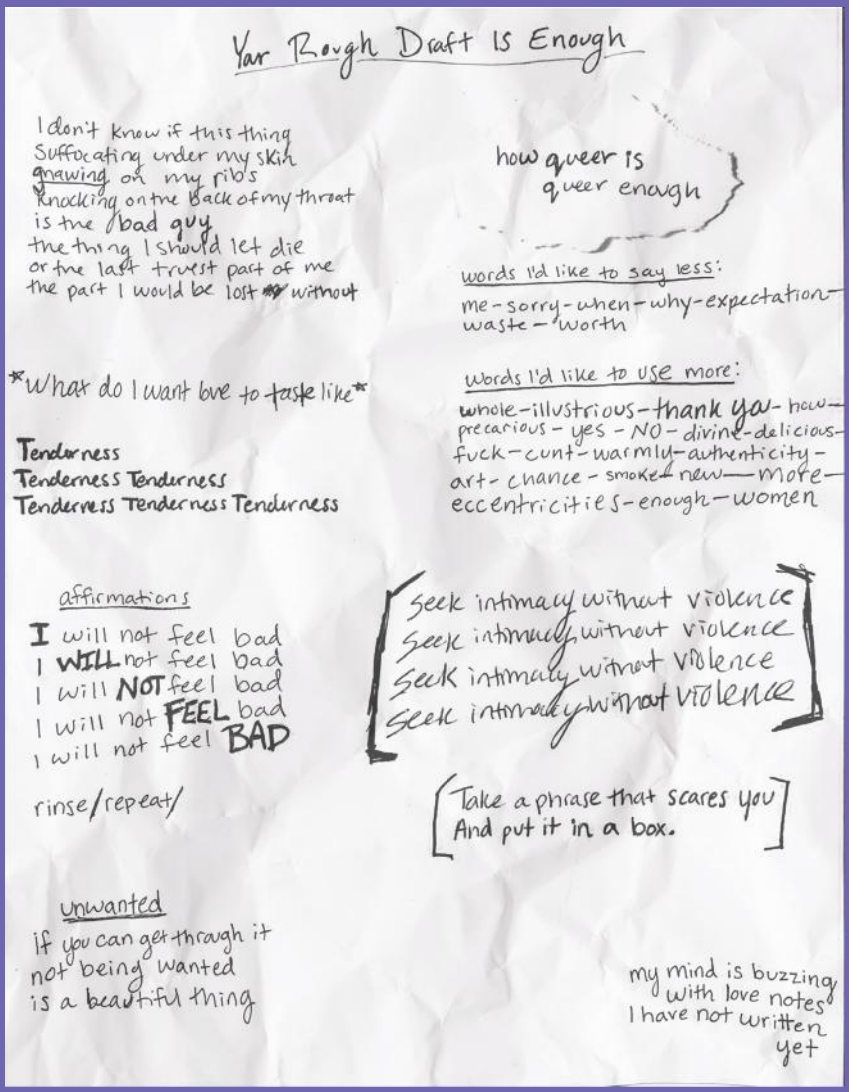
Art by audrey athena



DRAFTING



Sara Carpenter



Yar Rough Draft Is Enough

I don't know if this thing
Suffocating under my skin
gnawing on my rib's
Knocking on the back of my throat
is the bad guy
the thing I should let die
or the last truest part of me
the part I would be lost without

how queer is
queer enough

words I'd like to say less:
me - sorry - when - why - expectation - waste - worth

words I'd like to use more:
whole - illustrious - thank you - how - precarious - yes - NO - divine - delicious - fuck - cunt - warmly - authenticity - art - chance - smoke - new - more - eccentricities - enough - women

What do I want love to taste like

Tenderness
Tenderness Tenderness
Tenderness Tenderness Tenderness

affirmations

I will not feel bad
I WILL not feel bad
I will NOT feel bad
I will not FEEL bad
I will not feel BAD

rinse/repeat/

Seek intimacy without violence
Seek intimacy without violence
Seek intimacy without violence
Seek intimacy without violence

Take a phrase that scares you
And put it in a box.

unwanted

if you can get through it
not being wanted
is a beautiful thing

my mind is buzzing
with love notes
I have not written
yet

A Study in Being Different People:

you bleed i bleed

a love letter to theater by Sophie Hall

Actor one enters
They pull out a prop knife. They begin to chop something. carrots?
They're cutting fast. Angry.
The knife slips

The character bleeds.

Not scripted not intended, push back show?

Cuts.
deep.

ACTOR ONE:

It's not just physical. emotional but inevitable? When you audition for a character you're similar to, great! You probably have a better chance at getting it! You're authentic, you're fresh. Casting directors LOVE that shit. But suddenly that character experiences something you've experienced. It cuts
deep.
You break you fall into it you're bleeding
internally.
Bleeding?
Eternally
It doesn't go away after the show run it
Influences.

Is this your first time? You'll always remember your first time. You're fresh. Casting directors love that
shit.

Actor two enters.

ACTOR TWO:

The way I feel about my art is similar to the way I feel about my
Identity?
fluid.
or trapped into
Just one!

supposed to feel like a woman, or even feel like a man, as if I'm allowed to defy norms as long as I
make up my mind

Trapped
When I am not either
I'm caught in between
indistinctively.
As an artist it's the same!
expected to identify as one thing.
Can't make mistakes. Not allowed to try things without them defining who I am or becoming commodified. Capitalization is everything. You're an object, they do what they want with you.
I dont know
I'm still new to this?
That's performance isn't it? It's

Actor three enters. Or really they've always been there?

ACTOR THREE:
Fueled me to find the artist I am. Who i am. Who am i. I am fueled i am gutteral i am

Thriving on discovery, the new and unknown.

Unknown because I'm just beginning?

I'm still new to this and yet

I'm defined as an artist by my experiences,

An upbringing of lack

lack in all the senses

money, love, agency

what a cliché!





yet still making time to make
Create

Thats what acting is isn't it?

Isn't it.

ACTOR ONE:

It's always been my priority to make space to hold

Space.

My access

my recognition of artistic elitism

Art is sacred importance

Something you take into your own hands

My hands

You take into your hands yourself and you're held and you cultivate this life and then you're thrown on stage.

Is it yourself you're performing? Is it someone else? Are you a performance? Who are you?

It's the fight for the art that drives me, that I crave. My fight is what makes me

relish in it

ACTOR THREE:

I can't distinctly pinpoint what I want to create, but through theatre

Through performance

I create I aim to curate a sort of

energy:

ALL ACTORS:

When you're a child and play house, gender roles become irrelevant. Paper, string, and physical movement become your costume. Dance is language and you can feel touch despite being out of reach. Imagination smells the ocean from your bedroom and suddenly you can hold the sky.

ACTOR TWO:

Theatre takes the element of play and recreates life in ways to comprehend and to complicate. I've lived by the idea that theatre exists to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. Play is what transposes this, so you could say plays are aptly named.

You can play as yourself
maybe its uncomfortable
but theatre is meant to be real.

Theatre is

revolutionary

a distinctly unique medium.

dance, song, craftsmanship,

an immeasurable amount of tangible art forms are used within one creation

as well as the most revolutionary: the recreation of life before our eyes. life.

But what do i know?

I'm still new to this

i'm


FLORA

& FAUNA

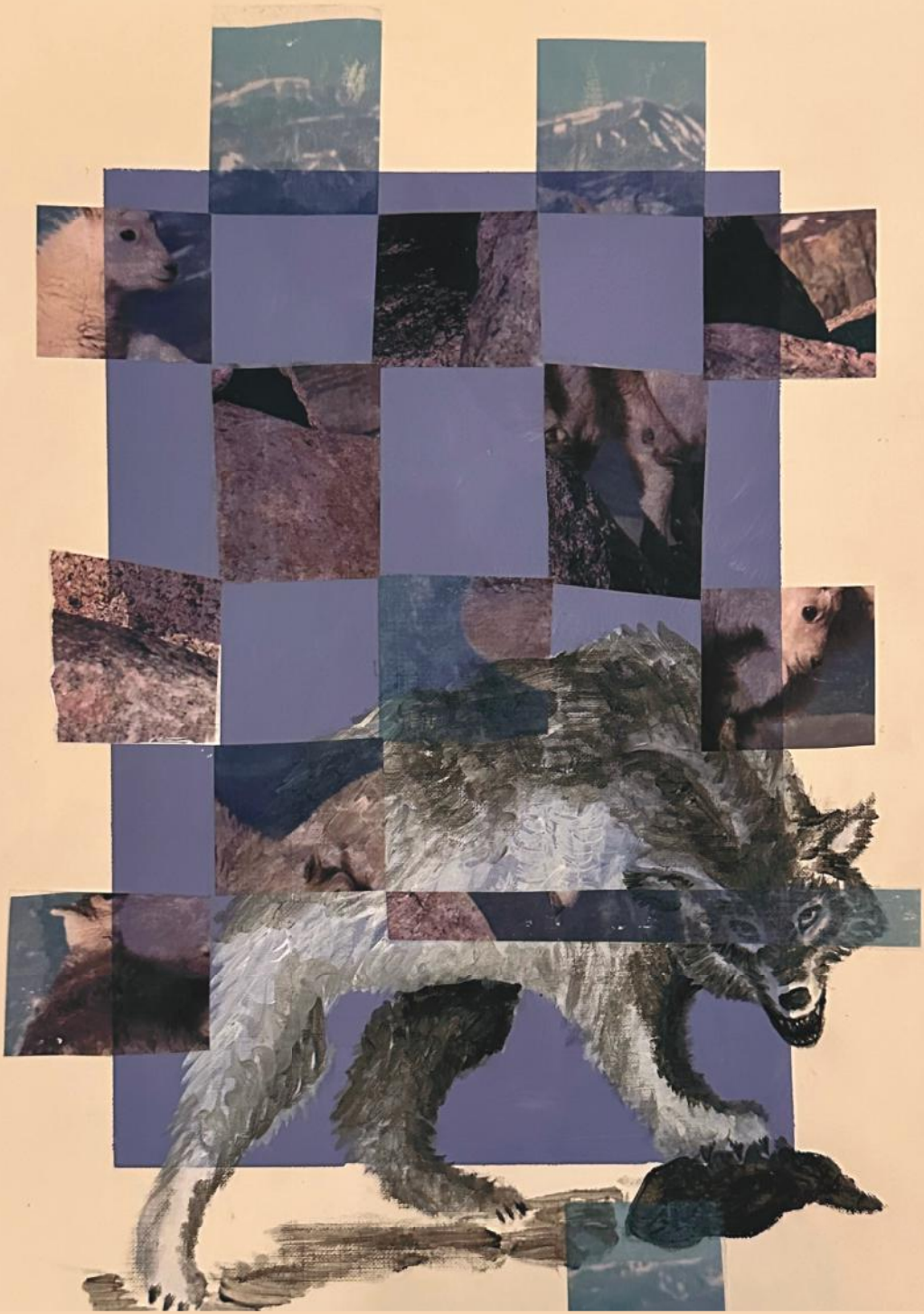
"No Canyon Hills!": From La Tuna to MUNA, the rallying cry heard 'round LA

Cam Reid

ALONG THE NORTHERN FRINGE OF LOS ANGELES, WHERE THE CITY SPILLS INTO THE VERUNDA MOUNTAINS BY WAY OF TUJUNGA AND SUNLAND, ROLLING MOUNTAINS OF CHAPARRAL AND OAK WOODLAND MAKE A MORE-THAN-SUITABLE HABITAT FOR CREATURES OTHERWISE OUTCAST FROM MUCH OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA DUE TO THE GROWING SPRAWL OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT. IN 2003, LA CITY COUNCIL APPROVED THE CONSTRUCTION OF A 300-ACRE LUXURY HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IN THIS AREA CALLED CANYON HILLS. THE PROPOSED CANYON HILLS PROJECT WOULD INCLUDE INTENSE GRADING OF THE LAND, AND MANY LOCAL EXPERTS BELIEVE THE PROJECT WOULD CAUSE SIGNIFICANT ECOLOGICAL DISRUPTION TO THE SITE. THE DEVELOPERS FOR THE CANYON HILLS PROJECT WERE GRANTED A PERMIT IN 2005—GOOD FOR 20 YEARS. THUS FAR, THEY HAVEN'T STARTED CONSTRUCTION. BUT FOR THE DEVELOPERS, TIME PRESSURE IS ON. THEY RECENTLY FILED FOR A GRADING PERMIT WITH THE LA DEPARTMENT OF CITY PLANNING, WHICH WOULD ALLOW THE DEVELOPERS TO RESHAPE THE MOUNTAINS UNDER WHICH THE LUXURY HOMES WILL BE BUILT. THIS LAND IS HOME TO SEVERAL ENDANGERED ANIMAL SPECIES, INCLUDING THE BUMBLE BEE, MOUNTAIN LION, AND RED-TAILED HAWK. THERE'S ALSO A FANTASTIC ARRAY OF PLANT LIFE, SO GREAT IT HAS CAPTURED THE INTEREST OF LA-AREA BOTANISTS AND HOBBYISTS, AND EVEN LED THEM TO ORGANIZE.

NO CANYON HILLS FORMED IN EARLY 2023, FIRST STEMMING FROM A BOTANY HOBBYIST INSTAGRAM GROUPCHAT. WHEN THE HOBBYISTS CAUGHT WORD OF THE IMMINENT HOUSING DEVELOPMENT IN AN EXTRAORDINARILY ECOLOGICALLY RICH LANDSCAPE JUST OUTSIDE OF LA, THEY SPRANG TO ACTION AND CAME TOGETHER UNDER THE MONIKER-SLASH-RALLY-CALL "NO CANYON HILLS." WITHIN THE LAST YEAR, THE ONCE-UNOFFICIAL GROUP HAS GROWN INTO A FULL-FLEDGED DIRECT ACTION ORGANIZATION WITH A PUBLIC AWARENESS CAMPAIGN MAKING WAVES ALL AROUND LOS ANGELES. BUT HOW DID A GROUP OF LA-AREA BOTANY ENTHUSIASTS BECOME POLITICAL CAMPAIGNERS?

THE LAND THREATENED BY THE CANYON HILLS DEVELOPMENT IS PART OF THE UNCEDED TERRITORY AND ANCESTRAL HOMELANDS OF THE FERNANDENO TATAVIAM BAND OF MISSION INDIANS AND THE GABRIELENO (TONGVA) BAND OF MISSION INDIANS, WHO HAVE SHOWN SUPPORT FOR ANTI-COLONIAL LAND CONSERVATION EFFORTS IN THIS REGION FOR GENERATIONS. OVER THE LAST 20 YEARS SINCE THE CANYON HILLS DEVELOPMENT WAS FIRST APPROVED BY LA CITY COUNCIL, THE LAND NORTH OF LA HAS BECOME AN INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT HABITAT TO PLANT AND ANIMAL SPECIES AS THE LA METRO AREA GROWS AND PUSHES FURTHER TOWARDS THE NORTHERN MOUNTAINS.



THIS ENCROACHING OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT ONTO WILD SPACES—KNOWN BY SOME AS "URBAN CREEP"—IS A BIG PROBLEM FOR ECOSYSTEM HEALTH UP AND DOWN THE WEST COAST. AND IS A MAJOR CONCERN FOR FIRE MITIGATION EXPERTS. THE PROPOSED CANYON HILLS DEVELOPMENT WILL OFFER MILLION-DOLLAR HOMES IN A LAFD-CLASSIFIED "VERY HIGH FIRE SAFETY SEVERITY ZONE." THESE HOMES WILL BE DIFFICULT TO DEFEND FROM WILDFIRES, AND WILL IMPEDE PREVENTATIVE WILDFIRE MITIGATION IN THE AREA. THIS REGION WAS ALREADY THE SITE OF THE INFAMOUS LA TUNA FIRES IN 2016, IMPACTING THE LIVES AND LIVELIHOODS OF THOUSANDS OF CALIFORNIANS.

IN EARLY WINTER 2023, COMMUNITY MEMBERS IN TUJUNGA BECAME AWARE THAT THE DEVELOPERS OF THE PROPOSED CANYON HILLS LUXURY COMMUNITY HAD APPLIED FOR GRADING PERMITS AFTER 16 YEARS OF INACTIVITY WITHIN THE CANYON HILLS PROJECT. THIS INFORMATION FOUND ITS WAY BY WORD-OF-MOUTH INTO THE BOTANY HOBBYIST GROUP CHAT POPULATED BY LA-AREA PLANT ENTHUSIASTS FROM MANY WALKS OF LIFE, INCLUDING OTIS SCHOOL OF ARTS AND DESIGN PROFESSOR EMMA KEMP (SHE/THEY), AND BOTANIST-BY-DAY, QUEER-ARTIST-BY-NIGHT HALEY HOPKINS (THEY/THEM). ALONG WITH OTHER BOTANISTS RANGING FROM TOTAL EXPERT TO COMPLETE NOVICE, HOPKINS BEGAN ORGANIZING TRIPS OUT TO THE PROPOSED CANYON HILLS DEVELOPMENT SITE IN ORDER TO COLLECT ECOLOGICAL DATA ABOUT THE AREA, MOSTLY, WHAT KINDS OF PLANT AND ANIMAL SPECIES COULD BE FOUND. HOPKINS CALLS THESE INFORMAL TRIPS "BIO BLITZES," AND THESE TRIPS HAVE BEEN A KEY PART OF THE NCH PROJECT. THE BIO BLITZES HAVE GIVEN SMALL-TIME RESEARCHERS THE ABILITY TO MAKE BIG DISCOVERIES, LIKE THE PRESENCE (AND ABUNDANCE!) OF THREATENED AND ENDANGERED SPECIES IN THE PROPOSED CANYON HILLS SITE. FIRED UP BY THE DATA FROM THE BIO BLITZES AND ORGANIZED LOOSELY AROUND A PASSION FOR LOCAL CONSERVATION, KEMP, ALONG WITH SEVERAL OTHERS, BEGAN WORKING IN SOLIDARITY WITH LOCAL INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES BY REACHING OUT TO THEIR NETWORKS TO INVITE COLLABORATORS ONTO A NO CANYON HILLS PROJECT. PEOPLE FROM THE DESIGN WORLD, AS WELL AS LOCAL HISTORIANS, CULTURE, AND LEGAL EXPERTS BEGAN CHIPPING IN, AND SOON, NO CANYON HILLS WAS FORMED IN EARNEST AS A NOT-FOR-PROFIT PROJECT AND COMMUNITY COALITION SUPPORTING THE ECOLOGICAL VITALITY OF THE VERDUGO MOUNTAINS, AND THE ANTI-COLONIAL LAND CONSERVATION PROJECTS STARTED IN LOCAL INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES.

THE FIRST OFFICIAL COMMUNITY INTEREST MEETING HELD BY NCH WAS HELD IN TUJUNGA IN SPRING 2023, IN A SMALL NEIGHBORHOOD CHURCH. KEMP RECALLS THAT THE CHURCH WAS ONCE USED AS A SECRET MEETUP LOCATION FOR LESBIAN SOCIAL GROUPS, AND HAS ONLY A SMALL RELIGIOUS CONGREGATION BUT A ROBUST COMMUNITY NETWORK.



Michelle Plotkin

KEMP CALLS THE EVENT A "VISIONING NIGHT," AND SAYS THAT THE IDEA OF COMING TOGETHER TO ENVISION A FUTURE OF POSITIVE CHANGE THAT COMMUNITIES MEMBERS ARE DIRECTLY INVOLVED IN, AN EVENT WHOSE AGENDA IS SET AROUND IMAGINING A HOPEFUL FUTURE, WAS FAMILIAR TO SOME OF HER COLLABORATORS—NAMELY, THE QUEER ARTISTS WHO WERE ON BOARD FROM THE JUMP. BUT FOR OTHER SORTS OF THINKERS—LIKE RECREATIONALISTS, POLITICIANS, AND LEGAL EXPERTS WHO ALSO BECAME INVOLVED IN NCH EARLY ON, THE IDEA OF A "VISIONING NIGHT" WAS AN UNFAMILIAR CONCEPT THAT LEFT MANY WONDERING WHAT TO EXPECT. THE EVENT PUT THE BUILDING AT CAPACITY, WITH OVER 200 ATTENDEES BOTH IN-PERSON AND ON ZOOM. IT WAS A HUGE HAPPENING, AND ONLY A COUPLE OF MONTHS AFTER A CURIOSITY ABOUT THE CANYON HILLS SITE WAS FLOATED IN THE BOTANY HOBBYIST IG CHAT. FROM THERE, THE NETWORK EXPANDED EVEN MORE WILDLY, AND NOW, NCH HOSTS A LARGE SWATH OF INDEPENDENT RESEARCH SUPPORTING THE RE-EVALUATION OF THE CANYON HILLS BUILDING PERMITS, AS WELL AS A GRASSROOTS MEDIA AND POLITICAL CAMPAIGN THAT HAS TAKEN THE LA AREA BY STORM. YOU MIGHT RECOGNIZE THEIR COMMUNITY-CREATED POSTER SERIES, OR HAVE SPOTTED SOME OF THEIR MERCH AT LOCAL CONCERTS AND COMMUNITY EVENTS. FRUITSLICE'S EDITOR-IN-CHIEF CHLOE OLOREN MET NCH PEOPLE FIRST AT THE LA COUNTY BOOK FAIR, AND THEN AGAIN AT A MUNA CONCERT. MAYBE YOU'LL SEE THEM AROUND SOMEWHERE SOON?

CAN'T WAIT TO GET INVOLVED WITH NCH? VISIT THEIR WEBSITE (NOCANYONHILLS.ORG), FOLLOW THEIR INSTAGRAM (@NOCANYONHILLS), OR SEND AN EMAIL ASKING FOR MORE INFORMATION (NOCANYONHILLS@GMAIL.COM). NCH IS ALWAYS ON THE LOOKOUT FOR COLLABORATORS, AND THEY'LL TAKE ANY WAY YOU HAVE TO HELP. WHETHER YOU'RE AN ARTIST, WRITER, SCHOLAR, DESIGNER, SCIENTIST, ORGANIZER, HOBBYIST, NOVICE PLANT EXPERT, OR CREATOR OF ANY KIND, AS LONG AS YOU HAVE AN INTEREST IN LOCAL ECOSYSTEM HEALTH, THEN THERE'S PROBABLY SOMEONE ALREADY DOING WORK THAT INTERESTS YOU AT NCH. AND IF NOT, EVEN BETTER, YOU'RE JUST AN EMAIL MESSAGE OR TWO AWAY FROM BEING A PART OF THE GRASSROOTS NETWORK THAT HOLDS UP THIS ORGANIZATION, FROM COMMUNITY MEETUPS IN TUJUNGA TO LABOR OF LOVE OF ENTHUSIASTS OF ALL SORTS.

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READ MORE AT WWW.NOCANYONHILLS.COM, WHICH WAS A FRUITFUL SOURCE FOR MUCH OF THE INFORMATION IN THIS ARTICLE.

Michelle Plotkin



Cultivate

Rosie D'Ercole

SOMEHOW THE PROCESS
OF SITTING STILL
IS ALLOWING SOMETHING NEW
TO SPROUT FROM THE SPRINGS

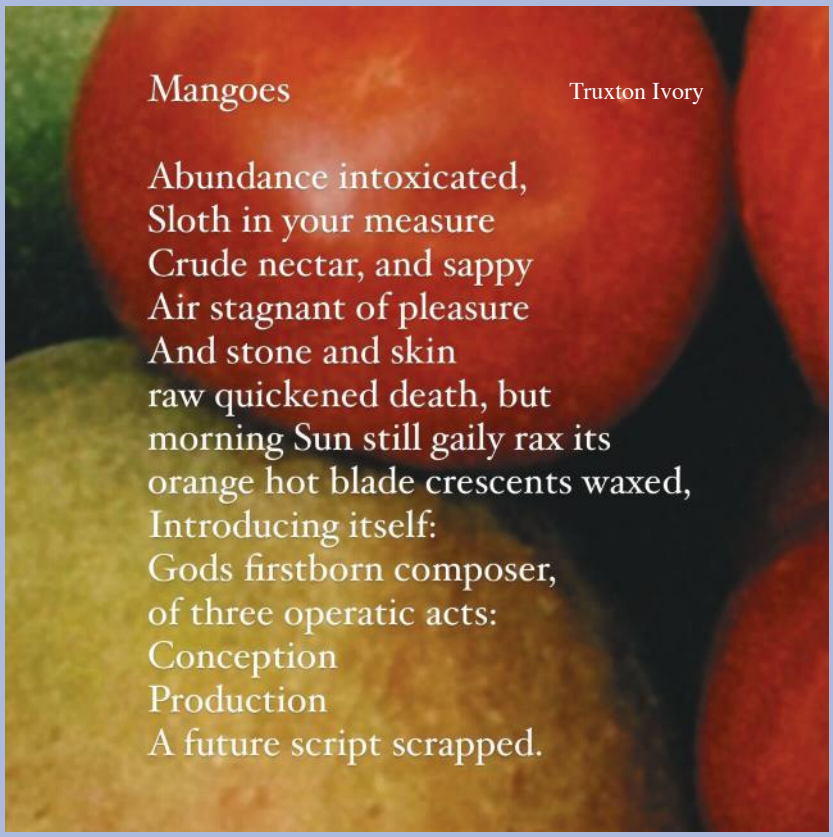
WE'RE CULTIVATING
GREEN STEMS SHOOTING
UNCONVENTIONALLY
FROM THE STRONGEST FOUNDATIONS
DEEP ROOTED IN SOIL
UNDERNEATH OUR FEET

THIS ROUTE IS NOT HELD
BY BANDS
BUT IN THE STRENGTH OF THE ROCKS ON OUR LAND
THAT GLITTER LIKE CRYSTAL IN THE CRACKS
THAT WE CLIMB IN THE MORNING SUN

WE ARE WALKING ON TERRITORY
YET TO BE EXPLORED
ANCHORED IN THE LEAVES
CLUSTERED AROUND OUR FEET

IT'S MARKED EACH MIDNIGHT
EVERY MINUTE OF EVERY DAY
BY BREATH SHARED
GREEN FINGERS INTERTWINED
CULTIVATING THE UNCONVENTIONAL




Mangoes
Truxton Ivory
Abundance intoxicated,
Sloth in your measure
Crude nectar, and sappy
Air stagnant of pleasure
And stone and skin
raw quickened death, but
morning Sun still gaily rax its
orange hot blade crescents waxed,
Introducing itself:
Gods firstborn composer,
of three operatic acts:
Conception
Production
A future script scrapped.

Maren Detlefs, You Can't Censor G(r)ay: A Deep Dive into Oscar Wilde

Maren Detlefs

THE FIRST TIME I READ THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY, BY OSCAR WILDE, I READ THE CENSORED VERSION. EVEN UPON FINISHING THAT EDITION, WHERE THE EXPLICITLY HOMOSEXUAL LANGUAGE WAS CUT AND BUTCHERED WITHOUT WILDE'S KNOWLEDGE OR CONSENT, IT WAS ABUNDANTLY CLEAR TO ME THAT BASIL WAS GAY AND IN LOVE WITH DORIAN. I FOUND THIS INCREDIBLY INSPIRING. A PUBLISHER HAD TRIED TO PRUNE THE QUEERNESS FROM WILDE'S WRITING, AND THE TASK HAD PROVEN ITSELF IMPOSSIBLE. CUTTING EXPLICIT DIALOGUE WOULD NEVER BE ENOUGH BECAUSE WILDE WOVE ELEMENTS OF HIS IDENTITY AND LIFE INTO EVERY FIBER OF HIS ART. THIS MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR SOCIETY TO IGNORE HIM. HIS STORIES CONTINUE TO BE TOLD, NEVER BRUSHING OVER HIS SEXUALITY, AND INSPIRING OTHER QUEER WRITERS WITH EVERY READING.

FOR THOSE WHO HAVEN'T READ THE PICTURE OF DORIAN GRAY, PLEASE DO. I KNOW THE DENSITY OF 19TH-CENTURY LANGUAGE CAN BE INTIMIDATING, BUT YOU WON'T REGRET IT. I DRAGGED MY FEET THROUGH IT THE FIRST TIME I READ IT, BUT WHEN I REACHED THE END, I HAD TO ADMIT ITS BRILLIANCE. THAT FINAL SCENE WILL ALWAYS STAY WITH ME. I RECENTLY READ THE UNCENSORED VERSION AND LOVED IT EVEN MORE. IT IS TRULY ONE OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL BOOKS I'VE READ. THE AESTHETIC IDEAS OF "ART FOR ART'S SAKE" ARE EVIDENT IN IT. BUT, IF YOU WANT TO FINISH THIS ARTICLE WITHOUT TAKING A 65,105-WORD INTERLUDE, I'VE INCLUDED A SUMMARY.

IT BEGINS IN THE STUDIO OF BASIL, A TALENTED ARTIST. HE HAS FOUND A NEW MUSE IN A YOUNG MAN NAMED DORIAN GRAY AND IS DISCUSSING HIM WITH HIS FRIEND, LORD HENRY. DURING THIS VISIT, HENRY AND DORIAN MEET EACH OTHER, HENRY BEGINS TO MANIPULATE DORIAN'S SUSCEPTIBLE, INNOCENT MIND, AND BASIL PAINTS HIS MASTERPIECE: A PORTRAIT OF DORIAN. UNDER HENRY'S INFLUENCE, DORIAN WISHES THAT THE PORTRAIT WOULD GROW OLD AND BEAR THE BRUNT OF HIS SINS, WHILE HE WOULD REMAIN FOREVER YOUNG AND UNTOUCHED BY TROUBLES. HE GETS HIS WISH AND TAKES FULL ADVANTAGE OF IT. WILDE FOCUSES ON THEMES OF VANITY, MORALITY, AND THE VALUES OF BEAUTY AND INTELLECT. BY THE END OF THE STORY, DORIAN HAS DEVELOPED A REPUTATION FOR DEBAUCHERY AND EVIL DEEDS, GOING SO FAR AS TO MURDER BASIL. HE ATTEMPTS TO ATONE FOR WHAT


Nicky Wittkopf

HE'S DONE BY DESTROYING THE PORTRAIT, NOW WEARY WITH AGE, TWISTED WITH CRUELTY, AND COVERED IN BLOOD, AND IN THE PROCESS, ENDS HIS OWN LIFE.

WILDE STARTS INCLUDING HOMOEROTIC SUBTEXT FROM THE GET-GO, THOUGH IT ISN'T APPARENT UPON FIRST READ. THE NOVEL BEGINS WITH THE FOLLOWING A SENTENCE: "THE STUDIO WAS FILLED WITH THE RICH ODOUR OF ROSES, AND WHEN THE LIGHT SUMMER WIND STIRRED AMIDST THE TREES OF THE GARDEN THERE CAME THROUGH THE OPEN DOOR THE HEAVY SCENT OF THE LILAC, OR THE MORE DELICATE PERFUME OF THE PINK-FLOWERING THORN." IT OPENS WITH A FLOURISH, DRAWING THE READER INTO A WORLD OF VICTORIAN DANDYISM. IT'S A TRANQUIL SCENE, SUCH A STARK CONTRAST TO HOW THE STORY WILL END, BUT REMEMBER THAT THIS IS WILDE'S WRITING, SO THIS SINGLE SENTENCE IS A SIGNIFICANT MOMENT OF FORESHADOWING. FLOWERS HELD SPECIAL SIGNIFICANCE IN THE VICTORIAN TIMES. THEY HAD ASSIGNED MEANINGS AND WERE OFTEN USED TO SEND SECRET MESSAGES TO LOVERS, FRIENDS, OR ENEMIES. WILDE LEFT HIS MARK ON THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS IN THE FORM OF THE GREEN CARNATION, NOW RECOGNIZED AS A SYMBOL FOR WILDE HIMSELF, AS WELL AS HOMOSEXUALITY. THEREFORE, IT CANNOT BE A COINCIDENCE THAT THE FLOWERS HE CHOSE TO OPEN HIS NOVEL ARE LADEN WITH ROMANTIC CONTEXTS.

IT ALL BEGINS WITH A ROSE, THE CLASSIC SYMBOL OF LOVE. HOWEVER, HE KEEPS THE COLOR HIDDEN. I THINK ANY COLOR WORKS IN THIS CASE. THE WHITE ROSE REFLECTS DORIAN'S STARTING INNOCENCE AND BASIL'S LOVE AND PURE ARTISTIC DEVOTION. IN CONTRAST, A PASSIONATE RED ROSE SUGGESTS WHAT IS TO COME WITH DORIAN'S INFATUTION WITH LORD HENRY AND DISASTROUS FLINGS. KNOWING WILDE, IT'S LIKELY BOTH AT ONCE. BY MENTIONING ONE FLOWER, HE IS ABLE TO FORESHADOW THE VARIOUS TYPES OF LOVE HIS CHARACTERS HAVE FOR ONE ANOTHER. TO CUT THIS, YOU WOULD NEED TO TAKE OUT EVERY MENTION OF A FLOWER, AND WHEN THE STORY OPENS IN A GARDEN, THAT SIMPLY ISN'T FEASIBLE. TAKE THAT PUBLISHERS.

LILACS CAN EITHER REPRESENT THE FIRST EMOTIONS OF LOVE OR BE A REMINDER OF AN OLD LOVE. I THINK THE FIRST EMOTIONS OF LOVE ARE MORE FITTING IN THIS CASE, AS BASIL'S FEELINGS FOR DORIAN QUICKLY BECOME CLEAR IN THIS CHAPTER. IT ALSO FORESHADOWS DORIAN'S INTRODUCTION TO LORD HENRY AND HOW QUICKLY HE BECOMES ENAMORED BY THE HEDONISTIC IDEAS THAT HENRY PLANTS. ON TOP OF THAT, LILACS WERE WORN BY WIDOWS IN THIS ERA AS A SYMBOL OF MEMORY, ADDING THAT NECESSARY TOUCH

Michelle Plotkin



OF TRAGEDY. I'M TEMPTED TO THINK OF THIS FLOWER AS A DIRECT SYMBOL OF DORIAN'S CHARACTER ARC. WHITE LILACS SYMBOLIZE THE PURITY AND INNOCENCE OF YOUTH, AND WHEN ASSOCIATIONS OF FIRST LOVE AND LOSS FOLLOW THIS UP, YOU CAN SEE THE OUTLINES OF DORIAN'S STORY TAKING SHAPE. HE GATHERS LOTS OF ATTENTION FROM BOTH WOMEN AND MEN, WHILE HIS OWN FANCIES ARE FLEETING AND END IN HEARTBREAK (ON THE PART OF THE OTHER PERSON.)

EVEN THE THORNS REVEAL DETAILS ABOUT EACH CHARACTER AND THEIR JOURNEYS. PINK FLOWERS REPRESENT GRACE, JOY, AND INNOCENCE, CONTINUING WILDE'S ALLUSIONS TO DORIAN'S YOUTHFUL INNOCENCE AT THIS POINT. THE THORNS THEMSELVES SYMBOLIZE SACRIFICE AND ADVERSARY. THEY PAINT A PICTURE OF PAIN AND PLEASURE, A RELATIONSHIP DEALT WITH IN THIS CHAPTER THROUGH BASIL'S EXPERIENCE. HE'S TERRIFIED THAT DORIAN MEETING HENRY WILL LEAD TO LOSING HIM—AND HE'S COMPLETELY RIGHT—BUT HE LETS IT HAPPEN ANYWAY. WHEN HE PAINTS DORIAN'S PORTRAIT, HE PUTS ALL HIS LOVE INTO IT, I THINK HOPING THAT HE CAN CAPTURE HIS ESSENCE BEFORE HENRY CAN DIG HIS CLAWS INTO HIM. BUT OF COURSE, IT ENDS UP GOING THE OPPOSITE WAY. DORIAN USES THE PORTRAIT FOR HIS PERSONAL GAIN, DISCOVERING THE LIMITS OF HIS PLEASURE, AND LEAVING PAIN WHEREVER HE GOES. BASIL'S LOVE—AND EVENTUALLY HIS LIFE—ARE SACRIFICED FOR THIS TO HAPPEN.

WILDE CONTINUES HIS PATTERN OF SHOWING CHARACTER THROUGH FLOWERS THROUGHOUT THE REST OF THE CHAPTER. A FEW PARAGRAPHS INTO IT, RIGHT BEFORE LORD HENRY'S INTRODUCTION, A LABURNUM TREE IS MENTIONED. LABURNUM HAS A BRIGHT GOLDEN YELLOW FLOWER, MIRRORING LORD HENRY'S CHARISMA. IT REPRESENTS THOUGHTFUL BEAUTY AND PENSIVE THOUGHT, THINGS HENRY VALUES, PARTAKES IN HIMSELF, AND ENCOURAGES IN OTHERS. IT HAS A DARKER SIDE, TOO. THE TOXINS IN THE TREE LEAD TO ITS MEANING IN THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS: FORSAKEN. WILDE USES THE PLACEMENT OF LABURNUM TO HINT AT THE POISON THAT SWIMS BENEATH LORD HENRY'S BEAUTIFUL EXTERIOR AND PRETTY WORDS. ITS ARRIVAL IN A BOUQUET IN VICTORIAN TIMES MEANT THAT YOU WERE ABOUT TO BE FORSAKEN, AS BASIL IS BY DORIAN, AND EVENTUALLY DORIAN IS BY THE REST OF SOCIETY.

WILDE'S WIT AND SKILL WITH LANGUAGE ARE EVIDENT IN THE FIRST SENTENCE OF HIS NOVEL ALONE AND CONTINUE THROUGHOUT THE REST OF THE STORY. EVERYTHING FORETOLD BY THE FLOWERS HE PLACES IN THE FIRST SENTENCE COMES TO PASS. TO A VICTORIAN READER FAMILIAR WITH THE LANGUAGE

OF FLOWERS, THE HIDDEN MEANINGS WOULD BE EVEN MORE OBVIOUS. BY UTILIZING SO MUCH SYMBOLISM FOR LOVE RIGHT OUT OF THE GATE, WILDE MAKES IT IMPOSSIBLE TO IGNORE THE EROTIC TENSION EXISTING BETWEEN HIS THREE CHARACTERS. HOWEVER, THIS WASN'T CUT BY THE PUBLISHER. I BELIEVE THIS IS BECAUSE THIS IS JUST ONE, TINY INSTANCE OF WILDE'S GENIUS USAGE OF SYMBOLISM. THEY WERE FIGHTING A LOSING BATTLE. IT WOULD BE IMPOSSIBLE TO ENTIRELY REMOVE THE QUEER SUBTEXT FROM WILDE'S WRITING BECAUSE IT WOULD BE REMOVING EVERYTHING THAT MAKES IT BEAUTIFUL.

DESPITE THE CENSORSHIP, WILDE STILL FACED IMMENSE BACKLASH FROM BRITISH SOCIETY. HE WAS TRIED FOR SODOMY AND SERVED TWO YEARS OF HARD LABOR IN PRISON WHEN ACCUSATIONS OF HIS HOMOSEXUAL ACTIONS WERE BROUGHT FORWARD BY THE FATHER OF A MAN HE WAS SEEING. HE SPENT THE LAST FEW YEARS OF HIS LIFE IN EXILE IN FRANCE. WHILE HIS REPUTATION DID NOT RECOVER DURING HIS LIFETIME, HE CEMENTED HIS PLACE AS A WRITER WHO WOULD STAND THE TEST OF TIME—WHOSE QUEER IDENTITY AND LITERARY THEMES HISTORY COULD NOT IGNORE, UNLIKE SO MANY OTHERS. HE ESTABLISHED A RECORD FOR UNDENIABLE QUEER BRILLIANCE THAT DOES NOT SHY AWAY FROM ITSELF.

I HOPE THAT WILDE'S STORY AND HIS WRITING WILL CONTINUE TO INSPIRE QUEER WRITERS INTO THE FUTURE. HE IS PROOF THAT WHILE WE FACE BARRIERS AND ADVERSARIES, WE WILL NOT BE FORGOTTEN OR SILENCED. I THINK THAT IS ESPECIALLY IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER NOW AS AN UNPRECEDENTED WAVE OF BOOK BANNINGS, AND HOMOPHOBIC AND TRANSPHOBIC LEGISLATION SWEEPS THE U.S. I ENCOURAGE MY FELLOW QUEER WRITERS TO NEVER CENSOR THEMSELVES AND TO FIGHT BACK WHEN OTHERS TRY TO TAKE OUR VOICE AWAY. OUR WRITING HAS THE ABILITY TO OUTLAST THESE TIMES.



Firsts

Sara Childrey

I DON'T KNOW HOW TO TELL YOU WHAT I AM FEELING

IF I WALKED THROUGH A DAY
LIKE IT WAS MY FIRST DAY ON EARTH
WHAT WOULD I NOTICE?

HOW WOULD MY FINGERS FEEL ON MY HANDS?
AND HOW WOULD THE BREATH FEEL
FINDING ITS WAY TO MY LUNGS?



HOW WOULD IT HURT TO STAND,
ACHING AGAINST GRAVITY
AND HOW WOULD IT HURT TO LOVE?

IF TODAY WAS MY FIRST DAY,
WOULD I NOTICE THE HUMMINGBIRDS?

WOULD I NOTICE THE FLOWER
GROWING, DEFIANTLY, ON THE HILL?
AND WOULD I NOTICE THOSE ROCKS
CRUMBLING DOWN THE HILL?

WOULD I NOTICE HER SMILE
MORE THAN THE OTHERS?
WOULD I BE SHOCKED TO FEEL MYSELF EAT?

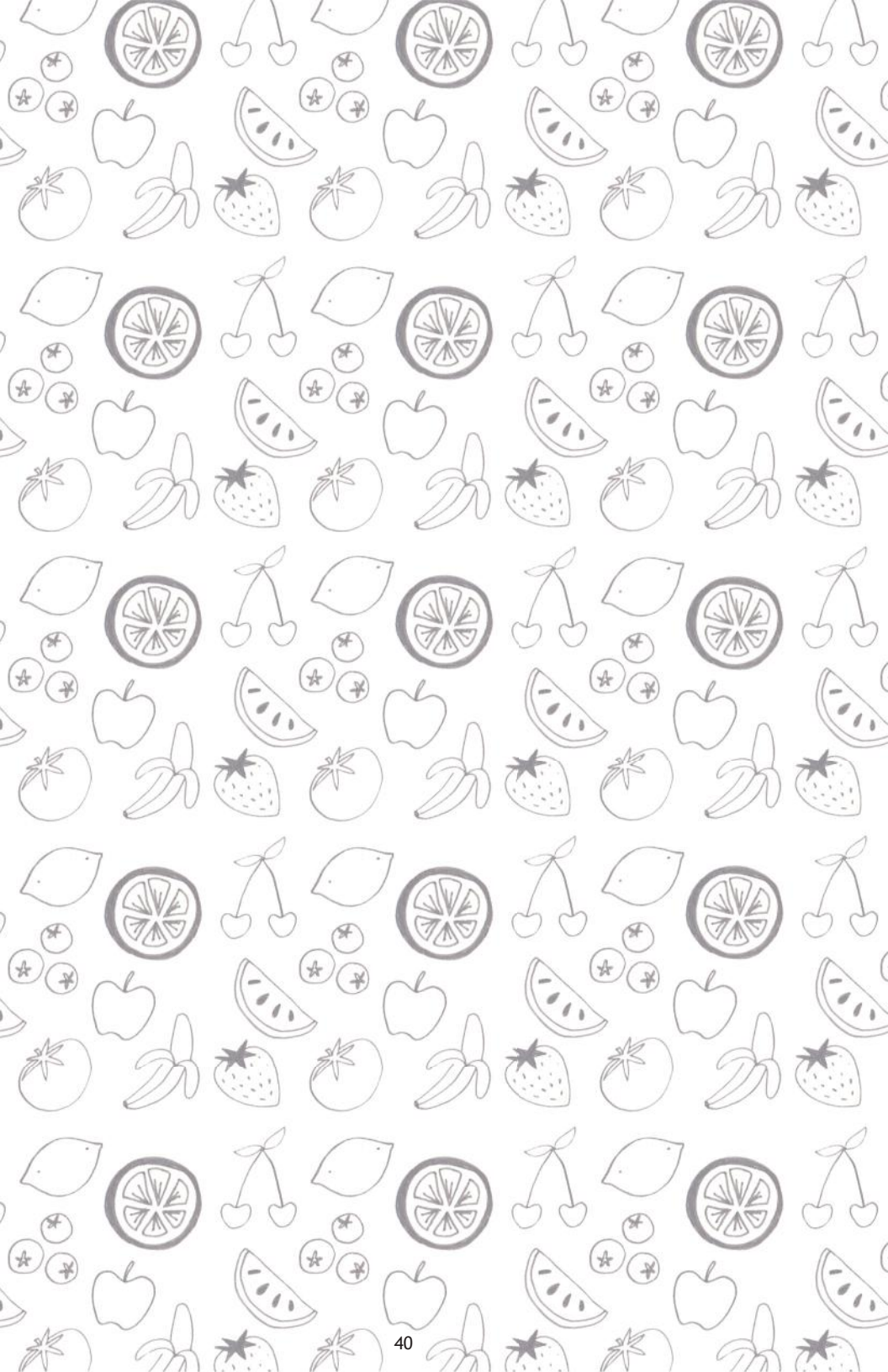
WOULD I WANT TO KISS,
OR BE FEARFUL,
OR RUN IN THE RAIN?

WOULD I CARE ABOUT BEING ENOUGH?



I MAY HAVE WALKED THESE STEPS BEFORE
BUT I LOVE HER IN A WAY I HAVEN'T KNOWN:
IT IS CHILDISH, IT IS FRESH.
IT IS SOMETHING TO FEEL.
AND WHAT A GIFT, EVEN,
TO FEEL THESE TEARS.





TABLOIDS

Me & Patti Smith

Gillian Rule

MAYBE IT WAS MY PENCHANT FOR DATING GAY MEN OR MY REBELLIOUS, CLOUT-CHASING SPIRIT, WRAPPED UP IN A PACKAGE OF BLACK HAIR AND BOHO-PUNK SENSIBILITY, BUT PATTI SMITH'S WORK BECAME THE SOUNDTRACK TO MY LIFE. IN HIGH SCHOOL I SPENT HOURS CONSUMING HER CONCERT FOOTAGE, WATCHING HER LIGHT CIGARETTES IN LEVI JEANS AND CEMENTING HER STATUS IN MY EYES AS "THE ONLY IT GIRL. EVER." *JUST KIDS* ENTERED MY LIFE AND WHISPERED PASSAGES TO ME LIKE A TRUSTED CONFIDANTE. SHE WAS WRITING TO ME. THE MOSAIC OF GREATS THAT INFLUENCED HER BECAME A PORTAL TO MY WORLD OF LITERATURE LIKE RIMBAUD, BAUDELAIRE, AND GINSBURG. I IDENTIFIED INCREDULOUSLY WITH HER WORK: HER LIFE WAS A MISSHAPEN MIRROR REFLECTING MY LIFE'S COMPLEXITIES.

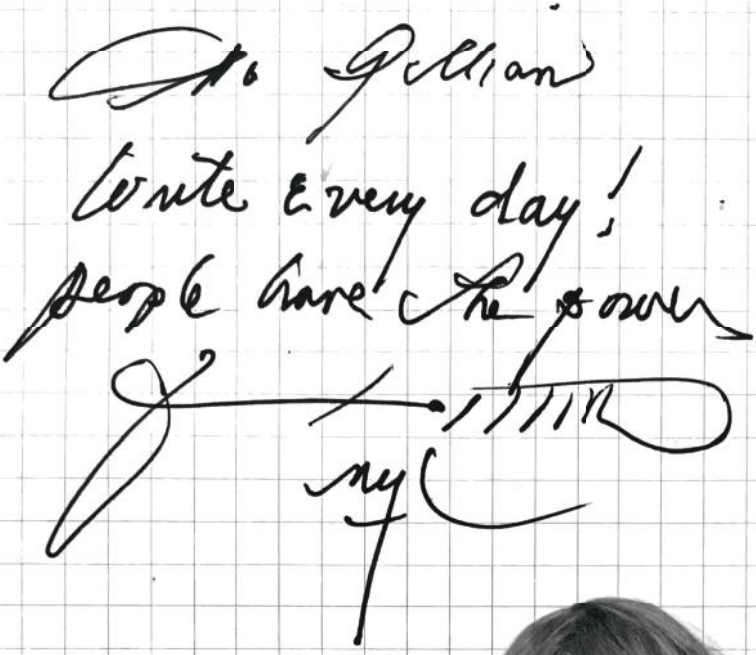
EVERYWHERE I LOOKED, I FOUND HER WORK IN NEW PLACES. HER LEGENDARY STATUS ISN'T CONFINED TO HER MUSICAL OR LITERARY PURSUITS; IT SPILLED OVER INTO MY INSTAGRAM FEED AND EMAIL. SHE WRITES WEIRD POETRY SNIPPETS, ALWAYS PAIRED WITH A CUP OF BLACK COFFEE, THAT MAKE THE MUNDANE FEEL PROFOUND. SHE'S STILL AT IT WITH A CHARMING SUBSTACK CONSISTING OF HER POETIC RAMBLINGS AND PHOTOS OF HER CATS. PATTI ISN'T JUST AN ARTIST; SHE'S AN ENDURING MUSE, AN INSPIRATION THAT AGED AS GRACEFULLY AS SHE DID.

IN TRUE PATTI SMITH FASHION, I EMBARKED ON THE QUINTESSENTIAL JOURNEY FOR EVERY ANNOYING 20-SOMETHING YEAR OLD: A MOVE TO NEW YORK CITY IN THE FALL. I LANDED IN A TENEMENT STYLE APARTMENT IN THE HEART OF CHINATOWN. I RAN ACROSS THE CITY WITH MY FRIENDS, WATCHED CIGARETTE SMOKE FLOAT FROM MY FINGERS, AND INDULGED IN AFTERNOON COFFEES. DATES COMPARED ME LOVINGLY TO PATTI, AS IF THEY WERE ON THEIR OWN JOURNEY TO FIND HER. IN THE LATE SUMMER, I BECAME A HOSTESS AT A FANCY RESTAURANT IN SOHO, WHERE I SPENT MY TIME BATTING MY EYES AT THE COOKS SO I COULD GET SOME FRENCH FRIES OR PLAYING JENGA WITH TABLES AND UNHAPPY CUSTOMERS. (I WAS HORRIBLE AT MY JOB).

ONE MIDNIGHT, AFTER A PARTICULARLY SOUL-DRAINING SHIFT, I MET HER. I HAD JUST ZIPPED UP MY JACKET AND EMBARKED ON MY TRIP HOME WHEN I NOTICED A FORM WALKING AHEAD OF ME. ONLY MINUTES AWAY FROM THE RESTAURANT, THERE SHE WAS—A BLACK SILHOUETTE WITH LONG, STRINGY GRAY HAIR. SHE HAD TOTE BAGS HANGING FROM HER ARMS LIKE A CHRISTMAS TREE DECORATED BY THE GROCER. MY STOMACH DID SOMERSAULTS, AND MY BACK CONTORTED. THE COOLEST WOMAN ON THE PLANET WAS JUST STEPS AWAY! AFTER A GOOD MINUTE OF FRANTIC INTERNAL DIALOGUE, I GATHERED

MY COURAGE, AND WENT IN FOR THE KILL: I INTRODUCED MYSELF TO MS. SMITH. TO MY SURPRISE, SHE SEEMED PLEASED, AND EVEN ASKED ME TO WALK WITH HER. AS WE STROLLED A FEW BLOCKS, MY KNEES SHAKING, WE DELVED INTO HER NEWFOUND PASSION FOR ANIMAL LIBERATION. FRESH OUT OF HER SOLD OUT SHOW AT MADISON SQUARE GARDEN (SHE APOLOGIZED FOR BEING TIRED), SHE VIVIDLY DESCRIBED THE SWAYING BLACK MASS OF THE CROWD. I LISTENED TO HER IN AWE, UNSURE IF THIS WAS REALLY HAPPENING TO ME.

FINALLY, OUR PATHS WERE ABOUT TO DIVERGE—I WAS HEADING TOWARDS LITTLE ITALY, AND SHE TOWARDS THE WEST VILLAGE. BEFORE PARTING WAYS, I MUSTERED THE COURAGE TO ASK HER TO SIGN MY JOURNAL. WITH A GRACIOUS SMILE, SHE WROTE, "TONIGHT EVERY NIGHT, PEOPLE HAVE THE POWER." SO NOW, I HAVE NEW WORDS TO LIVE BY.





THE FIRST TIME

LINNEA HEINY

My playlist #28

#	Title	
1	The First Time	Miki Fiki
2	i	Kendrick Lamar
3	Realized	dyslm, Olivia Tchangou
4	i	Kendrick Lamar
5	Was	Katie Belle
6	Technically	Teezo Touchdown
7	QUEER	BROCKHAMPTON
8	i	Kendrick Lamar
9	was	Danila Malkič
10	In	veilside
11	the corner in your basement	Bad Friends With Black Cats
12	High	Slow Pulp
13	And I Mean	Dazz Band
14	High as F%#K	Jon Lajoie
15	Watching Movies	Mac Miller
16	Specifically	Mauro Rawn
17	Featuring	The Audacity, Harry S. Truman
18	Ryan Reynolds	OGR-Scintilla
19	And Then I Said	Marcsine
20	DAMN	JOYRYDE, Freddie Gibbs
21	But I'm Not	Cocteau Twins
22	Like	Alissic
23	Queer	Garbage
24	Or Whatever	UnoTheActivist
25	...	CO0Lf15H

26  YKWIM?
Yot Club

27  I Promise
Radiohead

28  !
E Trippie Redd

29  You Looked at Me
Pachyman

30  Like
E Talk of the Town, Dthang, bando

31  Excuse You
MC Paul Barman

32  ?????
E Bktherula

33  thought it was
iann dior, Travis Barker, Machine Gun Kelly

34  Just
Radiohead

35  A One Time Thing - Acoustic Version
Morgs

36  Because
The Beatles

37  i was so drunk last night
E akumuh

38  that
Kristy Perry

39  I Saw Jesus Hanging on a Basketball Hoop
E Sorry Mom

40  But
E K. Cero

41  I Am
Emhahee

42  Still into You
Paramore

43  And Also
Gareth Dickson

44  Ryan
Ricky Eat Acid

45  ....
Yiruma

46  Sorry Bro
SALES

47  I
Noah Polk

48  Definitely
Shin Guard

49  Don't
E Bryson Tiller

50  Wish
sign crushes motorist

51  I Was Your Man
Tindersticks

52  Or
Daniel Ben Haim

53  That
E Kode Street

54  We Could Live Near the Beach
Flatsound

55  Married With Children
E Oasis

56  Or
RUN

57  That
Salvatore Cordova

58  I Could Be Your Dog
Kaitlyn Aurelia Smith, Emile Mosseri

59  your one and only
Revin

60  And
Ezekiel Blanchard

61  Definitely
Charlie Lim, Linying, Katz

62  Don't
ANDZY

63  Think
Kaleida

64  The Moon Shines Bright
Sam Lee, Elizabeth Fraser

65  Only
RY X

66 In Your Eyes - 2012 Remaster
Peter Gabriel

67 NOR DO I
E CH4RLI3

68 Love You
flowerovlove

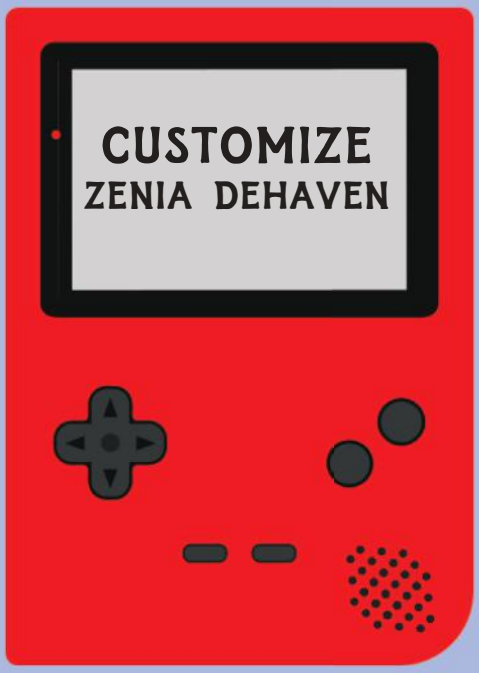
69 At All
KAYTRANADA

70 Probably
Hippo Campus

71 Just
Radiohead

72 Thought So
E Destiny Jay

73 Because I Got High
E Afroman



THE FIRST TIME I QUESTIONED MY GENDER IDENTITY, I WAS PLAYING POKEMON BLACK AND WHITE. IF YOU'RE A 90S KID OR A NERD LIKE ME, YOU MAY KNOW THAT OLDER POKEMON GAMES OFFER AN INFAMOUS CHARACTER SELECTION SCREEN WITH THE TAGLINE, "ARE YOU A BOY? OR A GIRL?" AT THE TOP. BEFORE PLAYERS CAN BEGIN THEIR MISSION TO CATCH 'EM ALL, THEY MUST SELECT BETWEEN ONE OF THESE TWO OPTIONS. AND, FOR THE FIRST TIME, I WASN'T SURE WHICH ONE I WANTED TO PICK.

BOTH OF THE PIXELATED OPTIONS WERE PROMISING. IT WASN'T THAT THE GIRL CHARACTER WAS OVER SEXUALIZED (LIKE IN SO MANY GAMES) OR THAT THE MALE PROTAGONIST WAS SO BLAND THAT HIS CANONICAL NAME SHOULD'VE BEEN "WHITE BREAD," BUT I WASN'T SURE WHICH OF THESE TWO OPTIONS ALIGNED WITH ME THE MOST.

THE BOY WORE A BLUE JACKET, LOOSE, DARK PANTS, AND GRIPPED THE RIM OF HIS BASEBALL CAP AS IF IN SALUTE. BLUE WAS MY FAVORITE COLOR AT THE TIME (I WAS DEEP IN THE THROES OF A PERCY JACKSON PHASE), SO I WAS DRAWN TO HIS OUTFIT, BUT THE GIRL'S CLOTHES HAD THEIR OWN APPEAL. SHE WORE A WHITE TANK TOP WITH A CROPPED VEST, DISTRESSED SHORTS, AND BLACK AND PINK COMBAT BOOTS. THOUGH WE SHARED THE SAME MUTED BROWN HAIR COLOR, MY HAIR WAS SO THIN THAT IT WOULD TAKE A MIRACLE AND SEVERAL TRIPS TO THE SALON TO MAKE IT AS FULL AND LUSCIOUS AS HERS.

I HAD NEVER QUESTIONED WHO I WAS UNTIL THEN. I LOOKED BACK AND FORTH FROM THE CHARISMATIC BOY TO THE SPUNKY GIRL, WONDERING WHY IT WAS SO HARD TO CHOOSE ONE OF THEM. IT SHOULD'VE BEEN OBVIOUS, RIGHT? WHEN I WAS BORN, THE DOCTOR GLANCED AT MY SEX ORGANS AND MARKED THE "F" ON MY BIRTH CERTIFICATE, AND THAT WAS THAT. I WAS FEMALE. ISN'T THAT ALL GENDER IS, REALLY? A SMUDGE OF INK ON A PAPER?

WHILE I WASN'T EXPECTING A DAMN POKEMON GAME TO BE THE BEGINNING OF MY SELF-DISCOVERY, IT WASN'T THE LAST INCIDENT WHERE I STRUGGLED WITH THIS ASPECT OF MYSELF. I FREQUENT GROUP EXERCISE CLASSES, WHICH ARE VERY WOMEN-DOMINATED. WHENEVER THE INSTRUCTOR SAID SOMETHING LIKE "LET'S GO, GIRLS!" OR PERHAPS AN ENTHUSIASTIC "YOU'VE GOT THIS, LADIES!" I'D FEEL SOMETHING CHURN IN MY STOMACH, LIKE I HAD SWALLOWED CEMENT, AND IT WAS HARDENING IN MY INTESTINES. EVEN WITHIN THESE CLASSES, I FELT LIKE AN OUTSIDER, LIKE AN ALIEN TAKING THE FORM OF A HUMAN WOMAN WHO WAS CURIOUS TO EXPERIENCE THE NOVELTIES OF A GYM.

I'D ALWAYS HEARD OF THINGS LIKE INTERNALIZED RACISM AND HOMOPHOBIA, WHERE SOMEONE IS A PART OF A MARGINALIZED GROUP BUT STILL HAS HARMFUL OPINIONS OF THAT GROUP. I REALIZED I HAD SOME KIND OF NONBINARY PHOBIA, WHICH WAS ODD TO ME. I WAS BISEXUAL, WHICH I REALIZED SHORTLY AFTER WATCHING THE FIRST PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN MOVIE, WHICH IS A STRANGELY COMMON SEXUAL AWAKENING AMONGST MANY PEOPLE FOR A FILM INVOLVING A PIRATE CURSE AND THE EAST INDIA TRADING COMPANY. BUT BEING BISEXUAL NEVER PERTURBED ME. MAYBE IT WAS BECAUSE I WAS SURROUNDED BY THE LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY FOR MY WHOLE LIFE. SOME OF MY FAMILY MEMBERS WERE GAY, AND ABOUT 90% OF MY HIGH SCHOOL FRIEND GROUP WERE PROUDLY QUEER AT THE TIME OR REALIZED THEY WERE GAY LATER ON IN LIFE. BUT SOMETHING ABOUT BEING NONBINARY FELT WRONG. I FELT WRONG, AND WHEN I LOOKED AT OTHER NONBINARY PEOPLE, I FELT THAT THEY WERE WRONG TOO.

I HAD A NONBINARY FRIEND IN HIGH SCHOOL WHO CAME OUT A FEW YEARS AFTER GRADUATION. AFTER THEY CAME OUT, THEY CHOSE A COOL AND ANDROGYNOUS NAME LIKE SAM. NAMES LIKE THOSE ARE SO ELASTIC, THEY COULD BE WOVEN INTO ANY SITUATION, AND NOBODY WOULD BAT AN EYE. SAM COULD BE YOUR CAR MECHANIC WHO COULD PINPOINT EXACTLY WHY YOUR DECADES-OLD RUST BUCKET OF A CAR MADE A "GRRAHHHH" NOISE JUST BY STARTING THE ENGINE. SAM COULD BE YOUR CHILD'S SWIM COACH, A COLLEGE STUDENT THAT DIDN'T PARTICULARLY LIKE WORKING WITH CHILDREN BUT NEEDED SOME EXTRA MONEY TO PAY THE RENT. SAM COULD BE YOUR ELDERLY, RETIRED NEIGHBOR WHO SPENT THEIR DAYS TELLING KIDS TO GET OFF THEIR LAWN OR ELSE. SAM COULD BE ANYBODY.

WHEN SAM CAME OUT TO ME, I WAS NOT THE MOST RECEPTIVE. AT THE TIME, EVEN THOUGH I SHARED THE SAME FEELINGS ABOUT BEING OUTSIDE OF THE GENDER BINARY, I FELT THAT IF I COULDN'T BE COMFORTABLE WITH MY IDENTITY, THEN THERE WAS NO WAY THAT ANY NONBINARY PERSON WAS TRULY AT EASE WITH THEMSELVES. AS FLAWED AS THIS THINKING WAS, I WAS CONVINCED THAT IF I WAS APPREHENSIVE ABOUT MY GENDER, THEN EVERYONE ELSE WAS, TOO, AND THEY WERE JUST HIDING IT BETTER.

SINCE THEN, I APOLOGIZED TO SAM AND EXPLAINED EVERYTHING. THEY WERE VERY RELAXED ABOUT THE WHOLE THING, SAYING SOMETHING ALONG THE LINES OF, "NO PROBLEM, MY DUDE!" EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE VERY UNDERSTANDING, I STILL FELT LIKE A ROTTEN FRIEND FOR DISMISSING THEM BECAUSE I COULDN'T OVERCOME MY OWN NONBINARY PHOBIA. AND, HONESTLY, I WAS A BIT JEALOUS OF SAM. THEY HAD A UNISEX NAME. PHYSICALLY, THEY HAD MORE ANDROGYNOUS FEATURES. THEY COULD PASS EASILY AS EITHER A MAN OR WOMAN DEPENDING ON HOW THEY PRESENTED THEMSELVES.

I, ON THE OTHER HAND, AM VERY OBVIOUSLY AFAB, NO MATTER HOW I DRESS, AND IT MAKES IT SO MUCH HARDER TO ACCEPT MYSELF. HOW WAS I SUPPOSED TO FEEL THAT I LIVED OUTSIDE OF THE GENDER BINARY WHEN I LOOKED LIKE A GENERIC WHITE WOMAN? I WISH I COULD LIVE IN A VIDEO GAME AND CUSTOMIZE MYSELF.

I WANT TO LIVE IN A CHARACTER CREATION SCREEN, WHERE I COULD ADJUST THE ANGLES OF MY FACE, THE SIZE OF MY BICEPS, EVEN THE PLUMPNESS OF MY LIPS, DEPENDING ON HOW I FELT THAT DAY. I WISH I COULD ALTER THE SIZE OF MY HIPS, THE WIDTH OF MY SHOULDERS, AND THE SHARPNESS OF MY JAW. I'D LOVE TO LIVE IN A UNIVERSE WHERE I COULD CUSTOMIZE MY PHYSICAL FEATURES AND PRESENT MYSELF WITH THE BODY THAT RESONATED WITH ME THE MOST IN THAT MOMENT WITH A SIMPLE CLICK OF A BUTTON.

UNFORTUNATELY, I'M BOUND BY THE LAWS OF PHYSICS AND LOGIC, AND CANNOT BEND REALITY TO MY WILL. PERHAPS THAT'S FOR THE BEST, BECAUSE I WOULD PROBABLY SPEND HOURS OF MY DAY CUSTOMIZING MY FEATURES AND MAKE VERY LITTLE PROGRESS IN EVERY OTHER ASPECT OF MY LIFE.

THERE'S STILL NOTHING I CAN POINT ON MY BODY AND SAY, "SEE? THAT'S WHAT MAKES ME NONBINARY," BUT MAYBE THAT'S THE POINT. THERE'S A PARTICULAR BEAUTY IN AMBIGUITY, OF HOW TWO PEOPLE WHO LOOK NOTHING ALIKE ARE ALIGNED BY LIVING OUTSIDE OF THE BINARY. IT PROVES THAT GENDER IS SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED IN HOPES TO SIMPLIFY SOMETHING SO ROBUST AND UNIQUE FOR EVERY INDIVIDUAL PERSON.

I'M COMFORTABLE WITH WHO I AM NOW. THOUGH PEOPLE STILL USE SHE/HER PRONOUNS FOR ME, I LET IT ROLL OFF OF MY BACK LIKE WAVES CRASHING OVER SAND. THOSE PEOPLE DON'T KNOW HOW I FEEL, BUT I DO. AND I KNOW THAT WHAT I FEEL IS VALID.

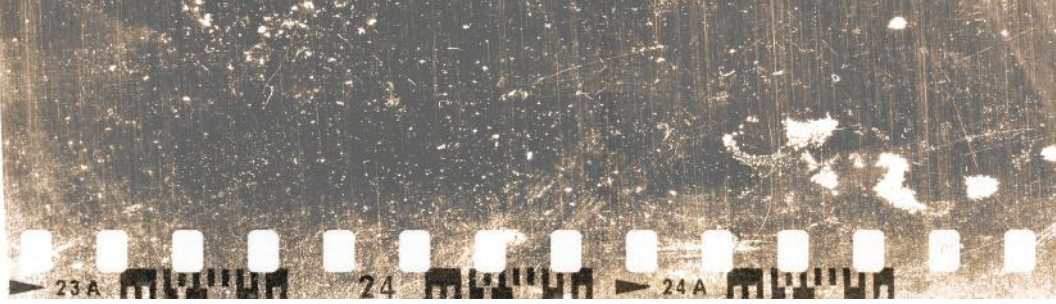
AND ALL OF THIS FIRST STARTED WHEN I WAS 12 YEARS OLD, MY NINTENDO DS LITE GLEAMING IN MY HANDS, WITH THE PIXELATED POKEMON PROFESSOR ASKING ME THE PIVOTAL QUESTION:

"ARE YOU A BOY? OR A GIRL?"

I LOOK AT BOTH OF THEM, THE CONFIDENT BOY, THE GIRL WITH HER HANDS ON HER HIPS.

I PICKED THE BOY. I WANTED A CHANGE OF PACE, SINCE UP UNTIL NOW, I'D ALWAYS CHOSEN THE FEMALE CHARACTERS. I WONDERED WHAT IT WOULD BE LIKE TO EXPERIENCE THIS GAME FROM A DIFFERENT LENS. I WOULD STILL BE CATCHING THE SAME POKEMON AND CHALLENGING THE SAME GYM TRAINERS, BUT HOW WOULD I FEEL ABOUT EXPLORING THIS WORLD AS A BOY?

AND BLUE IS FUCKING SICK.



Firsts on Screen

Taylor Michael Simmons

HI Y'ALL, MY NAME IS TAYLOR MICHAEL SIMMONS AND FOR AS LONG AS I CAN REMEMBER I'VE LOVED MOVIES. THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN SOMETHING COMFORTING ABOUT THEM FOR ME. WHILE I'M WATCHING A MOVIE I DON'T HAVE TO DEAL WITH THE LITTLE ANXIETIES OF DAILY LIFE OR THE MUCH LARGER ANXIETIES THAT COME WITH THE CRUSHING WEIGHT OF EXISTENTIAL DREAD. WHILE THE BEST FILMS OFTEN ASK US TO GRAPPLE WITH THESE VERY THINGS, I DON'T SEEM TO MIND. IT'S MUCH SAFER TO TRAVERSE THE ROCKY TERRAIN OF THE COMPLEXITIES OF THE HUMAN CONDITION IN THE COMFORT OF A CUSHIONED AMC RECLINER SEAT AFTER BEING SERENADED BY THE HOLY INCANTATION AS SPOKEN BY NICOLE KIDMAN.

LIKE MANY YOUNG CREATIVES IN LOS ANGELES I WORK IN THE SERVICE INDUSTRY IN ORDER TO PAY MY BILLS. BUT MORE THAN ANYTHING I JUST WANT TO MAKE MOVIES AND WATCH AND THINK AND TALK ABOUT THEM WITH ANYONE WHO WILL LISTEN. I AM A FAIRLY QUIET PERSON. IF YOU SEE ME AT A PARTY I WILL MOST LIKELY BE IN THE CORNER PLAYING AROUND ON THE CALCULATOR APP. BUT GOD HELP YOU IF YOU START TALKING TO ME ABOUT MY LETTERBOXD ACCOUNT OR WHAT MOVIES I'VE WATCHED LATELY.

THE FOLLOWING IS MY ATTEMPT TO PRESENT YOU WITH FIVE FILMS THAT I THINK DESERVE YOUR TIME AND ATTENTION. EACH FILM DEALS WITH A 'FIRST': (1) FIRST THROUPLE, (2) FIRST SLEEPOVER, (3) FIRST LOVE, (4) FIRST BEST FRIEND, AND (5) FIRST MARRIAGE. MY PRESENTATION OF THESE FILMS WILL INCLUDE SOME SLIGHT SPOILERS SO PROCEED WITH CAUTION. DON'T WORRY I WON'T GIVE AWAY ANY HUGE TWISTS. YOU WON'T FIND ANY 'THEY WERE DEAD THE WHOLE TIME' OR 'THAT'S NOT YOUR SISTER SHE'S ACTUALLY YOUR MOM' HERE. ALSO FILM IS SUBJECTIVE SO IF YOU DON'T AGREE WITH MY TAKES THAT'S FINE BUT JUST KNOW THAT YOU'RE DEAD TO ME.



FIRST THROUPLE

Passages (2023)

by Ira Sachs

WE ALL KNOW SOMEONE WHO JUST STRAIGHT UP SUCKS. AN ABSOLUTE GARBAGE PERSON. MAYBE YOU WORK WITH THEM. MAYBE THEY'RE THE PARTNER OF A FRIEND. MAYBE THEY ARE YOUR PARTNER. NOW IMAGINE SOMEONE MADE A MOVIE ABOUT THAT PERSON. A FILM TITLED *THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD* WAS RELEASED IN 2021 (IT'S WONDERFUL AND YOU SHOULD WATCH IT), IF THAT MOVIE HAD NOT BEEN MADE THEN THIS MOVIE WOULD HAVE BEEN TITLED THE WORST PERSON IN THE WORLD. AT THE VERY LEAST THEY SHOULD HAVE CONSIDERED TITLING IT THE WORST PERSON IN CONTINENTAL EUROPE.

PASSAGES FOLLOWS TOMAS, A TOXIC CREATIVE EXPLORING HIS BISEXUALITY AND TESTING JUST HOW OPEN HIS MARRIAGE REALLY IS. SOME MIGHT CALL HIM A CATCH (HE IS HOT) WHILE OTHERS WOULD CALL HIM JUST THE ABSOLUTE WORST (HE DOES SUCK). SOME OF HIS LESS HEINOUS ACTIVITIES INCLUDE CONSTANTLY POPPING INTO THE APARTMENT YOU USED TO SHARE TOGETHER WITHOUT TEXTING FIRST, WEARING A DAY-OLD CROP TOP TO MEET YOUR PARENTS FOR THE FIRST TIME, AND WEEPING ON HIS KNEES IN THE HALLWAY OF A PRIMARY SCHOOL. DON'T WORRY, *PASSAGES* ISN'T ALL ABOUT THE HORRIFIC BEHAVIOR OF ITS MAIN CHARACTER, IT'S ALSO ABOUT THE OUTFITS. JUST FIT AFTER FIT, I PROMISE.

DON'T WATCH THIS WITH YOUR PARENTS OR ON A PLANE CAUSE IT'S CHOCK-FULL OF FUCKING. IF YOU'RE INTO MOVIES ABOUT PEOPLE JUST CONSTANTLY MAKING THE WRONG DECISIONS AND WATCHING THE CONSEQUENCES OF THOSE DECISIONS COME CRASHING DOWN ON THEM THEN GIVE *PASSAGES* A TRY.



FIRST SLEEPOVER

House (1977)
by Nobuhiko Obayashi

DO YOU REMEMBER YOUR FIRST SLEEPOVER? I DO, MAYBE, I DON'T ACTUALLY KNOW IF IT WAS MY FIRST BUT IT'S THE FIRST THAT I CAN REMEMBER AND ISN'T THAT KIND OF THE SAME THING? WE WATCHED *MONSTERS INC.* AND ALL SLEPT ON THE FLOOR. IT WAS PRETTY COOL. I THINK I PEED MY PANTS AT SOME POINT BUT I CAN'T BE CERTAIN. DO YOU KNOW THAT THING WHERE YOU ARE AT A SLEEPOVER AND THE LIGHTS ARE OFF AND IT'S BEDTIME AND PEOPLE WILL TALK ABOUT RANDOM THINGS AND THE SPACE BETWEEN WHAT IS SAID GROWS LONGER AND LONGER AND THEN SOMEONE SAYS SOMETHING AND IT'S QUIET AFTERWARDS FOR LONGER THAN IT'S BEEN FOR ANYTHING ELSE AND YOU THINK TO YOURSELF 'I WONDER IF THAT WILL BE THE LAST THING SAID TONIGHT' OR IS THAT JUST ME?

ANYWAYS, *HOUSE* FOLLOWS GORGEOUS, A YOUNG SCHOOL GIRL WITH A DEAD MOM. HER DAD HAS JUST RETURNED FROM WORKING ABROAD, IN FACT, HE BROUGHT THE BROAD HOME WITH HIM. [HOLD FOR LAUGHTER] GORGEOUS' DAD HAS A NEW GIRLFRIEND AND SHE FEELS WEIRD ABOUT IT. IN ORDER TO RECONNECT WITH HER DEAR DEPARTED MOM, GORGEOUS INVITES SIX OF HER CLOSEST FRIENDS TO VISIT HER MATERNAL AUNT AT THEIR ANCESTRAL HOME. BUT UH OH, THE HOUSE IS HAUNTED AND THE AUNT IS SUPER CREEPY. PREPARE YOURSELF FOR DECAPITATED HEADS, CARNIVOROUS PIANOS, AND ACCIDENTALLY DRINKING BLOOD BECAUSE YOU DIDN'T LOOK AT WHAT WAS IN YOUR GLASS FOR SOME REASON.

IT'S EASY TO LOOK AT THIS MOVIE AND SEE SOMETHING THAT IS WEIRD AND WACKY AND EASY TO LAUGH AT. DON'T GET ME WRONG IT IS ALL OF THESE THINGS. BUT IT IS ALSO SO MUCH MORE. *HOUSE* IS A FILM BURSTING WITH CREATIVITY. THE EDGES MIGHT BE A BIT ROUGH AND YOU CAN LITERALLY SEE THE GREENSCREEN (IT'S ACTUALLY BLUE BUT WHATEVER) BUT MY GOD IS IT WONDERFUL.





BEING QUEER CAN BE AN ISOLATING EXPERIENCE. TOO MANY OF US ARE FORCED TO HIDE THIS PART OF OURSELVES FOR THE SAKE OF SELF-PRESERVATION. WE COVER OURSELVES UP, BUILDING A SUIT OF ARMOR AROUND US IN ORDER TO PROTECT OURSELVES FROM THE HARSHNESS OF THE OUTSIDE WORLD. IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO STRIP OURSELVES OF THIS ARMOR AND IF WE ARE EVER ABLE TO DO SO WE ARE QUICKLY REMINDED WHY WE BUILT IT IN THE FIRST PLACE. THIS MAKES IT ALL THE MORE MEANINGFUL WHEN SOMEONE SEES THROUGH ALL THAT ARMOR AND MAKES US FEEL LIKE WE JUST DON'T NEED IT ANYMORE.

IN *MOONLIGHT* WE ARE PRESENTED WITH THE LIFE OF CHIRON AS SEEN IN THREE DISTINCT PARTS: CHILDHOOD, ADOLESCENCE, AND ADULTHOOD. AS A CHILD CHIRON IS QUIET AND SMALL FOR HIS AGE, EARNING HIM THE NICKNAME 'LITTLE' AMONGST HIS PEERS. THESE SAME PEERS PICK ON HIM CONSTANTLY. HIS ONLY FRIEND SEEMS TO BE KEVIN, ANOTHER YOUNG BOY WHO UNDERSTANDS THE IMPORTANCE OF NOT APPEARING 'SOFT'. AS AN ADOLESCENT CHIRON IS ALONE. HE IS HARASSED BY CLASSMATES. HE WANDERS THE HALLS OF HIS SCHOOL BY HIMSELF. AT HOME, HE DOES NOT RECEIVE THE LOVE AND SUPPORT HE SO DESPERATELY NEEDS. HIS ONLY FRIEND STILL SEEMS TO BE KEVIN AND ALTHOUGH THEIR FRIENDSHIP APPEARS SUPERFICIAL, THERE IS CLEARLY SOMETHING BENEATH THE SURFACE CONNECTING THESE TWO YOUNG MEN. THEY RUN INTO ONE ANOTHER ON THE BEACH ONE NIGHT AND THEIR FRIENDSHIP BRIEFLY BECOMES SOMETHING MORE. BUT THIS MOMENT OF INTIMACY, VULNERABILITY, AND SOFTNESS IS SHORT LIVED AND THE HARSH WORLD AWAITS THEIR RETURN. THE TWO BOYS ARE FACED WITH A DEMAND FOR VIOLENCE AND THEY HAVE TO PUT ON THEIR ARMOR TO PROVE TO THE WORLD THAT THEY ARE NOT 'SOFT'.

AS AN ADULT CHIRON HAS FULLY CONSTRUCTED HIS ARMOR. LIKE MANY MEN, CHIRON HAS FOUND SAFETY IN A PERFORMATIVE MASCULINITY. HE HAS ATTAINED POWER AND MONEY AND PHYSICAL STRENGTH AND THIS PROTECTS HIM FROM THE THREATS OF HIS SURROUNDINGS. THEN HE GETS A PHONE CALL. IT'S KEVIN. SUDDENLY ALL THIS ARMOR IS STRIPPED AWAY AND WHAT IS LEFT IS THE SAME LITTLE BOY WE MET AT THE START OF THE FILM.

THIS FILM IS EASILY ONE OF THE GREATEST OF THE 21ST

CENTURY AND WILL CONTINUE TO INFLUENCE CINEMA FOR YEARS TO COME. THERE IS SO MUCH MORE TO THIS FILM THAN WHAT I DESCRIBE ABOVE. CHIRON'S RELATIONSHIPS WITH HIS MOTHER AND HIS SURROGATE FATHER FIGURE, THE KINDEST DRUG DEALER EVER DEPICTED ON SCREEN, ARE DEEPLY IMPORTANT TO OUR UNDERSTANDING OF CHIRON'S CHARACTER AND JOURNEY. THERE IS SUCH DEPTH AND COMPLEXITY AND EMPATHY IN *MOONLIGHT* AND YOU DESERVE TO WATCH IT FOR YOURSELF TO SEE WHAT STICKS WITH YOU. IF YOU HAVE NOT ALREADY SEEN IT I SUGGEST YOU DO SO IMMEDIATELY. BUT BE PREPARED TO FEEL SOME FEELINGS.



FIRST BEST FRIEND

Daisies (1966)

by Věra Chytilová

EVERY NOW AND AGAIN YOU WILL ENCOUNTER A PAIR OF FRIENDS THAT ARE TRULY INSEPARABLE. THEY SEEMINGLY SPEND EVERY WAKING MOMENT TOGETHER AND THEY PROBABLY SLEEP IN THE SAME BED TOO. MAYBE THEY'RE SIBLINGS OR ROOMMATES OR DATING OR SIMPLY TWO HALVES OF THE SAME SOUL DESTINED TO EXIST IN TWO SEPARATE BODIES. THEY ARE ALSO DEEPLY ANNOYING. SURE THEY MAY BE FUN AT PARTIES. THEY'RE WACKY AND HAVE GOOD STORIES AND ARE NATURAL ENTERTAINERS AND ALLEVIATE ANY PRESSURE YOU MAY FEEL TO ACTUALLY INTERACT WITH OTHERS AND BE VULNERABLE WITH ANOTHER HUMAN PERSON FOR ONCE IN YOUR LIFE. THEY ALSO HAPPEN TO BE GENERALLY UNCONCERNED WITH THE WELLBEING OF THOSE AROUND THEM. THEY SEEM TO CARE ONLY FOR THEMSELVES AND EACH OTHER AND SOMETIMES THEY DON'T EVEN SEEM TO CARE ABOUT EACH OTHER ALL THAT MUCH. IT'S POSSIBLE THAT IN THE FACE OF AN EVER DECAYING WORLD THEY HAVE MADE THE CHOICE TO LIVE LIFE CARELESSLY, AND THEY HAVE CHOSEN TO DO SO TOGETHER.

MARIE I AND MARIE II ARE THESE INSEPARABLE FRIENDS. SO ENTWINED THAT THEY EVEN SHARE THE SAME NAME. AS *DAISIES* BEGINS, WE SEE THE MARIES MAKE A PACT THAT 'WHEN EVERYTHING IS BEING SPOILED... WE'LL BE SPOILED TOO.' THE SHENANIGANS AND GENERAL TOMFOOLERY SHORTLY FOLLOW. THEY TRICK MEN INTO BUYING THEM EXTRAVAGANT MEALS, THEY HARASS LOCAL BAR PATRONS, AND THEY TRY TO SLYVIA PLATH (RIP GIRLIE) THEMSELVES IN THEIR APARTMENT BUT WHOOPSIES THEY LEFT THE WINDOW OPEN. THE MARIES SEEM HELL BENT ON THE CONSUMPTION AND/OR DESTRUCTION OF EVERYTHING AROUND THEM, EVEN THEMSELVES.

THIS FILM WAS RELEASED IN 1966 IN CZECHOSLOVAKIA AND IMMEDIATELY BANNED BY THE GOVERNMENT. THE FILM'S DIRECTOR, VĚRA CHYTILOVÁ, WAS BARRED FROM MAKING FILMS FROM 1969 TO 1975. LET ME REPHRASE, THIS FILM WAS DEEMED SO OFFENSIVE BY GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS THAT THEY REFUSED TO ALLOW THE FILM TO BE SHOWN TO AUDIENCES AND THEN BANNED THE DIRECTOR FROM MAKING MOVIES FOR 6 YEARS. IF THIS DOESN'T GET YOU JAZZED UP TO SEE THIS MOVIE THEN I DON'T KNOW WHAT WILL.

FIRST MARRIAGE
Possession (1981)
by Andrzej Żuławski

ARE COUPLES INHERENTLY DISGUSTING? OF COURSE WHEN YOU ARE IN THE MIDST OF A RELATIONSHIP WITH ANOTHER HUMAN PERSON IT CAN BE BEAUTIFUL AND EXCITING AND FULFILLING ON SOME CORE HUMAN LEVEL. THERE IS CLEARLY SOMETHING WITHIN OURSELVES THAT DRIVES US TO LOVE AND TO BE LOVED. WHEN WE ENGAGE IN THE ACT OF LOVE, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT IS ROMANTIC OR SEXUAL, OUR BRAIN REWARDS US WITH CHEMICALS THAT MAKE US FEEL GOOD. THESE CHEMICALS MAKE US WANT MORE. WE BECOME ADDICTED TO THIS FEELING AND THESE ACTIONS. WE SIMPLY CAN'T HELP OURSELVES. BUT HOW DOES THIS 'LOVE' LOOK FROM THE OUTSIDE? THE VERY SAME RELATIONSHIPS THAT CAN BE EUPHORIC FOR THOSE ENGAGED IN THEM CAN ALSO APPEAR GROTESQUE TO THOSE WHO ARE NOT. MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE SOME ACTS OF HUMAN INTIMACY ARE OBJECTIVELY STRANGE WHEN REMOVED FROM THE CHEMICALS THEY RELEASE IN OUR BRAINS. KISSING IS WEIRD. I'LL SAY IT. IT'S FUN AND NICE AND SURE I LIKE DOING IT AS MUCH AS THE NEXT GUY BUT LET'S BE HONEST IT'S YUCKY. OR, PERHAPS, THE AVERSION WE MIGHT FEEL TO A COUPLE DISPLAYING THEIR AFFECTION FOR ONE ANOTHER WITH AN ACT OF PHYSICAL INTIMACY COMES FROM THE COVETOUSNESS THAT RISES UP WITHIN OURSELVES AS WE GRAPPLE WITH THE VERY REAL POSSIBILITY OF DYING UNLOVED AND ALONE. IT'S ALSO POSSIBLE THAT THE RELATIONSHIP ITSELF IS REPULSIVE.

POSSESSION PRESENTS ITS VIEWERS WITH A TRULY REPULSIVE RELATIONSHIP IN THE FORM OF THE DISINTEGRATING MARRIAGE OF MARK AND ANNA. THE PLOT IS FAIRLY STRAIGHTFORWARD. HUSBAND RETURNS HOME FROM BUSINESS. WIFE LEAVES HUSBAND. HUSBAND HIRES PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR TO FOLLOW WIFE. PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR FINDS WIFE'S HORRIFYING FUCK MONSTER. YOU KNOW THE REST. THE STORY IS NOT UNREASONABLY ABSURD. THE MODERN VIEWER COULD EASILY GET THIS FILM CONFUSED WITH THE PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA BASED A24 TYPE HORROR FILMS OF THE 21ST CENTURY. BUT WHAT SETS THIS FILM APART IS THE WAY ITS STORY IS TOLD. IN PARTICULAR THE PERFORMANCES GIVEN BY ITS LEADS, ISABELLE ADJANI AND SAM NEIL, AND JUST THE WILDEST SUPPORTING PERFORMANCE GIVEN BY HEINZ BENNET. SERIOUSLY, EACH OF THESE ACTORS ARE ABSOLUTELY BRINGING IT. IF YOU ARE NOT ACCUSTOMED WITH ART-HOUSE CINEMA, AS PRETENTIOUS AS THAT SOUNDS, YOU WILL BE TRULY FLOORED BY THE ACTING IN POSSESSION. EVEN IF YOU HAVE WANDERED INTO THE WORLD OF THE CRITERION COLLECTION AND REPERTORY CINEMAS THE PERFORMANCES HERE WILL DROP YOUR JAW. MOST ACTING TENDS TOWARDS REALISM. IT'S PEOPLE ACTING LIKE PEOPLE. BUT NOBODY IS ACTING LIKE A PERSON IN POSSESSION. AND THAT'S KIND OF THE POINT.

IT MIGHT BE A LITTLE TOUGH TO GO FROM THE MILQUETOAST MIND-NUMBING SECOND-SCREENING OF MADE FOR STREAMING PAINT-BY-NUMBERS BULLSHIT TO A FILM MADE BY A POLISH MAN PROCESSING HIS DIVORCE IN THE WEIRDEST WAY POSSIBLE BUT IT IS MORE THAN WORTH IT. IF YOU CAN TOLERATE THE FULL BODY DISCOMFORT OF WATCHING POSSESSION YOU WILL FIND YOURSELF GIDDY WITH LAUGHTER WHILE THE WORDS 'WHAT THE FUCK' ESCAPE INVOLUNTARILY FROM YOUR BODY AS YOU WATCH THE CRAZIEST SHIT YOU'VE EVER SEEN IN YOUR LIFE. ALSO, SHOUT OUT THE BERLIN WALL.



MY love island LINEUP

by Jess Alba

NOW HEAR ME OUT. I, OF ALL PEOPLE, AM NOT ONE TO PARTICULARLY PARTICIPATE IN THE INDULGENCE OF REALITY TV. I NEVER HAVE BEEN. I LIKE TO WALK OUTSIDE, I LIKE TO DANCE, I LIKE TO READ. I LIKE TO EXIST IN THE NOW. I MEAN HONESTLY, I'D RATHER DO ANYTHING ELSE THAN CONSUME CONTENT THAT CONSISTS PURELY OF ALL OF THE TERRIBLE, NO GOOD, DRAMATIC PARTS OF ONE'S LIFE. PRIZE MONEY INCLUDED AT THE END, WHATEVER IT TAKES, I DON'T CARE.

OR AT LEAST I DIDN'T. I DIDN'T CARE.

THAT WAS BEFORE LOVE ISLAND.

THE RUMORS ARE TRUE. MY FIRST CONNECTION TO REALITY TV. HOT SINGLES ON AN ISLAND FAR, FAR AWAY, COMPETING FOR LOVE AND MONEY, STEALING EACH OTHER'S PARTNERS JUST BECAUSE THEY CAN—NOW THIS... THIS IS TRASH TV. I CAN'T GET ENOUGH.

I WOULD GO AS FAR TO SAY THAT I, JESS ALBA, HAVE WATCHED MULTIPLE SEASONS FROM MULTIPLE COUNTRIES. I'VE ALLOWED LOVE ISLAND TO TAKE OVER MY LIFE. SO MUCH SO THAT, I'VE BEGUN TO THINK—IF I WERE A LOVE ISLAND CONTESTANT, WHO WOULD MY LINEUP CONSIST OF? NOW, I'VE CONSIDERED MORE THAN A FEW FACTORS WHILE CREATING MY LOVE ISLAND LINEUP. I WOULD OBVIOUSLY REQUIRE A FEW SUITORS. WHO, IF I WERE ON THE ISLAND, WOULD I SELECT TO SHARE ROMANTIC SPACE WITH ME? I WOULD LIKE TO TEST THE WATERS, SO, AS FOLLOWS YOU'LL SEE THAT I'VE SELECTED A FEW. NOT SO OBVIOUSLY, I'LL NEED ENTERTAINMENT. I PERSONALLY DON'T THINK THAT THE ROMANCE ALONE WOULD SOLELY ENTERTAIN ME FOR THE ENTIRE DURATION OF THE TIME I'M ON THE SHOW. SO, I REQUIRE SELECTIONS THAT PROVIDE ME WITH AMPLE ENTERTAINMENT. WHO WOULD FIGHT? WHO'S CONVERSATION WOULD TRULY LEAVE ME SPEECHLESS? WHO COULD I SELECT TO REALLY TACKLE THOSE PHYSICAL COMPETITIONS? WHO WOULD I PLACE INTO THE MIX JUST BECAUSE I KNOW THAT THEY'RE NOT IN IT FOR LOVE, AND WE NEED THE DRAMA?

LET'S BREAK IT DOWN. I PRESENT TO YOU, MY LOVE ISLAND LINEUP.

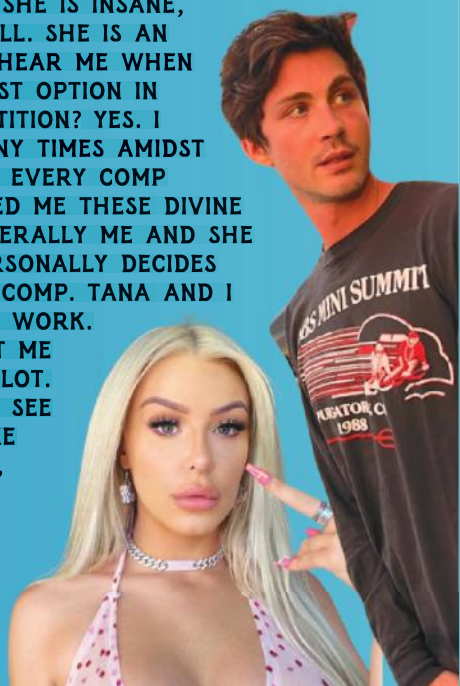


1.
NAME: JACOB ELORDI
COUNTRY: AUSTRALIA
PURPOSE: SUITOR
WHY: I THINK THIS ONE IS OBVIOUS. I NEED HIM.

2.
NAME: LOGAN LERMAN
COUNTRY: USA
PURPOSE: SUITOR
WHY: LOGAN DELIVERS THE PERFECT AMOUNT OF TRANQUILITY & CHAOS. WITH HIS PEACEFUL DEMEANOR & SALT & PEPPER HAIR, HE IS SURE TO ARRIVE ON THE ISLAND WITH THE SOLE PURPOSE OF GETTING ME TO FALL IN LOVE WITH HIM. WHILE I RIDE THE TUMULTUOUS WAVE THAT IS COUPLING UP WITH JACOB ELORDI, HE'LL EASE MY WORRIES AND WOES WITH CONSISTENT LOVE AND COMPASSION, WHICH OFTEN PISSES OFF THE OTHER ISLANDERS PINING AFTER HIM, AS HE REALLY ONLY DESIRES ME UNTIL HE MEETS HIS TRUE LOVE (WHICH I SUPPORT WHOLEHEARTEDLY. SEE ISLANDER 7), TANA MONGEAU DOES NOT LIKE LOGAN CHASING OTHERS, AS ON DAY 1, SHE STAKED HER CLAIM ON HIM. THIS IS WHERE THE CHAOS BEGINS.

3.
NAME: TANA MONGEAU
COUNTRY: USA
PURPOSE: DRAMA / LIFE OF THE PARTY
WHY: I MEAN, WHAT'S THERE TO SAY? TANA IS ALWAYS YELLING. SHE SINGLE HANDEDLY WOULD RUIN EVERYONE'S LIVES ON MY SEASON, AS SHE WANTS THE 100K ALL TO HERSELF. SHE WOULD STRING EVERYONE ALONG UP UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE, MAKE IT TO THE FINALE, AND TAKE THE MONEY. SHE IS INSANE, BUT SO HOT. SHE WOULD FOOL US ALL. SHE IS AN ICON. IT WOULD BE ANARCHY. NOW HEAR ME WHEN I SAY THIS—WOULD TANA BE MY FIRST OPTION IN EVERY BLINDFOLDED KISSING COMPETITION? YES. I WOULD KISS TANA MONGEAU SO MANY TIMES AMIDST MY SEASON, AND SHE WOULD LEAVE EVERY COMP THINKING: "WHO WAS IT THAT GIFTED ME THESE DIVINE KISSES?" IT'S LITERALLY ME. IT'S LITERALLY ME AND SHE WOULD NEVER KNOW UNTIL SHE PERSONALLY DECIDES TO KISS ME IN A BLINDFOLDED KISS COMP. TANA AND I ON A LOGISTICAL LEVEL JUST DON'T WORK. I DON'T LIKE IT WHEN SHE YELLS AT ME & YOU SEE, SHE WOULD DO THAT A LOT. SO, WE'D NEVER COUPLE UP. YOU'LL SEE BELOW THAT SHE DOES IN FACT TAKE THE W AT THE END OF THE SEASON, BUT WITH ME? NO.

(ADDITIONAL INFORMATION: TANA TASTES LIKE CUPCAKES).



4.
NAME: TRISHA PAYTAS
COUNTRY: USA
PURPOSE: DRAMA
WHY: TRISHA IS EVERYWHERE. A GREAT CONVERSATIONALIST, BUT ALWAYS UP AND READY FOR A GOOD FIGHT. MISS PAYTAS WOULD SAY SOMETHING GENUINELY SO MEAN ABOUT SOMEBODY, THEN CRY & RUN OFF & MAKE IT A HUGE DEAL AFTER THEY RIGHTFULLY RETALIATE. 10/10 CHAOTIC. WOULD WAKE US ALL UP IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT YELLING.



5.
NAME: GLEN POWELL
COUNTRY: USA
PURPOSE: BAD NEWS BEARS
WHY: NOW I DON'T KNOW ANY OF THESE PEOPLE PERSONALLY, BUT I FEEL LIKE GLEN WOULD JUST BE THE WORST ISLANDER. HE WOULD COME IN, CHARMING AS HELL, CHARISMATIC, FUN, ATTRACTIVE. BUT SOMETHING ABOUT HIM IS GIVING OH-NO! HE WOULD BE THE CASA AMOR SCANDAL OF THE SEASON. HOPPING FROM GIRL TO GIRL, FINALLY FINDING "THE ONE" AND THEN THROWING IT AWAY FOR A HOT NIGHT IN THE HIDEAWAY DURING CASA AMOR WEEK. EVERYONE WOULD TURN ON HIM. HE GETS VOTED OUT SHORTLY AFTER ARRIVING.



6.
NAME: DWAYNE (THE ROCK) JOHNSON
COUNTRY: USA
PURPOSE: DOMINATE PHYSICAL COMPS
WHY: DWAYNE'S ONLY PURPOSE IN THIS SEASON IS TO COME IN AND ROCK EVERYONE'S SHIT IN THE PHYSICAL COMPS. TANA & TRISHA WOULD DEFINITELY FIGHT FOR HIS ATTENTION. HE DOESN'T CARE. HE'S WORKING OUT IN THE BACKGROUND OF LITERALLY EVERY SHOT & IS CONSISTENTLY MAKING JOKES BUT REFUSES TO MAKE A CONNECTION. HIS LACK OF CONNECTION ALSO LEADS HIM TO LEAVE THE VILLA SOON AFTER HE ARRIVES.



7.
NAME: BRITTANY BROSKI
COUNTRY: USA
PURPOSE: BESTIE
WHY: BRITTANY AND I ARE SOULMATES. WE ARE DESTINED TO BE FRIENDS. WE WOULD SPEND THE ENTIRE TIME IN THE VILLA, SHARING TEA, AND BEING GOOFY TOGETHER. HER CONFESSIONALS ARE UNBEARABLY FUNNY & SHE WOULD WIN FAN FAVORITE OF THE SEASON. I THINK THAT EVENTUALLY, LOGAN AND BRITTANY WOULD END UP TOGETHER. THESE TWO ARE THE POTENTIAL VICTORS OF THE SEASON.

8. NAME: DOJA CAT
COUNTRY: USA
PURPOSE: SUITOR / CHAOS / A TOP CONTENDER IN PHYSICAL COMPS
WHY: DOJA WOULD PUT DWAYNE IN HIS PLACE FOR SOME OF THE PHYSICAL COMPS. SHE'S AGILE AND SMALL. THIS WOULD WORK TO HER ADVANTAGE. SHE WOULD ALSO HAVE THE CRAZIEST INTRO INTO THE VILLA—I MEAN, LOOK AT HER. ADDITIONALLY, WOULD TOTALLY BEGIN THE UPROAR AGAINST ALL OF THE MEN ON THE ISLAND, STARTING A PACT FOR ALL OF US WOMEN TO DATE EACH OTHER WHILE THE MEN SLOWLY ALL TRICKLE OFF. TRISHA HATES HER. GLEN WANTS, BUT CANNOT HAVE HER. SHE & I SPEND THE ENTIRE SEASON PLAYFULLY FLIRTING. WE SNEAK A KISS HERE & THERE. WE WOULD MOST LIKELY SPEND A WEEK COUPLED UP, BUT I FEEL LIKE OUR GOOFINESS TOGETHER MIGHT BE TOO MUCH, AND WE WOULD AMICABLY PART TO RE-COUPLE WITH OTHER ISLANDERS AS WE JUST WOULDN'T REALLY KNOW WHEN TO TAKE EACH OTHER SERIOUSLY. WE'D JUST BE CUDDLING AND CONFUSED. I'M CONVINCED THAT AT THE END OF IT ALL, HER & TANA WOULD COUPLE UP AND MAKE THE FINALE—HELL, THEY WOULD WIN. TANA WOULD IN FACT MAKE THE HEINOUS CHOICE TO LEAVE THE ISLAND WITHOUT DOJA AND TAKE THE 100K ALL TO HERSELF (IDIOT), BUT DOJA DOESN'T CARE. SHE JUST WANTS TO SHAKE ASS AND BE WILD!

9. NAME: AUSTIN BUTLER (DRESSED AS ELVIS THE ENTIRE TIME)
COUNTRY: USA
PURPOSE: HE PAID TO BE ON THE SHOW
WHY: AUSTIN REFUSES TO STOP TALKING IN HIS ELVIS ACCENT / DRESSING LIKE ELVIS, BUT TRISHA CANNOT GET ENOUGH. AUSTIN (ELVIS) AND GLEN'S FRIENDSHIP KNOWS NO BOUNDS. WE ASK THEM OFTEN IF THEY'RE INTERESTED IN COUPLING UP, BUT THEY ARE REPULSED BY THIS. (JOKE IS ON THEM. I AM NOW WRITING ABOUT THEM IN A HOMOSEXUAL MAGAZINE.) TO PROVE TO AMERICA THAT THEY ARE NOT ROMANTICALLY INVOLVED, THEY ARE CONTINUOUSLY FIGHTING OVER DOJA CAT & KISSING HER IN COMPETITIONS (ROUND 2 OF JOKE IS ON THEM, DOJA ONLY HAS ROMANTIC RELATIONS WITH WOMEN ON THE ISLAND). BUTLER (PRESLEY) WOULD ALSO BE THE SECOND MOST HEAVILY PIED ISLANDER IN THE PIE COMPETITION, NEXT TO GLEN POWELL. THE CRAZY CHANGE UP ABOUT THIS IS, (ROUND 3 OF JOKE IS ON THEM) BECAUSE AUSTIN IS SO OBSESSED WITH ELVIS, HE ACTUALLY FALLS FOR JACOB ELORDI HALFWAY THROUGH THE SEASON BECAUSE JACOB ELORDI ALSO PLAYS ELVIS ON THE BIG SCREEN. AUSTIN BUTLER LOVES HIMSELF. HE SPENDS THE REST OF HIS TIME ON THE ISLAND CHASING JACOB. JACOB INDULGES FOR A WHILE DURING MY ESCAPADE WITH DOJA CAT, BUT AFTER HE REALIZES THAT HE IS UNABLE TO GET BUTLER OUT OF CHARACTER, HE GETS FREAKED OUT AND DECIDES TO STEP BACK FROM THEIR RELATIONSHIP. THE CEREMONY IN WHICH JACOB SAYS MY NAME WHEN ASKED WHO HE'D LIKE TO COUPLE UP WITH INSTEAD OF AUSTIN'S SHOCKS THE NATION. WE ARE THE DRAMA. BUTLER HAS TO LEAVE THE ISLAND. HE PRAYS TO ELVIS.



10.
NAME: GORDON RAMSAY
COUNTRY: UNITED KINGDOM
PURPOSE: MEAN
WHY: GORDON SERVES AS THE SINGULAR CAST MEMBER WHO IS REALLY WILLING TO PUT EVERYONE IN THEIR PLACE WITHOUT FEAR OF BACKLASH. HE WOULD ALSO COOK ALL OF OUR MEALS FOR US, SO WE WOULD EAT GOOD ALL DAY, EVERY DAY. EVERY TIME SOMEBODY SAYS SOMETHING STUPID, HE'S THE FIRST TO SHOOT A CRAZY LOOK UP AT ONE OF THE HIDDEN CAMERAS, AND IS CONSTANTLY TALKING ABOUT HOW HE WANTS TO GO HOME. GORDON, BRITTANY, AND I, ARE HOWEVER, THE BEST OF FRIENDS. A THREE PERSON ALLIANCE, IF YOU WILL.

IN THE END, THE THREE COUPLES THAT COMPETE IN THE FINALE ARE AS FOLLOWS:

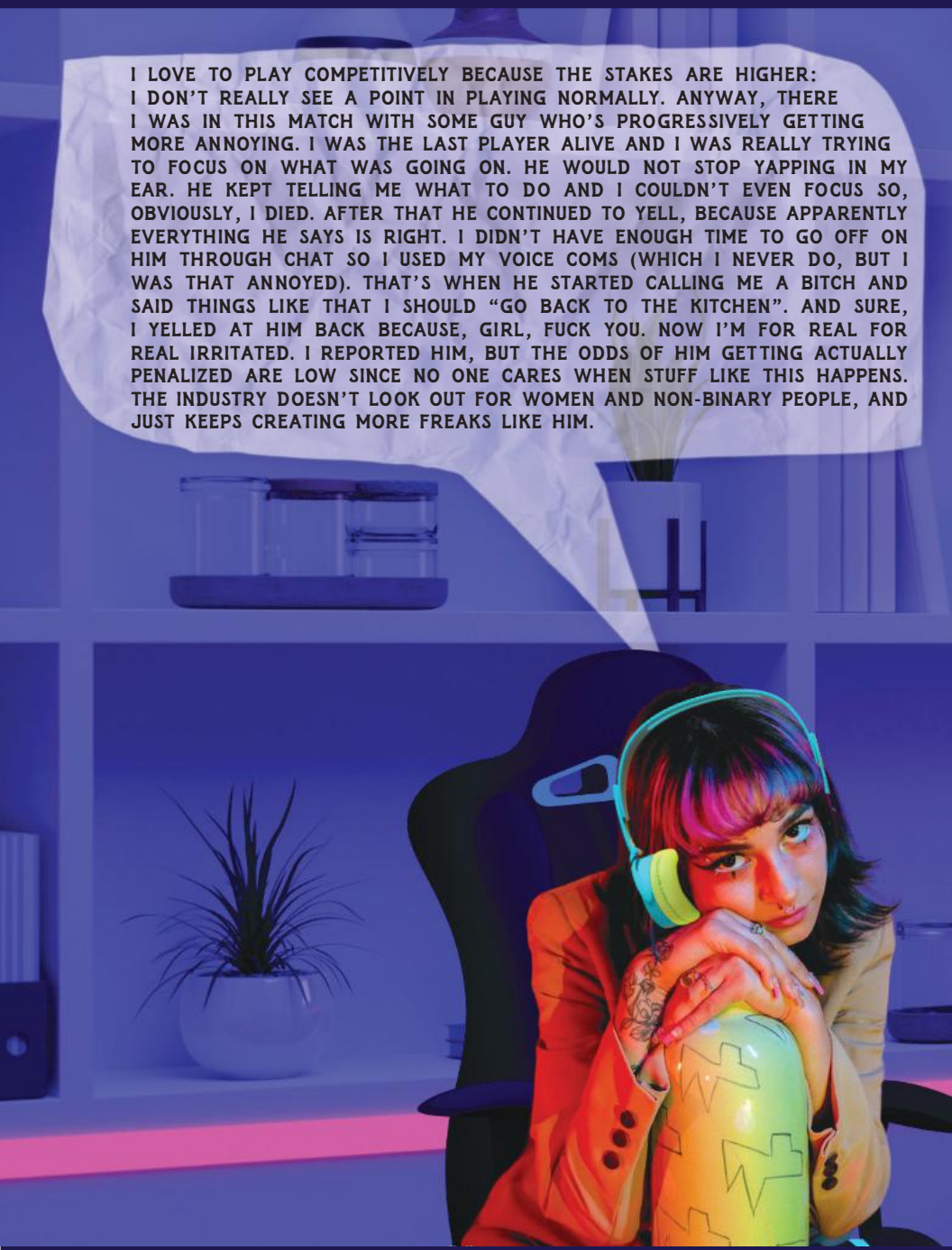
1. JACOB ELORDI AND MYSELF
2. DOJA CAT AND TANA MONGEAU
3. BRITTANY BROSKI AND LOGAN LERMAN

OUR VICTORS? AS PREVIOUSLY STATED, MISS DOJA AND BABY TANA!

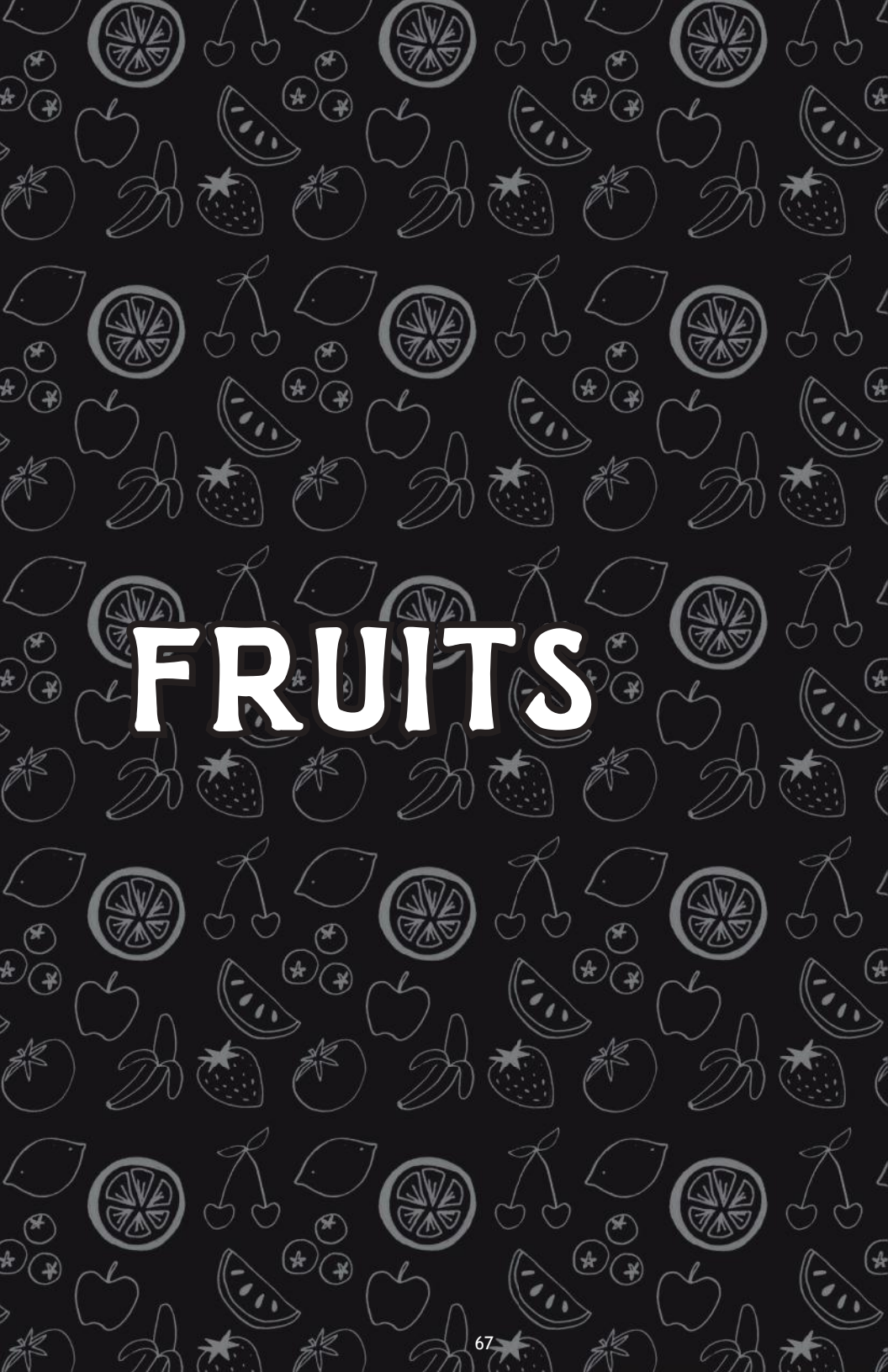
ADDITIONAL HONORABLE CAST MEMBER MENTIONS:
DOVE CAMERON (SUITOR)
JACK HARLOW (FOR THE BIT)
POST MALONE (GIVES THE BEST HUGS)
LEA MICHELE (SOLE INGENUE OF THE ISLAND & WON'T STOP TALKING ABOUT IT)
JUDD NELSON, BREAKFAST CLUB ERA (SUITOR)



Gaming With Milo Pina



FEATURED


FRUITS

On Meeting Through Music, First Times, and Utilizing Lemons: A Love Letter to Laura Elliott

by Sara Childrey

IN MY LIFE, I HAVE STUMBLED INTO BEING FRIENDS WITH A FEW ROCK STARS. WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, BEING A ROCK STAR SEEMED SO UNATTAINABLE, EVEN IF MY MOM TOLD ME THAT I COULD BE ONE SOMEDAY. EVENTUALLY, I REACHED THE CONCLUSION THAT, SINCE I HAD PUT NO EFFORT INTO LEARNING TO PLAY OR WRITE, I WOULD NOT GET TO BE A SINGER-SONGWRITER. DESPITE MY FANTASIES OF BEING OVERHEARD BELTING IN THE SHOWER BY A RECORD EXECUTIVE, MY SMALL WASHINGTON TOWN WAS NOT RIPE WITH OPPORTUNITY. NEVERTHELESS, I PREVAILED: I INFILTRATED THE MUSIC INDUSTRY BY TRICKING ACQUAINTANCES INTO BRINGING ME ON TOUR AND STEALING ALL THEIR FRIENDS. AMONG THEM WAS LAURA ELLIOTT.

I FIRST HEARD LAURA'S MUSIC WHILE SITTING IN THE PASSENGER SEAT OF MY FRIEND'S CAR. HE HAD BORROWED IT FROM HIS DAD, AND I FEIGNED EXCITEMENT ABOUT THE "SICK RIDE." WE TOOK ON THE HILLS OF SAN FRANCISCO IN THIS SPORTY NISSAN, AND HE URGED ME TO LISTEN TO AN UNRELEASED TRACK BY A GIRL HE MET THE WEEK PRIOR. (THE PERK OF BEING SURROUNDED BY MUSICIANS IS THAT THEY ARE ALWAYS GIVING YOU ACCESS TO NEW, UNRELEASED MUSIC THAT NEVER FAILS TO MAKE YOU FEEL LIKE YOU ARE IN ON A BIG SECRET.) WHEN "GOD COMPLEX" PLAYED, I LOVED HER MUSIC IMMEDIATELY: SHE WAS LIKE A PHOEBE BRIDGERS WITH A NEW YORK TWANG, SINGING ABOUT SOME DUDE FAILING TO STEP UP TO THE PLATE. I LOVE SONGS ABOUT HOW MEN HAVE FAILED.

MY FRIEND MAY HAVE PLAYED THIS FOR ME IN PASSING, BUT I BECAME OBSESSED. SHE ONLY HAD A HANDFUL OF SONGS OUT ON SPOTIFY AT THIS POINT, AND IF WE STILL PLAYED TAPES, I WOULD HAVE WORN THROUGH HERS IN A WEEK. I DID NOT LISTEN TO ANYTHING ELSE. I HADN'T BEEN SO TAKEN BY MUSIC SINCE I FIRST HEARD "STRANGER IN THE ALPS"! HER WORDS FELT CATHARTIC. AND OF COURSE THEY WERE: YEARS LATER, WHEN LAURA AND I HAD GROWN TO KNOW EACH OTHER WELL, I COULD SEE HOW THESE SONGS HELPED HER WORK THROUGH HER EMOTIONS. THIS IS EVIDENT AS YOU LISTEN: HER MUSIC FEELS LIKE A RELEASE. TALKING TO HER TODAY, I ASKED IF SHE FELT THAT SONG WRITING WAS SIMILAR TO JOURNALING. SHE TOLD ME THAT IT PROBABLY WOULD BE, IF SHE DIDN'T HATE JOURNALING. TYPICALLY, I WOULD LAUNCH INTO A LECTURE ON THE IMPORTANCE OF JOURNAL PRACTICE, BUT IF HER PRACTICE MEANS I GET LYRICS LIKE "DRAG ME TEN FEET UNDERGROUND/SOMEHOW YOU LOOK SMALLER NOW" THEN I WILL "FOLD" ON MY POSITION.


BRAKE
Kathy (Mom)

THE FIRST TIME I SAW LAURA LIVE SHE WAS PLAYING AT THE ECHO. I HAD BEEN SECRETLY LISTENING TO HER EP ON AN INCOGNITO SOUNDCLOUD LINK FOR MONTNS. (I ACTUALLY DON'T KNOW IF I EVER TOLD HER THIS.) WATCHING HER PERFORM, I WAS MOVED BY HER JOY. SHE IS A BUBBLE OF ENERGY; SHE BEAMS ONSTAGE AND IT IS A GIFT TO HEAR HER GIGGLE. SHE HELD HERSELF WITH EFFORTLESS COOL IN A BIG T-SHIRT AND CAMO PANTS. FOR SOMEONE WHO WRITES SUCH SAD SONGS, YOU WOULD BE SHOCKED HOW MUCH SUNSHINE RADIATES OFF HER WHEN SHE IS PERFORMING. THAT NIGHT, MY FRIENDS AND I GOT DRUNK AND WANDERED ECHO PARK. THE END OF THE DAY IS HAZY IN MY MEMORY, ENDING WITH DRUNK TACOS, RUNNING THROUGH THE MCDONALD'S LINE, AND DISCUSSING OUR ABILITY (OR LACK THEREOF) TO JUMP ON TOP OF THE GROCERY STORE BUILDING. I LEFT LAURA AT THE VENUE, BUT SHE KEPT LIVING ON IN MY HEADPHONES.

THE FIRST TIME LAURA CAME TO SAN FRANCISCO, I MET HER AND HER MOM (TOUR MANAGER EXTRAORDINAIRE) FOR LUNCH. WE WALKED ON THE PIER, WE SAW THE SEALS, WE TOOK BEREALS, AND I WATCHED HER PLAY AT THE ICONIC FILLMORE. WE WALKED THE HALLS GAWKING AT THE POSTERS OF OUR MUSICAL HEROES. I HEARD HER PLAY "FOLD" THAT NIGHT, LAURA'S FAVORITE SONG ON HER UPCOMING EP. THE FIRST FEW SECONDS IN, I WAS MOVED TO TEARS AS HER VOICE FLOATED PERFECTLY ON TOP OF INTRICATE GUITAR MELODIES.

THE FIRST TIME LAURA CAME TO VISIT ME IN LOS ANGELES, WE SOLIDIFIED OUR FRIENDSHIP IN CUPS OF TEA AND MID-DAY VENTS AND BORROWED SKIRTS. THEY SAY TO NEVER MEET YOUR HEROES, BUT TIME REVEALED TO ME ALL THAT WE HAD IN COMMON: DESPITE MY IDOLIZATION, SHE WAS JUST ANOTHER 20 SOMETHING TRYING TO FIGURE HER SHIT OUT. SHE DIDN'T MIND THE AIR MATTRESS IN MY LIVING ROOM, MY MINI MELTDOWNS, OR MY LACK OF CREAMER OPTIONS. SHE LISTENED TO MY WOES AND I LISTENED TO HERS. LAURA IS MADE OF SWEETNESS DOWN TO HER CORE, EVEN WHEN THE WORLD IS GIVING HER LEMONS. I WATCHED HER GRAB THE CITRUS, SLICE IT OPEN, AND SQUEEZE OUT CAR SICK (LAURA'S NEW, HIGHLY ANTICIPATED EP).

THE FIRST TIME I HEARD A RECORDING FROM CAR SICK WAS DURING THIS LA TRIP. LATE AT NIGHT, WE CREPT OUT OF MY APARTMENT TO SIT IN THE CAR AND LISTEN TO HER DEMO OVER THE SPEAKER— IPHONE QUALITY WOULD NOT DO. MY NEIGHBOR OPENED HER WINDOW AND GLARED AT US, BUT I WAS TOO EXCITED TO CARE. I KNEW THIS WAS THE START TO A VERY SPECIAL PROJECT.


Tony Davia
The Dude

5 TRACKS LONG, LAURA DESCRIBES THIS AS HER "MOST COHESIVE PROJECT TO DATE." THIS IS THE FIRST PROJECT THAT SHE HAS HAD A CLEAR IDEA FOR FROM THE BEGINNING: FROM VISUALS, SOUND, AND CONCEPT. SOME OF THE CREDIT FOR ITS COHESIVITY GOES TO HER PRODUCER, TONY DAVIA. THIS IS LAURA'S FIRST PROJECT WITH A DISTINCT VISION FROM THE START, AND COLLABORATION ALONG THE WAY. (LAURA WOULD NOT DESCRIBE HERSELF AS A "COLLABORATIVE GIRLY"). WHEN I ASKED HER WHY WORKING WITH TONY FELT DIFFERENT, SHE BEAMED, "I TRUST THE HECK OUT OF HIM. FROM THE VERY START, HE TOLD ME HOW MUCH HE BELIEVES IN MY MUSIC, AND HE REALLY PUTS HIS ALL INTO IT... HE BELIEVES IN ME IN A WAY THAT HELPS ME BELIEVE IN MYSELF... HE REALLY STARTED TO FEEL LIKE AN ANCHOR." WHEN YOU LISTEN THROUGH FOR THE FIRST TIME, KEEP A KEEN EAR ON THE PRODUCTION TO HEAR THE TRUST BEYOND THE ARTISTRY.

THIS EP CONTAINS SOME OTHER FIRSTS, NAMELY THAT BUG IS HER "FIRST EVER LOVE SONG." SHE CONFESSED, "IT'S THE FIRST SONG THAT I FEEL LIKE REPRESENTS LOVE IN ONLY A POSITIVE WAY. IF YOU THINK ABOUT IT, "FOLD" IS A LOVE SONG TOO, BUT IN A VERY DIFFERENT WAY." I DID THINK ABOUT IT, AND SHE IS RIGHT. LAURA IS A LOVER AND A FEELER: HER EMOTIONALITY IS A COMPLIMENT TO HER EXPERT GUITAR AND VOCAL ABILITIES. THIS DICHOTOMY OF SKILL AND VULNERABILITY IS WHAT LEADS US TO ARTISTS LIKE BOYGENIUS, HALEY HEYNDRICKX, AND PINEGROVE, AND HAS INCREASINGLY BECOME PART OF THE ZEITGEIST OF POPULAR MUSIC. EVEN WHEN SHE IS SINGING ABOUT HER DEVASTATION, IT COMES FROM ALL THE LOVELIEST PLACES OF HER HEART.

LAURA TOLD ME SOME OTHER FAVORITE FIRSTS OF HERS, INCLUDING HER FIRST CRUSH (THE PARENTS FROM SPY KIDS), FIRST FAVORITE ALBUMS (DONNY HATHAWAY, LIVE AT THE BITTER END AND PINEGROVE, LIVE AT AUDIOTREE), FIRST CONCERT (JAMES TAYLOR AS A WEE BABE), AND HER FIRST PERFORMANCE IN A MUSICAL (JACK, INTO THE WOODS, JR.). WHILE I WISH I COULD SEE HER AS JACK, I WILL HAPPILY SETTLE DOWN WITH MY VOICE MEMO VERSION OF CAR SICK, AND I CAN'T WAIT FOR YOU ALL TO JOIN ME IN LISTENING ON ALL MAJOR MUSIC PLATFORMS THIS JANUARY.


AIR MAIL
UNITED STATES POSTAGE
LAURA
elliott
New York
USA 20c
Eastern Bluebird &

BEYOND SAM K

by Kelsey Rose Rootenberg

AS THE CLOCK STRIKES 10:00 PM ON A NOVEMBER EVENING, I WALK INTO SAM K'S STUDIO TO FIND HER DISGRUNTLED AT THE STATE OF HER NEW BIRTHDAY PARTY DRESS. "SOMETHING ISN'T RIGHT," SHE DECIDES. HER SOLUTION? SHE'LL WEAR THE DRESS BACKWARDS; IT'S BETTER THAT WAY.

SAM KLEGERMAN IS A RENOWNED PHOTOGRAPHER, MODEL, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, AUTHOR, AND SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER. WITH OVER 36K INSTAGRAM FOLLOWERS, SAM HAS SHOT SWIM WEEKS, POSED FOR MAGAZINES, AND PUBLISHED A BEST SELLING BOOK ALL BEFORE THE AGE OF 26 YEARS OLD. AS A TEENAGER, SHE TRAVELED AROUND THE WORLD SHOOTING FOR GIGANTIC COMPANIES LIKE PLAYBOY AND PACSUN, AND NOWADAYS, SHE SPENDS HER TIME CREATING WITH HIGH-END BRANDS LIKE SKIMS AND GUESS. WHETHER YOU FOLLOW HER ONLINE OR HAVE HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF MEETING HER IN REAL LIFE, IT'S CLEAR THAT NO ONE LIGHTS UP A ROOM LIKE SAM. FRANKLY, NO ONE WOULD KNOW THIS MORE THAN ME, BECAUSE I AM LUCKY ENOUGH TO CALL HER MY BEST FRIEND.

BECAUSE OF MY UNIQUELY FORTUNATE POSITION, I SEE SIDES OF SAM K THAT ARE NOT SHOWCASED AS MUCH TO THE PUBLIC; I AM EXCITED TO HAVE THIS OPPORTUNITY TO GIVE CURRENT AND FUTURE SAM K FANATICS THE INSIDE SCOOP.

I LOVE TO SEE HER GLEAM WHEN STRANGERS RECOGNIZE AND EXPRESS HOW THEY HAVE BEEN IMPACTED BY HER; BUT I FIND EVEN MORE JOY WHEN SHE CALLS ME TO UPDATE HER FIVE YEAR PLAN ON HOW A HANNAH MONTANA TOUR COULD SOLVE THE ECONOMY (A PROJECT WHICH IS EXTREMELY UNDER WRAPS, SORRY FRUITSLICE READERS). I CHERISH THE SAM K THAT CALLS ME IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT WHEN SHE HAS A BAD DREAM.

GROWING UP TRANSGENDER IN CONSERVATIVE ORANGE COUNTY, SAM HAS THRIVED DESPITE THE LABORIOUS ENMITIES THAT SHE HAS HAD TO COMBAT THROUGHOUT HER ENTIRE EXISTENCE. DESPITE THE ANTAGONISTIC SURROUNDINGS, SHE FOUND SUCCESS EARLY. WHEN SHE WAS 14 YEARS OLD, THE HEAD OF BRANDY MELLVIELLE SAW THE PHOTOGRAPHS SHE WAS POSTING ON INSTAGRAM AND INVITED HER TO BE THE FIRST CONTENT CREATOR EVER TO SHOOT FOR THEM. I ASKED HER IF SHE REMEMBERED THE FIRST PHOTO THAT MADE HER REALIZE HER DESTINY.

"I TOOK A PHOTO OF MY FRIEND HOLDING A CANDLE IN THE GUTTER ACROSS THE STREET FROM MY HOUSE. WE WOULD ALL GO THERE TO TAKE PICTURES. TO ME, THAT WAS THE GOLDEN TICKET—THE EXPOSURE THAT PHOTO GOT IS WHY I DO WHAT I DO TODAY. I FELT HOW COOL IT WAS THAT I GOT TO EXPRESS MYSELF THROUGH THAT MEDIUM, AND I KNEW THEN THAT THIS WAS HOW I WANTED TO MAKE SHIT HAPPEN. IT FELT LIKE I WAS GOING TO A MOVIE PREMIERE THAT I KNEW WAS GOING TO BE A BLOCKBUSTER. I KNEW IT WAS GONNA BE A HIT AND I WAS JUST STOKED TO BE IN THE ROOM."



FROM THE FIRST MOMENT I MET SAM, ONE THING WAS CLEAR: HERE IS A GIRL WHO HAS A DREAM AND MAKES IT HAPPEN WITH HEART AND FEROCITY. IN ANY CAPACITY, IT'S CLEAR THAT SAM HAS PROGRESSED IN AND OUT OF HER FIELD WITH EXTREME POISE. UNBEKNOWNST TO ME, THERE WERE MOMENTS ALONG THE WAY WHEN SAM QUESTIONED HER CHOSEN PATH.

"PHOTOGRAPHY HAS THE POTENTIAL TO GET EXTREMELY ONE DIMENSIONAL VERY QUICKLY UNLESS YOU INFUSE YOUR OWN PERSONALITY AND LIFE INTO YOUR PICTURES. IT CAN GET BORING IF YOU'RE ONLY DOING IT FOR A CHECK, AND I WENT FROM DOING IT EXCLUSIVELY AS AN ART FORM TO BEING COMPENSATED. I LOOK BACK ON THE PHOTOS I TOOK BEFORE I WAS GETTING PAID AND I STILL SEE HOW PHENOMENAL THEY ARE. BUT THERE ARE LULLS IN BETWEEN THE MOMENTS OF WORKING AS MUCH AS I DO WHEN I SIT BACK AND THINK ABOUT WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF I NEVER TOOK ANOTHER PHOTO. IT'S A QUESTION THAT ALWAYS COMES UP IN JOBS WHERE YOU'RE SELF EMPLOYED AND SELF MOTIVATED. THIS JOB ONLY WORKS IF YOU DO, THERE'S A LOT OF GIVE AND TAKE."

WHILE SUCCESS HAS BEEN CONSTANT, NEW HEIGHTS PROVIDE NEW CHALLENGES AND ANXIETIES. FOR THE FIRST PORTION OF SAM'S CAREER, SHE STUCK TO SHOOTING PRODUCTS AND MODELS FOR BRANDS THAT WERE LUCKY ENOUGH TO HIRE HER. HOWEVER, NOWADAYS, SAM HAS BEEN CREATING MORE CONTENT FROM IN FRONT OF THE CAMERA. USING HERSELF AS A VESSEL FOR HER ART HAS PROVED TO BE A BIT MORE CHALLENGING THAN ONE WOULD GUESS.

"ONE DAY I WOKE UP AND THOUGHT, WAIT, I'M EQUALLY IMPORTANT TO ONE DIMENSIONAL IMAGES THAT I'M PUTTING OUT FOR A BRAND. I DESERVE TO BE LOOKED AT AS MUCH IF NOT MORE THAN THOSE PHOTOS. I'VE BEEN POSTING MORE PHOTOS OF MYSELF, TURNING THE CAMERA TOWARDS ME AND ALLOWING OTHER PEOPLE TO PRESS THE BUTTON. WHAT PEOPLE DON'T REALLY UNDERSTAND IS I'M VISUALLY STYLING EVERY PHOTO THAT I'M IN, EVEN IF I DON'T TAKE THE PICTURE. WHEN I POST, I DEFINITELY PUT A LOT OF STRESS ON MY BODY FOR NO REASON. THERE'S AN INTERNAL CONVERSATION THAT HAPPENS BEFORE I MAKE IT A PUBLIC CONVERSATION. BUT MORE RECENTLY, IT FEELS LIKE I'M SENDING A BABY BIRD OUT OF THE NEST. IF IT FLIES, IT FLIES, AND IF IT DOESN'T, I KNOW THAT I GAVE IT WINGS AND AT THE END OF THE DAY, I STILL FLY NO MATTER WHAT."

I ASKED SAM WHAT KEEPS HER FLYING.

NOTE: SAM K FORMULATES SENTENCES AS BEAUTIFULLY AND AS FAST AS A HEART PUMPS BLOOD THROUGH A BODY. HOWEVER, THIS IS THE ONLY QUESTION IN OUR ENTIRE CONVERSATION THAT IS MET WITH A DEEP BREATH AND A STUMPED SILENCE. WITH AN INTENTIONAL GAZE UP TO THE SKY, SHE DECIDES—

"A COUPLE OF THINGS. KNOWING I'VE FLOWN FOR A VERY LONG TIME AND I'M GOOD AT FLYING. KNOWING THAT REGARDLESS OF WHAT I'M DOING ON ANY DAY, I HAVE TO USE MY WINGS AND I WILL ALWAYS LAND ON MY FEET (METAPHORICALLY). ALSO, JUST KNOWING HOW MUCH TIME I'VE PUT INTO THIS CAREER-ACTUALLY, NOT EVEN CAREER. SCREW CAREER. THE AMOUNT OF TIME I'VE PUT INTO UNDERSTANDING AND GETTING TO KNOW MYSELF WILL ALWAYS KEEP ME ABOVE WATER INSTEAD OF LETTING MYSELF BE DROWNED BY DOUBT."



SAM IS VERY INTENTIONALLY AWARE OF HOW MUCH OF HER ART CORRESPONDS WITH HOW SHE PRESENTS HERSELF. THE INEVITABILITY OF BEING PERCEIVED BY STRANGERS AND COLLABORATORS DOES NOT GO UNACKNOWLEDGED. HOWEVER, DESPITE HER COMMITMENT TO AUTHENTICITY IN ALL ENVIRONMENTS, THERE ARE STILL IMPORTANT PARTS OF SAM THAT GO WIDELY UNKNOWN.

"ONE THING PEOPLE DON'T KNOW ABOUT ME IS THAT I GENUINELY ENJOY SHARING THE STAGE WITH OTHERS. AS MUCH AS I DO COMMAND AND CONTROL A SPOTLIGHT, I NEVER FEEL LIKE I HAVE TO DIM MY LIGHT TO HELP OTHERS SHINE. EVEN ON A SMALL STAGE, WHEN I'M HAVING A CONVERSATION WITH SOMEONE AND I'M MAKING THEM FEEL LIKE A MILLION BUCKS BECAUSE I'M BEING— WAIT, WHO'S THAT CHICK THAT DANCED FOR A NICKEL?" (SHIRLEY TEMPLE?) "YES! SHIRLEY TEMPLE! I'M BEING FULL SHIRLEY TEMPLE, BUT I STILL WANT YOU TO DANCE IN THE ALPHABET SOUP WITH ME. AND THAT DOESN'T MEAN IN UNISON OR TO THE BEAT OF MY DRUM, BUT STILL TOGETHER."

AS SAM'S BEST FRIEND, I CAN AUTHENTICATE THIS DECLARATION. SAM'S GLOW IS CAST SO WIDELY THAT IT SHINES ON ANYONE AND EVERYONE. SHE LOCATES THE LIGHT IN SOMEONE ELSE AND TURNS THE BRIGHTNESS UP TO 100%. SHE REMINDS ME WHO I AM. SHE SHOWS UP TO MY WORK AND BRINGS ME A SNACK. SHE CALLS ME TO TELL ME THAT SHE'S PROUD OF ME FOR SOMETHING I DID TWO WEEKS AGO. IT'S RARE TO SEE A STAR USE ITS OWN SHIMMER TO ILLUMINATE OTHERS. ONE WOULD EXPECT IT TO BE AN ACT, BUT SAM HAS HER OWN WAYS OF KEEPING IT ALL AUTHENTIC.

"THIS IS GONNA SOUND SO SILLY, BUT I'M AT MY MOST GROUNDED AND AUTHENTIC SELF WHEN I AM WORKING AND GIVING EVERYTHING I'VE GOT. I'VE SPENT OVER TEN YEARS PUTTING THIS ALL TOGETHER, AND YES, IT'S A PERFORMANCE AND A SHOW, BUT DAMN, WHAT A SHOW! THAT'S AUTHENTICITY RIGHT THERE. BUT ON THE OTHER SIDE OF IT, I COULD ALSO ARGUE THAT I'M MY MOST AUTHENTIC SELF WHEN I'M NOT SPEAKING TO A SINGLE PERSON AND I'M ALLOWING MYSELF THE SPACE TO RELAX. A LOT OF PEOPLE SEE ME AS THIS BIG CHECKLIST: DIABETIC, TRANS, PHOTOGRAPHER; THERE'S SO MANY THINGS THAT GO INTO IT, BUT WHEN I'M JUST AT HOME IN MY ROBE, JUST PUTTING ON A FACEMASK OR TALKING TO MYSELF, THAT'S ME."

IT'S CLEAR THAT SAM HAS NO PROBLEM PUTTING ALL OF HERSELF ON DISPLAY. WHETHER IT BE HER UNPARALLELED INSTAGRAM POSTS OR HER HILARIOUS TIK TOKS, WHEN SAM K PUTS HERSELF OUT THERE, THE PEOPLE EAT IT UP. BUT WHEN IT COMES TO PARTS OF HER LIFE SHE WISHES WERE MORE CENTER STAGE, SAM DOES NOT HESITATE. AFTER GRADUATING FROM PARSONS SCHOOL OF DESIGN IN NEW YORK, SAM PUBLISHED A PROFOUND AND DEEPLY INTIMATE BOOK, *YES NO THANK YOU GOODBYE,* DOCUMENTING HER EXPERIENCES CARING FOR HER MOTHER WHO LIVES WITH EARLY-ONSET ALZHEIMER'S. THROUGH POWERFUL AND EMOTIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS, SAM USES HER ART TO SHINE A LIGHT ON HER EXPERIENCE WITH ACTIVE AND LIVING GRIEF. ALL PROCEEDS FROM THE BOOK ARE DONATED TO USAGAINSTALZHEIMER'S.



"NOW THAT THE BOOK HAS BEEN PUBLISHED AND POSTED, PEOPLE MIGHT THINK IT'S DONE AND IN THE PAST. A LOT OF PEOPLE THINK MY MOM IS DEAD BECAUSE THEY SEE THE WORD GRIEF AND MAKE THAT CONCLUSION; THAT'S REALLY FUNNY BECAUSE THE CHICK'S STILL ALIVE AND KICKING. I WISH PEOPLE HAD THE GUTS TO ASK ME ABOUT THAT, BECAUSE I LOVE TALKING ABOUT IT AND I WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT MORE. THAT'S ALSO WHEN I'M MY MOST AUTHENTIC SELF, SHARING A PART OF MY LIFE THAT NEVER REALLY SAW THE LIGHT OF DAY UNTIL I MADE THE BOOK. IT'S A TRAUMA RESPONSE, IT'S A GRIEF PROJECT, IT'S EVERYTHING IN ONE. I'M VERY DELIBERATE, AND ESPECIALLY WITH THAT BOOK, I PUT MY WHOLE HEART INTO IT.

I WISH PEOPLE WOULD ASK ME MORE ABOUT ITS BACKSTORY, BUT THEN I AM REMINDED OF WHEN SOMEONE GETS UPSET WHEN PEOPLE DON'T WISH THEM A HAPPY BIRTHDAY. IF I WANT PEOPLE TO ASK ME ABOUT MY BOOK, I NEED TO PR IT. I REALLY THINK IT'S 50/50 OF GIVE AND TAKE AS AN ARTIST; YOU'RE IN CONTROL OF WHAT YOU LET THE PEOPLE KNOW. YOU'RE NOT IN CONTROL OF HOW THEY RESPOND OR WHAT QUESTIONS THEY ASK, BUT IT'S YOUR JOB TO INVITE THEM TO RAISE THEIR HANDS."

ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THAT, THERE IS AN EASY ANSWER TO WHAT SHE WISHES PEOPLE WOULD SHUT UP ABOUT.

"WHEN IT COMES TO TYPE 1 DIABETES, PEOPLE LIKE TO POINT FINGERS. THEY PUT BLAME ON THE DIABETIC, THEY THINK HAVING DIABETES IS A RESULT OF ACTIVE CHOICES. WHEN I TELL PEOPLE I'M TYPE 1 OR I WHIP OUT MY NEEDLES TO GIVE MYSELF A SHOT, PEOPLE JUST MAKE ASSUMPTIONS. ESPECIALLY NOWADAYS, A LOT OF PEOPLE ASK ME IF I'M GIVING MYSELF ESTROGEN AND I'M LIKE, 'NO, I JUST WANT TO EAT, BABE'. I CAN'T IMAGINE A CHILD IN THIS DAY AND AGE TRYING TO EXPLAIN WHAT IT IS TO THEIR FRIENDS. I REMEMBER BEING EIGHT YEARS OLD IN THE HOSPITAL, I JUST THOUGHT TO MYSELF, 'FUCK, I HAVE TO EXPLAIN THIS TO EVERYBODY, THIS FUCKING BLOWS.' EVEN AT RESTAURANTS, I'VE HAD WAITRESSES ASK ME IF I WAS TAKING CRAZY DRUGS, AND I WOULD BE LIKE, 'I'M NINE'. I JUST WISH PEOPLE WOULD BE MORE DIRECT ABOUT DIABETES. I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING TO GET THIS. I JUST WOKE UP ONE DAY AND MY BODY WAS DIFFERENT. I WISH PEOPLE KNEW THAT I CARE A LOT MORE THAN THEY THINK. AND YOU KNOW WHAT? FOR A LONG TIME, IT WAS JUST, 'THAT SUCKS'. FOR A LONG TIME, I NORMALIZED FEELING LIKE I WAS JUST GOING TO BE STUCK FEELING DIFFERENT. BUT NOW, FOR THE FIRST TIME, I'VE GIVEN MYSELF PERMISSION TO FEEL ALL OF MY EMOTIONS AT ONCE. FOR THE FIRST TIME, RIGHT NOW, ME AND MY BODY ARE IN SYNC."



I REALLY ADMIRE SAM FOR HER OPENNESS AND DESIRE TO EDUCATE OTHERS ON THE PARTS OF HER LIFE THAT SHE ALONE CAN GIVE INSIGHT INTO, HER WILLINGNESS TO DISCUSS THE UNIQUE BOXES THAT SHE CHECKS, AND THE BEAUTIFUL AND GENUINE WAY SHE SHOWCASES THE PARTS OF HER IDENTITY THAT ARE NOT USUALLY DISCUSSED ON MOST SCALES. SO MANY PEOPLE OF ALL IDENTITIES ARE LUCKY ENOUGH TO HAVE SAM K TO LOOK UP TO. I DON'T EVEN FINISH POSING THE IDEA OF YOUNGER SAM SEEING WHAT SHE HAS GROWN UP TO BE—

"—SHE WOULD SHIT HER PANTS. SHE WOULD LOSE HER FUCKING MIND."

AND IF SHE COULD GIVE HER ANYTHING?

"WHEN I WAS IN KINDERGARTEN, I HAD A POWERPUFF GIRLS BACKPACK. IT ROCKED. ONE DAY, THE SCHOOL CALLED MY MOM. THEY WERE UPSET ABOUT THE BACKPACK, THEY SAID IT WAS CONFUSING AND DISTRACTING TO THE OTHER KIDS, AND THEY SAID IT WOULD BE BEST IF SHE GOT ME A NEW BACKPACK. AND YOU KNOW WHAT MY MOM SAID? 'FUCK OFF.' TO THIS DAY, I THINK ABOUT HOW THAT STRONG REINFORCEMENT PLANTED A SEED INSIDE OF ME. THAT SEED HAS BEEN WATERED AND FLOURISHED INTO THIS BELIEF THAT I'M GONNA DO ME NO MATTER WHAT. I KEPT IT GOING, I RAN HOLES THROUGH THAT BACKPACK. I DID HAVE SOME GUILT AND SHAME WHEN I LOOKED AT IT SOMETIMES, BUT IT SHAPED ME. ON A PHYSICAL LEVEL, I WOULD GIVE THAT BACKPACK TO MYSELF AGAIN.

"ON THE OTHER SIDE OF IT, BEING THE VISUAL PERSON THAT I AM, I DON'T KNOW IF I WOULD SAY A SINGLE THING TO LITTLE SAM. I WOULD JUST SHOW HER PHOTOS. I WOULD SHOW UP IN LEATHER PANTS WITH A SKIMS BODYSUIT (GIFTED), COVERED IN JEWELRY. I'D SHOW HER WHO SHE'S GOING TO BE - OR WHO SHE ALREADY IS. AND WHAT'S COMING. BECAUSE SHE KNOWS WHAT TO DO. SHE HAS AN IDEA OF WHAT'S POSSIBLE, AND TO HER, IT FITS INTO AN 8X8 UPS BOX. BUT THE WORLD'S A LOT BIGGER THAN THAT. SHE'LL SEE."

YOU CAN FIND SAM ON INSTAGRAM AND TIK TOK AT @SAAAAAMK AND YOU CAN ORDER *YES NO THANK YOU GOODBY*E ON AMAZON.



Jill Young is Really Good at Firsts

Emma Standerford

IN MY FIRST FEW MONTHS OF LIVING IN LOS ANGELES, I WAS DESPERATE FOR COMMUNITY. I, BEING THE INTROVERT THAT I AM, TIMIDLY TOOK MYSELF OUT TO VARIOUS QUEER EVENTS HOPING TO MAKE NEW FRIENDS. I FOUND MYSELF ONE DAY SITTING ALONE AT AN INDUSTRY EVENT HOSTED BY THE CONNIE NORMAN EMPOWERMENT CENTER. DRINK IN HAND, I WAS TRYING TO DRUM UP THE COURAGE TO SAY HELLO TO SOMEONE. MUCH TO MY GRATITUDE, A BLONDE DYKE SAT DOWN NEXT TO ME AND TOOK THE TASK OUT OF MY HANDS.

THIS BEAUTIFUL SAVIOR WAS NONE OTHER THAN THE INCREDIBLY TALENTED JILL YOUNG. THEY INTRODUCED THEMSELF TO ME, ASKED IF THEY COULD SIT AT MY TABLE DURING THE EVENT, AND TOLD ME A LITTLE ABOUT THEMSELF. "OH, I'M AN ACTOR. I WRITE SOME STUFF, TOO," THEY SAID, HUMBLY. AT THE TIME, I HAD NO IDEA I WAS CHATTING WITH ONE OF THE FUNNIEST PEOPLE I WOULD EVER MEET. SO, WHEN THEY INVITED ME TO A COMEDY SHOW THEY WERE PERFORMING IN, I WAS TERRIFIED. I SHOWED UP TO THE BROADWATER PREPARING FOR THE WORST. NOTHING LIKE A BAD SET TO KILL A BUDDING FRIENDSHIP. MUCH TO MY RELIEF, JILL ABSOLUTELY SLAYED. THEIR TASTE AND THEIR TIMING WAS IMPECCABLE, AND I DIDN'T STOP LAUGHING FOR EVEN A MOMENT WHILE THEY COMMANDED THE STAGE.

I'VE BEEN FRIENDS WITH A FEW CLOWNS, SO I'M NO STRANGER TO THE SCENE. I'VE BEEN TO MORE THAN MY FAIR SHARE OF COMEDY SHOWS AND CLOWN SHOWCASES. THEY'RE NOT ALWAYS PACKED WITH WINNERS, LET ME TELL YOU. EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE, HOWEVER, THERE IS A PERFORMER THAT STANDS OUT AMONGST THE REST. THEY SPLIT YOUR SIDES, AND YOU LEAVE THE THEATER LAUGHING AT THEIR JOKES FOR WEEKS. THIS PERFORMER, MORE OFTEN THAN NOT, IS NAMED JILL YOUNG.

ONE YEAR LATER, I'VE SEEN JILL PERFORM IN COUNTLESS COMEDY SHOWS. I AM A HUGE JILL YOUNG FAN. NOT JUST BECAUSE THEY'VE BECOME SUCH A DEAR FRIEND, BUT ALSO BECAUSE THEY'RE ONE OF THE MOST TALENTED PEOPLE I'VE EVER MET. THEY'VE PRODUCED A BRILLIANT SOLO SHOW DIRECTED BY CALLIOPE WEISMAN THAT PREMIERED IN THE HOLLYWOOD FRINGE FESTIVAL IN JUNE, 2023. THEY'VE JOINED A CLOWN TROUPE CALLED THE NON-SEMBLE, AND HOSTED AN EVENT PRODUCED BY JACKET-OFF APTLY RE-NAMED THE "JILL OFF SHOW." NOT ONLY ARE THEY HILARIOUS, BUT THEY'RE WHIP-SMART. SITTING DOWN WITH JILL TO TALK ABOUT THEIR CREATIVE JOURNEY HAS BEEN SUCH A GIFT.



EMMA STANDERFORD (ES): IS THIS YOUR FIRST TIME DOING AN ARTIST SPOTLIGHT? HOW DOES IT FEEL NOW THAT YOU'RE AT POINT IN YOUR CAREER WHERE [DOING INTERVIEWS] IS A THING?

JILL YOUNG (JY): IT FEELS REALLY GOOD! IT MAKES ME REALLY HAPPY. I'M REALLY EXCITED ABOUT WHERE I'M AT WITH MY ART RIGHT NOW. IT MEANS A LOT FOR YOU TO BE INTERVIEWING ME!!

ES: SO... WHEN DID YOU FIRST PERFORM, LIKE, WHEN DID YOU FIRST STEP FOOT ON STAGE?

JY: (IN THE VOICE OF A BROADWAY DIVA) BABY, I WAS BORN ON THE STAGE!—UM, MY FIRST PLAY WAS CALLED "SCHOOL DAYS" AND I WAS SEVEN. IT WAS ABOUT FISH GOING TO SCHOOL. I TOOK IT VERY SERIOUSLY.

ES: OF COURSE.

JY: MY GRANDPA TOOK ME TO A PRODUCTION OF ANNIE GET YOUR GUN WHEN I WAS THREE AND A HALF. THEN I WENT HOME AND RECREATED THE ENTIRE MUSICAL ON REPEAT FOR THE NEXT YEAR. SO I WAS VERY EXCITED WHEN I FINALLY GOT TO DO A PLAY.

ES: SO ANNIE GET YOUR GUN WAS THE FIRST PLAY YOU EVER SAW?

JY: YEAH, AND THEN I GOT TO BE IN IT WHEN I WAS IN FIFTH GRADE. I GOT TO BE ANNIE. VERY BIG MOMENT. AND THE DAUGHTER OF THE DIRECTOR OF THAT PRODUCTION, STAY WITH ME HERE, IS CALLIOPE WHO DIRECTED MY SOLO SHOW!

ES: SPEAKING OF YOUR SOLO SHOW, IS THIS THE FIRST TIME YOU'VE HAD A FULL ONE-ACT SOLO SHOW PERFORMED? HOW DOES THAT FEEL?

JY: YES! IT FEELS A LITTLE CRAZY, BUT IT FEELS REALLY GOOD. IT'S NOT SCARY TO ME AT ALL—WELL, I MEAN IT WAS WHEN I WAS DEVELOPING IT. BUT IT DOESN'T FEEL OVERWHELMING. I REALLY ENJOY DOING IT.

ES: SO YOUR DIRECTOR CALLIOPE—YOU TWO HAVE OBVIOUSLY KNOWN EACH OTHER FOR A REALLY LONG TIME NOW. YOU'RE BOTH IN YOUR MID-TWENTIES DOING YOUR FIRST SOLO SHOW TOGETHER. HOW HAS THAT CREATIVE, WORKING RELATIONSHIP GROWN OVER THAT TIME?

JY: SO WE DID GO TO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TOGETHER. WE WERE FRIENDLY AND KNEW EACH OTHER, BUT WE WEREN'T SUPER CLOSE BACK THEN. BUT! A YEAR AGO, ALMOST EXACTLY, I RAN INTO HER AT A COMEDY SHOW ALONG WITH ANOTHER OLD CLASSMATE, TANNER. WE GOT DRINKS AFTER THE SHOW AND CAUGHT UP WITH EACH OTHER. CALLIOPE AND I STARTED CHATTING ABOUT HOW I HAVE BEEN DOING A LOT OF COMEDY AND WAS WANTING TO DEVELOP A SOLO SHOW. SHE SAID SHE HAD BEEN DIRECTING A BUNCH OF SHOWS!



ES: WOW! SERENDIPITY!

JY: I KNOW! SHE HAD BEEN LOOKING TO DIRECT A SOLO SHOW WRITTEN BY SOMEONE SHE TRUSTED AND WANTED TO WORK WITH AND I HAD BEEN LOOKING FOR A DIRECTOR I TRUSTED AND WANTED TO WORK WITH... IT JUST PERFECTLY FELL INTO PLACE. SHE'S THIS SUPER BRILLIANT, ORGANIZED, TALENTED DIRECTOR WITH SO MUCH

PASSION AND COMMITMENT. SHE'S REALLY BECOME ONE OF MY DEAREST FRIENDS. IF YOU'D TOLD ME FIVE YEARS AGO THAT I'D BE WORKING WITH CALLIOPE WEISMAN I'D BE LIKE... "THAT'S KIND OF RANDOM" BUT OKAY! AND NOW SHE'S ONE OF MY FAVORITE PEOPLE.

ES: THE WAY THAT THE TWO OF YOU WORK—IT DOES REALLY READ LIKE THE TWO OF YOU HAVE HAD THIS CREATIVE PARTNERSHIP FOR TEN YEARS BECAUSE IT'S SO COHESIVE. I'M KIND OF SHOCKED TO KNOW IT WAS SORT OF A RANDOM—

JY: IT WAS A FIRST FOR US! IT'S OUR FIRST COLLABORATION.

ES: YES! WOW, TYING IT ALL TOGETHER. BUT THAT'S REALLY SPECIAL. SO FIRST COLLABORATION WITH CALLIOPE... WHO IT SEEMS MIGHT BE A CONTINUED COLLABORATOR ON FUTURE PROJECTS...?

JY: YES, WE'RE WORKING TOGETHER ON PLANNING WHERE THE SOLO SHOW IS GOING NEXT YEAR. WE'RE BOTH HOPING TO TAKE THE SHOW TO EDINBURGH, FINGERS CROSSED.

ES: SO FIRST FORAY INTO A SOLO SHOW... FIRST TIME AT THE HOLLYWOOD FRINGE FEST AS WELL... DO YOU HAVE ANY ADVICE FOR PEOPLE WHO STRUGGLE WITH TRYING SOMETHING FOR THE FIRST TIME? WHEN YOU'RE IN THE THROES OF "MAYBE I'M NOT GOING TO FINISH THIS PROJECT" IS THERE SOMETHING YOU RELY ON TO PUSH YOU THROUGH TO THE END?

JY: YOU CAN ALWAYS SAY IT WAS YOUR FIRST TIME! THEN IT'S ALMOST MORE IMPRESSIVE TO SAY YOU DID IT EVEN IF IT DIDN'T TURN OUT PERFECTLY. THERE'S SO MUCH YOU LEARN FROM DOING SOMETHING FOR THE FIRST TIME THAT THE PRODUCT ALMOST DOESN'T MATTER. IT'S ALL ABOUT THE PROCESS. IF YOU'RE HAVING THOUGHTS LIKE "I HATE THIS PLAY I'M WRITING," OR "I HATE THIS SONG I WROTE—" IT DOESN'T EVEN MATTER IF IT'S GOOD. FINISHING IT TO THE END IS THE REASON YOU'RE DOING IT; TO LEARN WHAT IT'S LIKE TO FINISH SOMETHING. THEN THE SECOND THING YOU MAKE, YOU'LL HAVE ALL THAT KNOWLEDGE. YOU'LL BE STARTING FROM SOMEWHERE SOLID INSTEAD OF STARTING FROM SCRATCH.

ES: THAT'S A GOOD WAY TO GET OVER THAT FEAR OF FAILURE. IS THERE A TIME WHERE YOU TRIED SOMETHING AND FAILED REALLY HARD?

JY: FIRST OF ALL, I LOVE THAT QUESTION BECAUSE I HAVE A VERY WEIRD RELATIONSHIP WITH FAILURE. I LOVE IT AND I'M TRYING TO LOVE IT MORE. A BIG TENET OF CLOWNING IS SETTING YOURSELF UP TO FAIL SO THAT YOU CAN CHALLENGE YOURSELF TO CLIMB OUT OF IT. WHEN YOU DO SOMETHING GOOD, PEOPLE LIKE YOU. WHEN YOU DO SOMETHING SHITTY AND THEN YOU WIN THEM BACK, PEOPLE LIKE YOU MORE.

ES: SO TRUE.

JY: SO A LOT OF WHAT I'VE BEEN STUDYING IN COMEDY RECENTLY HAS BEEN "HOW CAN YOU DO THE OPPOSITE OF EVERYTHING YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO DO TO GET PEOPLE TO LIKE YOU AND THEN WIN THEM BACK?" WHICH IS FUN BECAUSE IT MAKES YOU FEEL LIKE NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO, YOU CAN ALWAYS GET YOURSELF BACK OUT OF IT. THE REAL ART ISN'T NOT FAILING, IT'S COMING BACK UP AFTER YOU'VE FAILED.

ES: THAT'S REALLY BEAUTIFUL!

JY: ONE OF MY GOALS IS TO BE MORE COMFORTABLE WITH FAILURE. I THINK A LOT OF TIMES, IF I SENSE I'M GONNA FAIL I'LL JUST PULL OUT. OR I'LL REFRAME IT IN MY MIND SO IT DOESN'T FEEL LIKE A FAILURE?—OR MAYBE I'M JUST PERFECT.

ES: I THINK MAYBE—WHAT IF YOU'RE JUST PERFECT??

(WE BOTH LAUGH).

ES: SO JILL, WHAT DO YOU HAVE COMING UP NEXT?

JY: I HAVE A LOT OF THINGS LINED UP. I LIKE TO HAVE A LOT OF THINGS GOING ON BECAUSE INEVITABLY A FEW THINGS WON'T PAN OUT. FIRST THING IS THAT I'M CONTINUING MY SOLO SHOW IN THE COMING YEAR. BY THE TIME FRUITSLICE IS PUBLISHED I'LL KNOW IF I'M DOING ORLANDO FRINGE OR NOT. I'M PLANNING ON DOING EDINBURGH. I APPLIED TO A FEW FESTIVALS AND IF IT GETS IN I'LL BE GOING TO SAN FRANCISCO OR NEW YORK. I'M WORKING ON DEVELOPING A SHOW WITH MY FRIEND GERI [COURTNEY-AUSTEIN]. WE HAVE A FEW CHARACTER/CLOWN DUO BITS WE DO. WE'RE MAKING THAT INTO A BIGGER SHOW, IT'LL BE VERY AUDIENCE INVOLVED. VERY CLOWNS. IT'S A LOT ABOUT CHILDHOOD, SPECIFICALLY GIRLHOOD. I'M ALSO DEVELOPING A MONTHLY COMEDY SHOW WITH ANOTHER LESBIAN CALLED "DYKE DYNASTY" AND WE'RE GONNA HAVE A LOT OF DYKE AND DYKE-ADJACENT ARTISTS AND COMEDIANS AND PERFORMERS COME ON FOR IT.

ES: BOOKED AND FUCKIN' BUSY, MAN!

JY: BOOKED AND BUSY!

ES: OKAY LAST QUESTION. WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE FRUIT?

JY: WATERMELON.

ES: DONE!

JY: DONE. EASY.

YOU CAN FIND JILL YOUNG ON INSTAGRAM @JILLISYOUNG AND AT THEIR WEBSITE WWW.JILLKYOUNG.COM

HEART

BREAKERS



GUIDE TO A FIRST DATE

SARA CHILDREY

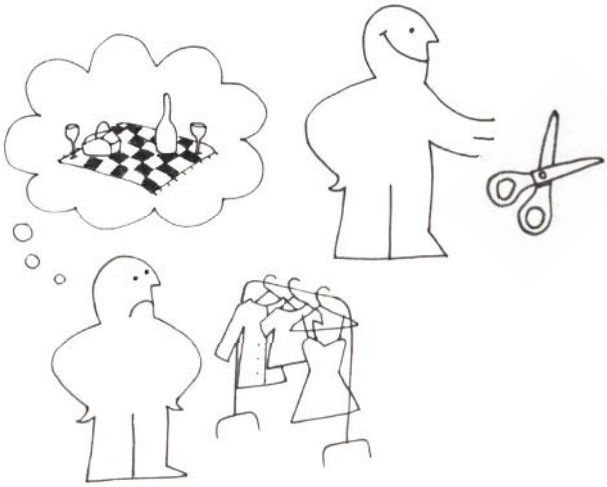
HELLO, AND WELCOME TO MY GUIDE TO A FIRST DATE. I AM HONORED, HUMBLED, AND HORNY TO HAVE YOU JOINING ME ON THIS JOURNEY. WITH YOUR PURCHASE OF THIS GUIDE TO A FIRST DATE YOU HAVE A 100% SATISFACTION GUARANTEE, OR YOUR MONEY BACK!*

STEP 1: YOU MUST DECIDE A TIME AND PLACE. IDEALLY, THIS IS SOMEWHERE THAT CONTAINS MULTITUDES OF INTIMACY AND ADORATION. BUT ALSO SUPER CHILL. JUST LIKE YOU. I RECOMMEND A WINE BAR OR A PICNIC.

STEP 2: BEGIN TO THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU'RE GOING TO WEAR. OF COURSE, THIS IS THE BIGGEST DECISION YOU WILL EVER MAKE AND THEY ARE GOING TO JUDGE YOU IMMEDIATELY ON THIS SO... DON'T FREAK OUT OR ANYTHING... BUT YOU'RE FUCKED.

STEP 3: TRY ON YOUR WHOLE CLOSET! (YOU DON'T FIND ANYTHING YOU LIKE.)

STEP 4: CUT UP AT LEAST 2 SHIRTS! MAYBE A NEW OUTFIT WILL HELP YOU FEEL BETTER. NO TIME TO SHOP, JUST CUT.



STEP 5: CONSIDER PULLING OUT THE SEWING MACHINE. YOU STILL DON'T HAVE TIME TO SHOP BUT YOU MIGHT HAVE TIME TO LITERALLY CONSTRUCT A NEW THREE PIECE SET OUT OF THAT DRESS YOU NEVER WEAR AND ALSO DON'T REALLY LIKE.

STEP 6: CALL YOUR ROOMMATE! SOBBING!! RAID THEIR CLOSET.



STEP 7: RETURN TO YOUR OWN CLOSET, AND TRY ON THE SAME OUTFIT YOU HAVE WORN FOR EVERY NICE EVENT FOR THE LAST THREE YEARS. (IN MY CASE, IT'S A LIGHT GREEN SILK BUTTON UP AND DOC MARTENS).

STEP 8: PACE AROUND YOUR BEDROOM FOR AT LEAST 30 MINUTES. IF YOUR BEDROOM IS TOO SMALL, YOU MAY EXTEND YOUR WALK TO OTHER PARTS OF THE HOUSE, OR EVEN OUTSIDE.

STEP 9: SCREAM A FEW TIMES, THE CONTENT OF WHICH CAN BE DEALER'S CHOICE: WORDS OR SLURS OR SLURRY WORDS. MY FAVORITE IS "I'M GONNA THROW UP!"

STEP 10: HOPEFULLY BY NOW YOUR ROOMMATE WILL ANSWER YOUR CALLS AND COME HOME FROM WORK EARLY. (THIS IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN THEIR PAYCHECK, DESPITE WHAT CAPITALISM MAY TELL YOU.) CRY TO THEM ABOUT HOW UNLOVABLE AND HORRIBLE YOU ARE. BY NOW, YOU FEEL THIS WITH CERTAINTY.

STEP 11: LISTEN TO EVERYTHING NICE THEY SAY, AND THANK THEM PROFUSELY. IN YOUR HEAD, REJECT IT, THINK ABOUT HOW THEY DON'T KNOW YOU AT ALL (YOU'VE ONLY LIVED TOGETHER FOR 5 YEARS), AND CONTINUE TO PANIC.

STEP 12: MAKE YOURSELF A DRINK. POUR IT HEAVY, YOU'RE GONNA NEED THE EXTRA COURAGE. NOW, IT TASTES DISGUSTING AND YOU HATE IT AND YOU MIGHT AS WELL LEAVE IT ON THE COUNTER AS A SYMBOL OF YOUR STUPIDITY AND SHAME. I THINK DOSTOEVSKY WROTE A BOOK ABOUT THIS.

STEP 13: BOIL WATER FOR COFFEE. FORGET ABOUT IT. LET THE KETTLE WHISTLE FOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE. THE SOUND WILL ACTUALLY CALM YOUR MIND. BELIEVE ME.

STEP 14: GO OUTSIDE, SMOKE A CIGARETTE. PRAY YOUR HOT NEIGHBOR WILL COME OUT TO SEE YOU IN THIS HOT OUTFIT. (THEY'VE SEEN IT BEFORE).



STEP 15: KEEP AN EYE ON THE STREET. INEVITABLY SOMEONE WILL WALK BY WITH A BETTER OUTFIT, AND YOU CAN GO BACK TO SQUARE ONE.

STEP 16: TAKE MY ADVICE ON THIS ONE: JUST CHANGE YOUR SHOES. LOAFERS.

STEP 17: HEAD BACK INSIDE, AND CATCH YOURSELF IN THE MIRROR BY THE DOOR. NOTICE THAT YOUR MASCARA IS UNDER YOUR EYES, SINCE YOU NEVER PUT ON FRESH MAKEUP.

STEP 18: GO WASH YOUR FACE. (SINCE YOU'RE WEARING WATERPROOF MASCARA, THIS MAKES IT WORSE.)

STEP 19: STARE AT YOUR RACCOON EYES. GO OFF, BLACK SWAN.

STEP 20: REPEAT NUMBER 9.

STEP 21: IN TRYING TO REMOVE YOUR MAKEUP, SPILL WATER ALL OVER YOUR SHIRT.

STEP 22: PACK YOUR BAG. DON'T FORGET THE ESSENTIALS: ATIVAN, WEED PEN, THE BOOKS YOU'VE BEEN MEANING TO READ (AT LEAST 3), A LETTER FROM YOUR EX, YOUR BOSS' PRESCRIPTIONS (REMEMBER TO DELIVER TOMORROW), A COMPASS, A RUBBER BAND BALL (CONFISCATED FROM A STUDENT AT SHAKESPEARE CAMP LAST SUMMER), AN OLD PLAYBILL, YOUR PLANNER, AND YOUR CVS RECEIPT (YOU MIGHT NEED THAT COUPON!!).



STEP 23: RUN TO THE KITCHEN, CHUG YOUR DRINK.

STEP 24: REMEMBER THE WATER ON THE STOVE, TURN IT OFF, BUT BURN YOUR HAND IN THE PROCESS.

STEP 25: RUN BACK TO THE BATHROOM TO PUT YOUR HAND UNDER COLD WATER. SAY ALOUD "PEOPLE CAN DO HARD THINGS" 4 TIMES. LOOK DIRECTLY IN THE MIRROR.

STEP 26: CHECK GOOGLE MAPS: 25 MIN WALK, YOU HAVE TO BE THERE IN 20 MINUTES. YOU CAN DO IT. RUN. BUT DO NOT SWEAT. YOU JUST FIXED YOUR MAKEUP.

STEP 27: AS YOU LEAVE, YOUR HOT NEIGHBOR COMES UP THE STAIRS. PUSH THEM IF YOU MUST, BUT DO NOT ENGAGE.

STEP 28: PUT ON YOUR HEADPHONES AND CHANGE THE PLAYLIST EVERY 30 SECONDS. DECIDE ON A "CONFIDENCE MIX" BUT ULTIMATELY CHANGE TO PHOEBE BRIDGERS.

STEP 29: DECIDE TO WALK DOWN A STREET WHERE YOU KNOW YOU WILL BE CAT CALLED. THIS WILL MAKE YOU WALK FASTER, AND YOU'LL BE ON TIME. (HAVE YOU EVER BEEN STOPPED AND ASKED WHAT YOU'RE LISTENING TO? IT WOULD BE SO EMBARRASSING IF THAT HAPPENED RIGHT NOW.)

STEP 30: TURN UP "WAITING ROOM" AND TRY NOT TO HUM ALONG.

STEP 31: ARRIVE AT THE BAR. IT'S BEST IF YOU'RE A LITTLE SWEATY FROM THE WALK, SO YOUR DATE CAN SMELL YOUR PHEROMONES. FORGET ABOUT THE MASCARA YOU JUST FIXED.

STEP 32: THEY'RE LATE (OF COURSE) SO ORDER YOURSELF A GLASS OF WINE. MAKE SURE TO FINISH IT BEFORE THEY ARRIVE.

STEP 33: PULL OUT YOUR BOOK. IS IT COOL?

STEP 34: PUT IT AWAY.

STEP 35: PULL OUT YOUR PLANNER. NO THAT'S DUMB. YOU CAN'T LOOK LIKE YOU'RE WORKING!

STEP 36: REPEAT NUMBER 35.

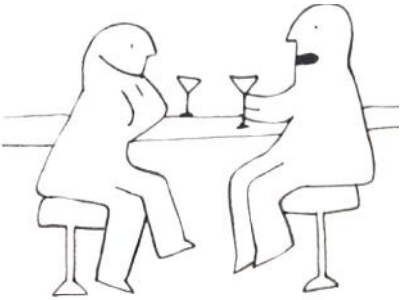


STEP 37: PULL OUT YOUR PHONE. SEE AN UGLY INSTAGRAM PHOTO OF YOUR EX BEST FRIEND, AND START GOING IN DEEP ON WHERE HE'S BEEN HANGING OUT. JUST AS IT'S GETTING JUICY.....

STEP 38: DATE ARRIVES. THEY'RE HOT. DROOL A LITTLE. TELL THEM YOU LIKE THEIR OUTFIT. GET SHY.

STEP 39: NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO, DON'T LOOK AT THEIR BOOBS. (LOOK AT THEIR BOOBS.)

STEP 40: ASK THE USUAL FIRST DATE QUESTIONS: WHERE DID YOU GROW UP? WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOUR FATHER SAID HE WAS PROUD OF YOU? HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED KILLING YOURSELF? HOW MANY SIBLINGS DO YOU HAVE? HOW MUCH MONEY DO YOU MAKE? WHAT IS THE WEIRDEST PLACE YOU'VE HAD SEX? ARE YOU HIGH RIGHT NOW? WHAT FRIENDSHIP DO YOU MOST REGRET LOSING? ARE YOU IN LOVE WITH ME? WANT TO FUCK IN THE BATHROOM? HOW MANY EGGS DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE CONSUMED IN YOUR LIFETIME, AND WAS IT WORTH IT?



STEP 41: LAUGH, GIGGLE, SHOOT THE SHIT. OFFER TO WALK THEM TO THEIR CAR, SINCE YOU HAVE TO WALK HOME ANYWAYS. WORTH IT?

STEP 42: LET THEM DRIVE YOU HOME. MAKE OUT IN THE CAR, SUFJAN STEVENS STYLE.

STEP 43: WHEN THEY ASK IF THEY CAN COME INSIDE, SAY YOU "HAVE TO BE A LADY!!!!" (REGARDLESS OF GENDER).



STEP 44: NEVER CALL, TEXT, EMAIL, FAX, DM, OR WRITE THEM. EVER.

STEP 45: COMPLAIN TO ALL YOUR FRIENDS THAT YOU CANNOT FIND ANYONE THAT CAN HANDLE YOU, IN ALL YOUR GREATNESS.

STEP 46: OPEN HINGE. BEGIN AGAIN...



*TERMS & CONDITIONS APPLY.

AUDREY ATHENA

My Brother's Wedding: His Marriage Didn't Last But At Least It Got Me Laid

Nicole Urban

MY FIRST KISS WAS SO BAD THAT IT LAUNCHED ME INTO A MONTHS-LONG IDENTITY CRISIS. IF I HATED KISSING WOMEN, DID THAT MEAN I WASN'T ACTUALLY A LESBIAN? I WOULDN'T HAVE ANY CLARITY ON THIS FRONT UNTIL I WAS 700 MILES AWAY FROM HOME AND SNEAKING AWAY FROM MY FAMILY MULTIPLE NIGHTS IN A ROW TO HOOK UP WITH A COMPLETE STRANGER.

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE REALIZATION I WAS A QUEER IN HIGH SCHOOL WAS NOT EASY. IN FACT, IT WAS DEEPLY ISOLATING. I KNEW ONE DAY I WOULD MOVE AWAY FROM MY HOMETOWN AND FEEL THE FREEDOM TO TRULY EXPLORE THIS BEAUTIFUL SIDE OF MY IDENTITY. BUT IT HIT ME DURING THE WINTER OF MY JUNIOR YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL THAT, FOR THE TIME BEING, I HAD TO SIT IN THIS CRUSHING LONELINESS.

A FEW MONTHS AFTER MY FIRST GAY KISS IN 2017, MY BROTHER GOT MARRIED IN CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA. MY DAD BALLED OUT AND BOOKED A FANCY HOTEL FOR MY FAMILY, AND EACH OF MY FAMILY MEMBERS GOT OUR OWN HOTEL ROOM. WE FLEW IN ON A WEDNESDAY FROM NEW JERSEY AND MY FAMILY WAS IN THEIR ROOMS ASLEEP BY 9P.M. I WAS FRESHLY EIGHTEEN AND FEELING BOLD. I FELT WEIRD ABOUT USING DATING APPS IN MY HOMETOWN. HERE THOUGH, NOBODY KNEW ME. I STARTED SWIPING ON THE DATING APP *HER* (DON'T LAUGH) AND THE VERY FIRST PERSON I MATCHED WITH INVITED ME OVER TO HER PLACE. HER NAME WAS HANNAH. SHE HAD A SHORT BROWN PIXIE CUT AND WAS A CERTIFIED DYKE. I EAGERLY ACCEPTED HER INVITATION.

YOU MAY BE THINKING: "NICOLE, YOU HAD A HOTEL ROOM ALL TO YOURSELF, AND YET YOU CHOSE TO GO TO SOMEONE ELSE'S PLACE? WHY?" TRUTHFULLY, I DON'T KNOW. IT'S LIKE MY MIND WENT BLANK AND THE DESPERATION FOR QUEER CONNECTION TOOK OVER. THIS WAS FINALLY MY CHANCE AND I HAD TO JUMP ON IT. SO THERE I WAS, IN THE BACKSEAT OF A LYFT, FRANTICALLY GOOGLING "HOW TO HAVE LESBIAN SEX." THERE WERE SIMPLY SO MANY BONGS IN THIS LIVING ROOM. TO THIS DAY, I HAVE NEVER SEEN THAT MANY BONGS IN ONE ROOM. I STARTED THE NIGHT OFF STRONG BY TAKING A HIT AND COUGHING SO HARD I CRIED AND ALMOST THREW UP. I'D NEVER SMOKED FROM A BONG BEFORE, SO IT WAS DEFINITELY AN EVENING OF FIRSTS. AT ONE POINT, HANNAH AND I WERE SHARING A SOFA CHAIR AND SHE STARTED RUBBING MY LEG. NO WOMAN HAD EVER DONE THAT TO ME BEFORE, AND EVEN THAT SHE DID WELL.

THIS IS A REAL LINE FROM MY JOURNAL RECITING THE EVENTS OF THE NIGHT:

"HANNAH SAT DOWN PRESSED AGAINST ME AND I WAS MELTING INSIDE. TOUCHING GIRLS IS A EUPHORIC EXPERIENCE. AT ONE POINT, SHE RUBBED MY INNER THIGH AND LINGERED THERE FOR A LITTLE AND MOVED HER HAND DOWN MY THIGH AS SHE GOT UP TO GRAB A DRINK."



First Love (2015)



First real relationship (2018)



First LA Breakup (2023)



First best friend crush (2017)

EVENTUALLY WE WRAPPED UP CHATTING WITH HER FRIENDS AND THE TWO OF US WENT INTO HER BEDROOM. LET ME SET THE SCENE FOR YOU: HER BED DID NOT HAVE ANY SHEETS. JUST A RAW MATTRESS WITH A BLANKET OVER IT. NO PILLOWCASE. WENT TO HER BATHROOM—NO HAND SOAP. IT WAS A REALLY NICE AMBIANCE TO LOSE MY VIRGINITY IN.

SOMETIMES I WONDER HOW THIS NIGHT COULD HAVE GONE DIFFERENTLY, IF I DIDN'T FILL IT WITH LITTLE WHITE LIES.

LIE #1: I LIED ABOUT MY AGE (KIND OF). NOT IN A WEIRD ILLEGAL WAY THOUGH. SHE KNEW I WAS 18, BUT I DIDN'T TELL HER I WAS STILL IN HIGH SCHOOL. SHE THOUGHT I WAS A MONTH AWAY FROM TURNING 19. FOR SOME REASON, BOOSTING MY AGE BY ABOUT A YEAR FELT LIKE AN IMPORTANT THING TO DO AT THE TIME. I DIDN'T WANT TO SEEM IMMATURE.

LIE #2: SINCE I SAID MY BIRTHDAY WAS THE FOLLOWING MONTH (IN MAY), I OBVIOUSLY HAD TO ADJUST MY SIGN WHEN SHE ASKED THE ANTICIPATED ASTROLOGY QUESTION. I TOLD HER I WAS AN ARIES. I'M WONDERING IF SHE CAUGHT MY LIE IN THE MOMENT AND CHOSE NOT TO QUESTION IT, SINCE A PERSON BORN IN MAY WOULD NOT BE AN ARIES. SHE THEN STARTED SHIT-TALKING CAPRICORNS TO ME AND SAID THAT THEY'RE THE WORST. FUNNY ENOUGH, I'M A CAPRICORN.

LIE #3: ONE OF THE MOST QUESTIONABLE LIES OF THE NIGHT, I PRETENDED THIS WASN'T MY FIRST TIME HAVING SEX. ANOTHER SNIPPET FROM MY JOURNAL:

"SHE REALLY KNEW WHAT SHE WAS DOING, AND IT MADE ME FEEL A LITTLE EMBARRASSED THAT I DIDN'T REALLY KNOW 100% WHAT I WAS DOING. I MEAN, BEING REALLY HIGH HELPED CALM MY NERVES THOUGH."

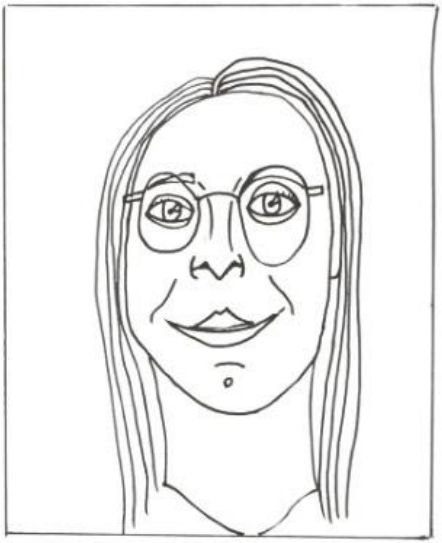
WE MADE OUT ON HER RAW MATTRESS FOR TEN MINUTES, AND THEN SHE TOOK OFF MY SHIRT. "HOW DO YOU LIKE IT?" SHE ASKED. I LOOKED AT HER. "IT'S GOOD! IT'S NICE..." I SAID WITH A SMILE, COMPLETELY MISUNDERSTANDING THE QUESTION. SHE THEN GOES, "NO.. HA.... HOW DO YOU LIKE IT? LIKE, ROUGH? SOFT?"

LIE #4: I TOLD HER I LIKE IT ROUGH.

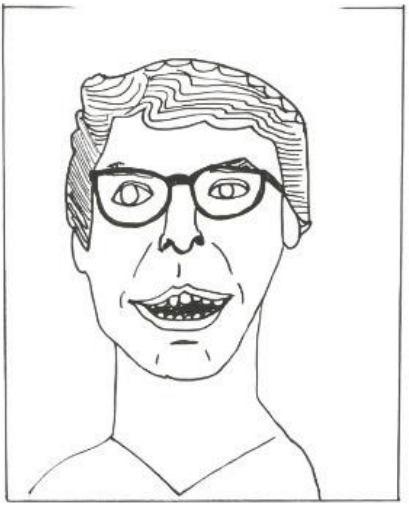
I THOUGHT HANNAH WAS A BADASS AND BADASSES LIKE IT ROUGH. SHE WAS A COOL EXPERIENCED LESBIAN WITH A NOSE PIERCING AND A TATTOO ON THE BACK OF HER NECK! I THOUGHT ASKING FOR SOFT GENTLE SEX WAS LAME. I THOUGHT IT WOULD GIVE ME AWAY AS A VIRGIN. I PERCEIVED MY INEXPERIENCE AS A WEAKNESS.

EVEN IF THINGS DIDN'T GO EXACTLY HOW I HOPED AND I FELT DISAPPOINTED THAT I PEOPLE-PLEASED MYSELF INTO A DYNAMIC I WASN'T REALLY DOWN FOR, I STILL OVERALL HAD A GOOD TIME. IT DID ALMOST TAKE A VERY BAD TURN AT ONE POINT THOUGH. SHE TURNED AROUND AND ASKED ME TO "HIT HER FROM THE BACK." I SAT THERE THINKING, WAS SHE ASKING ME TO FINGER HER BUTTHOLE? I ALMOST FINGERED THAT GIRL'S BUTTHOLE. I THANK THE VOICE IN MY HEAD THAT SAID, NO, SHE WAS NOT ASKING YOU TO FINGER HER BUTT HOLE. GO FOR THE OTHER HOLE.

IN THE MORNING, I CALLED MY LYFT. SHE SAID SHE WANTED TO SEE ME AGAIN BEFORE I LEFT CHARLESTON. WHILE I WAS ON MY WAY BACK TO THE HOTEL, I GOT A CALL FROM MY MOM. SHE SAID OUR FAMILY WAS IN THE



First Girlfriend (2011)



First Boyfriend (2013)

HOTEL LOBBY, AND I NEEDED TO GET DRESSED AND MEET THEM DOWNSTAIRS. I STILL DON'T KNOW HOW, BUT I SUCCESSFULLY SNUCK PAST MY FAMILY IN THE LOBBY AND MADE IT UP TO MY HOTEL ROOM UNDETECTED. LATER THAT DAY, I WAS SITTING AT A RESTAURANT WITH MY FAMILY. FROM ACROSS THE TABLE, MY BROTHER SHOUTED "NICOLE, IS THAT A HICKEY ON YOUR NECK?" I GLANCED AT MY MOM. HER FACE WAS WHITE AS A GHOST.

WHEN I GOT BACK TO THE HOTEL, I WROTE IN MY JOURNAL:

"PSA!! REALLY IMPORTANT!! I LOVE GIRLS!! WITH ALL MY HEART!! I HAD SEX WITH A GIRL LAST NIGHT AND OH MY GOD. I LOVE GIRLS SO MUCH."

IT'S ALMOST ENDEARING HOW EQUALLY NERVOUS AND EXCITED I WAS ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE. I THEN WENT ON TO SAY:

"THE ONE THING I WAS SUPER SELF-CONSCIOUS ABOUT WAS HOW FAST MY HEART WAS BEATING WHEN WE WERE CUDDLING THE MORNING AFTER. SHE EVEN COMMENTED ON IT. YIKES, A LOT OF EMBARRASSING THINGS HAPPENED LAST NIGHT, BUT THEY COULDN'T HAVE BEEN THAT BAD IF SHE WANTS TO SEE ME AGAIN."

IT WAS 11:30PM ON A FRIDAY NIGHT. TWO NIGHTS EARLIER, I SPENT $16 TO GET FROM MY HOTEL TO HANNAH'S HOUSE, WHICH WAS 20 MINUTES AWAY. BUT TONIGHT, IT WAS $73 FOR A ONE-WAY TRIP, DUE TO SURGE PRICING. I BARELY HESITATED. THIS TIME, I FELT A BIT MORE CONFIDENT WHEN IT CAME TO SEX". I WROTE:

"SEX WITH HER FELT SO RIGHT. WHEN I'D GET WITH BOYS, I WOULD FOCUS SOLELY ON PLEASING THE GUY, AND I FELT LIKE I WAS JUST GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS LIKE I THOUGHT I WAS EXPECTED TO. SEX WITH HANNAH IS SO DIFFERENT. I WAS FULLY SUBMERGED IN WHAT WE WERE DOING AND NOT FOCUSED ON BEING PERFORMATIVE. I CAN SAY WITH A DECENT AMOUNT OF CONFIDENCE THAT I'M GAY."

THE NEXT MORNING, I WENT BACK TO MY HOTEL AND THEN I WENT TO MY BROTHER'S WEDDING. IT WAS A GOOD WEDDING, BUT THEY'RE DIVORCED NOW, SO THAT'S THE LEAST IMPORTANT PART OF THIS STORY. AFTER I GOT BACK TO MY HOTEL LATE THAT NIGHT, HANNAH ASKED ME TO COME OVER AGAIN. FOR THE THIRD NIGHT IN A ROW, I TOOK A LYFT TO HER HOUSE. THIS TIME, I SPENT $92 FOR THE ONE-WAY TRIP TO HER HOUSE. I PUT MY HARD-EARNED PAYCHECK INTO IMPORTANT MATTERS THAT WEEKEND: GETTING MYSELF LAID!

BY NOW, THE EXCITEMENT STARTED TO WEAR OFF AND THE DRAINING REALITY KICKED IN: I WAS HIDING MY INEXPERIENCE FROM HANNAH, SO SHE HAD NO CLUE HOW SIGNIFICANT THESE NIGHTS TOGETHER WERE TO ME. I STARTED FEELING DRAINED FROM SUSTAINING A SEXUAL DYNAMIC THAT, DESPITE ASKING FOR, I DIDN'T EVEN WANT. BUT HOW DO YOU ASK FOR SOMETHING YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW YOU WANT? I SPENT THE NIGHT AND I LEFT IN THE MORNING. I FLEW BACK TO NEW JERSEY THAT DAY AND I NEVER SAW HER AGAIN.
HANNAH COMPLETELY CHANGED THE WAY I VIEWED INTIMACY. I WROTE IN MY JOURNAL AFTER THE FIRST NIGHT:

"I DON'T GET THAT WARM, COMFORTABLE, SAFE FEELING WITH GUYS. I WANTED TO WRAP MYSELF AROUND HER AND NEVER LET GO."

I THEN WENT ON TO DESCRIBE OUR CONNECTION TOGETHER AS PURE, NATURAL, AND EASY. SHE SHOWED AS MUCH INTEREST IN MY OWN PLEASURE AS I SHOWED TOWARDS HERS, WHICH I SELDOM EXPERIENCED WITH THE GUYS I HAD PREVIOUSLY BEEN WITH.
WHILE THIS EXPERIENCE WITH HANNAH WAS EXCITING AND (MOSTLY) FULFILLING, I CAN'T HELP BUT VIEW IT FROM A MORE SOMBER LENS AS I ENTER MY MID-TWENTIES AND REFLECT ON MY PAST. I REGRET NOT TELLING SOMEONE WHERE I WAS GOING ALL THOSE NIGHTS. I PUT MYSELF IN A POTENTIALLY DANGEROUS SITUATION IN ORDER TO FEEL EVEN A HINT OF CLOSENESS TO THE QUEER COMMUNITY. IT ALSO BREAKS MY HEART THAT I FELT LIKE I HAD TO FABRICATE SO MANY PIECES OF MY PERSONHOOD TO THIS STRANGER. I STILL WONDER TO THIS DAY, HOW WOULD THAT FIRST NIGHT HAVE PLAYED OUT IF I WAS HONEST TO HER THAT I WAS A VIRGIN AND I WANTED TO BE HANDLED SOFTLY? IN THE ANXIETY OF IT ALL, I HURRIED THROUGH RECEIVING BECAUSE IT DIDN'T FEEL LIKE MINE TO TAKE. I WISH I HAD THE CONFIDENCE AT THE TIME TO SHOW UP AUTHENTICALLY, BECAUSE MY 18-YEAR-OLD SELF DESERVED THAT.

I WISH I COULD TELL MY 16-YEAR-OLD SELF THAT THEY'D BE SURROUNDED BY A SURPLUS OF QUEER COMMUNITY ONE DAY. I WISH I COULD TELL MY 18-YEAR-OLD SELF THAT THEY DON'T NEED TO BEND THEIR BOUNDARIES DURING SEX IN ORDER TO FEEL VALUABLE. I WISH I COULD TELL MY 21-YEAR-OLD SELF THAT QUANTITY IS NOT BETTER THAN QUALITY WHEN CHOOSING SEXUAL PARTNERS. AND I WISH MY 24-YEAR-OLD CURRENT SELF WOULD BE JUST A LITTLE BIT KINDER AND MORE COMPASSIONATE TOWARDS THE VERSIONS OF MYSELF THAT WERE STILL LEARNING HARD LESSONS AROUND INTIMACY AND VULNERABILITY.



Aleena Sharif

On the Couch

Holly Payne-Strange

HOT COALS AND BUTTERFLY UNCERTAINTY,
FLUTTERING LIKE SNOW CAUGHT
IN HEADLIGHTS.

THE FIRST TIME
MY WIFE MET MY LOVER
WAS ONE OF THE HAPPIEST DAYS OF MY LIFE.

IT WAS AWKWARD, OF COURSE.
WHO TO SIT NEXT TO,
HOW MUCH TO CUDDLE,
WHAT TO SAY.
SILENCES STRETCHING OUT LIKE OCEANS,
MAKING US ALL A LITTLE SEASICK.

BUT WOW.
I HAVE NEVER FELT CO COMPLETE,
A PYRAMID FINALLY FINISHED,
FULL TO THE BRIM WITH SPLENDOR AND
RICHES.

HOW COULD THEY BE
SO GENEROUS
TO LEAVE ALL THIS AT MY FEET?

I'M SORRY, I HAVE TO GO
I HAVE TO BUY HER SOME ROSES,
GET HIM POKEMON CARDS.
I AM AT THEIR RAVENOUS MERCY,
MY SUN AND MY MOON.

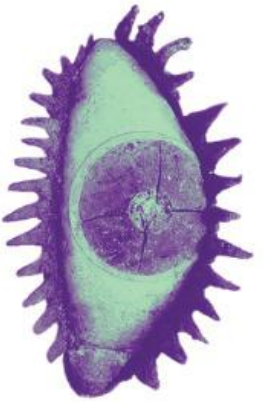




Aleena Sharif

Eternal

Jack Cariad Leon



HE'S NOT MY FIRST LOVE, BUT HE IS
THE FIRST TO HAVE HAUNTED ME LIKE THIS
WITH THAT DARK MOP OF HIS, THOSE
DAVID CROLAND CURLS THAT ADORN HIM,
BROODING EYES HIDING SO MUCH.
HIS GHOST WALKS THE HALLS OF MY MIND,
AND MY SPIRIT WOULD WILL ITSELF TO
CROSS DIMENSIONS TO BRING ME TO HIM,
IF I HAD TO. THE LIMITS OF WHAT I
WOULD DO FOR HIM ARE UNKNOWN, EVEN
TO ME.



SO, THEN,
YOU COULD ONLY IMAGINE HOW
DEEPLY IT BOTHERS ME THAT HE
ISN'T ONE TO LET PEOPLE WORRY.

I THINK I AM WHO I AM
BECAUSE OF THE FIRST PSYCHOTIC BREAK I HAD
IN MY ADOLESCENCE: I WAS RAISED BY A VILLAGE
THAT WAS A PSYCH WARD
AND ONCE I OVERHEARD A NURSE TELL ANOTHER NURSE
I ASKED HIM HOW HE WAS
AND HE SAID VERY WELL THANK YOU AND SO
I REMINDED HIM HE WAS IN THE INTENSIVE CARE WARD.
AND THE MAN I PICTURED HER TALKING TO, LONG AGO
HAD HIS EXACT SAME FACE, THOSE SAME, DARK,
COUSIN-TO-CUPID CURLS.

Hilary Buffum



Poem and Art by Hilary Buffum

YOU HELD ME LIKE A POMEGRANATE
GENTLE IN YOUR HAND
ALLOWING ME TO CRACK OPEN
TO REVEAL THE SWEETNESS
YOU TRUSTED LAY BENEATH THE THICK LAYERS
CRADLED AGAINST YOU
YOU COAXED EACH SEED
LIKE A JEWEL
SMILING
WHEN THE TART JUICE BURST IN YOUR MOUTH
NOT AFRAID TO GET YOUR HANDS STICKY

Some Dreamers

Jill Young

SANTA CLARITA IS A CITY THAT SHOULDN'T EXIST. IT'S A SUBURBAN COMMUNITY SUPPLANTED ONTO A DESERT—MAN-MADE LAKES AND OVER-WATERED LAWNS DISGUISING A LANDSCAPE OF YEARLY WILDFIRES AND CHRONIC DROUGHT. THE PEOPLE ARE MOSTLY MIDDLE-CLASS FAMILIES AND HOLLYWOOD COMMUTERS, THOSE WHO WANT A PIECE OF THE LA DREAM WITHOUT THE RUSH OF CITY LIFE.

TWO FAKE RIVERS CUT THROUGH SANTA CLARITA. THE FIRST USED TO BE A REAL RIVER, THE SANTA CLARA, BUT AFTER YEARS OF DROUGHT AND AGRICULTURAL DAMMING IS ONLY A RIVERBED. IT IS HOME TO LITTLE ELSE BESIDES LITTER, ABANDONED SHOPPING CARTS, AND THE REFUSE OF A HEROIN EPIDEMIC. THE MIDDLE SCHOOL NEAR MY OLD HOUSE IS NAMED "ARROYO SECO" WHICH TRANSLATES TO "DRY RIVER."

THE OTHER FAKE RIVER IS AN AQUEDUCT—A GARGANTUAN CEMENT VALLEY THAT SNAKES THROUGH THE TOWN AND BORDERS MY HIGH SCHOOL. IN KINDERGARTEN WE WERE MADE TO WATCH A PSA ON AQUEDUCT SAFETY, AND WHY ONE SHOULD NEVER, UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES, ENTER THE AQUEDUCT OR SHE WILL BE SWEPT AWAY BY A SUDDEN AND UNPREDICTABLE SURGE OF WATER. I HAD NIGHTMARES ABOUT DROWNING FOR MONTHS AFTERWARD—VISIONS OF MY LOVED ONES PULLED INTO MAN-MADE RAPIDS.

SAUGUS HIGH SCHOOL, WHERE I SPENT FOUR YEARS OF MY EDUCATIONAL LIFE AND COUNTLESS HOURS REHEARSING FORGOTTEN PLAYS, IS A SPRAWLING CEMENT FORTRESS COMPRISED OF BLINDINGLY WHITE BUILDINGS AND TALL PALM TREES, OVERLOOKED BY A HILL THAT HOLDS A GIANT PIPE CARRYING WATER FROM FAR UP NORTH. IT IS A TRADITIONAL HIGH SCHOOL IN ONLY THE CALIFORNIAN SENSE; THERE ARE NO HALLWAYS AND THERE IS NO CAFETERIA—STUDENTS MOVE FROM CLASS TO CLASS BY WALKING BETWEEN BUILDINGS, THEY EAT LUNCH OUTSIDE AND SIT ON PLANTERS OR SIDEWALKS, BASKING IN THE GOLDEN SUN.
IT IS THIS PECULIAR NATURE OF SAUGUS' DESIGN WHICH MAKES IT SO IMMEDIATELY RECOGNIZABLE ON CAMERA. EVEN FROM A BIRD'S-EYE VIEW THE CAMPUS IS UNMISTAKABLE. PERHAPS THIS IS WHY IT WAS USED AS THE LOCATION FOR THE 1990 CHRISTIAN SLATER FILM, PUMP UP THE VOLUME. IT WAS A WHOLLY DIFFERENT CONTEXT IN WHICH THE WORLD WOULD BE ULTIMATELY DESTINED TO SEE SAUGUS, FILMED BY HELICOPTERS AND SURROUNDED BY EMERGENCY VEHICLES, ITS IMAGE MARRED BY THE LOGOS AND GRAPHICS OF VARIOUS NEWS STATIONS.

BEFORE THE HELICOPTERS AND THE TRAGIC B-ROLL OF TEARY-EYED CHILDREN, SAUGUS WAS A SOMEWHAT UNREMARKABLE HIGH SCHOOL AND I WAS A MODERATELY-REMARKABLE STUDENT, TRANSFIXED WITH GRADES AND CLUBS AND REHEARSALS. I WAS SHELTERED, LARGELY BY MY OWN EFFORT; AN ADOLESCENT FEAR OF THE ADULT WORLD PAIRED WITH UNDIAGNOSED OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER LEFT ME VOID OF ANY CLASSIC TEENAGE CURIOSITY FOR DRUGS OR PARTIES OR SEX.

MY FRESHMAN YEAR AT SAUGUS IS WHEN MY RELATIONSHIP WITH S BEGAN TO FADE. SHE WAS MY CLOSEST FRIEND IN MIDDLE SCHOOL, AND WE SPENT HOURS PASSING NOTES AND CRAFTING INSIDE JOKES. WE WENT TO A NOW-DEFUNCT CHARTER MIDDLE SCHOOL BUILT INSIDE OF AN OLD FACTORY, AND CLUNG TO EACH OTHER THROUGH ITS PREPUBESCENT CHAOS. S WAS VERY DIFFERENT FROM ME, AND I FOUND IT EXCITING; SHE WAS BEAUTIFUL AND THIN AND LOOKED LIKE AN ADULT BY AGE TWELVE, AT 5 FOOT 9. SHE ALWAYS DRESSED IN SHORT DENIM SHORTS AND THIN COTTON TANK TOPS, EVEN IN THE DEAD OF WINTER; SHE CLAIMED THAT SHE "DIDN'T GET COLD." THOUGH ONE MIGHT NOT NOTICE FROM LOOKING AT HER, SHE WAS HALF-JAPANESE. HER MOTHER WORKED AS A LANGUAGE TUTOR. S TEASED ME IN JAPANESE UNTIL I UNDERSTOOD ENOUGH TO TEASE HER BACK.

ONE TIME WE TOOK A WALK ON THE HILL BEHIND HER HOUSE, MAKING OUR WAY THROUGH CHAPARRAL AND COLLECTING BURRS ON OUR SOCKS AND SHOELACES. WE STOPPED AT A SMALL POND WHERE TADPOLES SWAM IN WRIGGLING CLUSTERS. S REACHED INTO HER BACKPACK AND PULLED OUT A SMALL HOT PINK AND GREEN BARBIE-BRANDED POLAROID CAMERA. "I ONLY HAVE ONE PICTURE LEFT," SHE SAID, "SO WE GOTTA MAKE IT GOOD." SHE HELD THE CAMERA IN HER LONG AND BONY ARM, AND LEANED HER HEAD ON MY SHOULDER. I BLINKED WHEN IT FLASHED. IT FELT UNFAMILIAR AND MAGICAL TO WATCH A PHOTO BECOME IMMEDIATELY PHYSICAL. WE PLACED THE FILM UNDER A ROCK AND WAITED FOR THE IMAGE TO CREEP INTO EXISTENCE. AFTER A FEW MINUTES WE TOOK OUT THE PHOTO AND MARVELED AT OUR BLURRY SELVES, TOOTHY AND WASHED OUT IN THE HARSH AFTERNOON SUN. I HELD ONTO IT AS WE WALKED BACK TO HER HOUSE, ACCOMPANIED HER BROTHER TO KARATE PRACTICE, AND RETURNED HOME TO EAT RICE SNACKS AND PLAY TWO-PERSON TRUTH OR DARE.

IT WAS AFTER ADVENTUROUS DAYS LIKE THESE THAT S WOULD QUIETLY CONFIDE IN ME THINGS I COULD ONLY PRETEND TO UNDERSTAND. WE WOULD SIT ON HER COUCH AND WRAP OURSELVES IN A FRAYING QUILT, A VIDEO GAME IDLING ON HER TV, AND SHE WOULD TALK ABOUT HOW SHE HID CUTS ON HER BODY AND THE NUMBER OF DAYS SHE HAD GONE WITHOUT EATING A MEAL, AND ONCE WE WERE IN EIGHTH GRADE, WHAT SEX WAS LIKE. I WOULD NOD AND DO MY BEST TO DISGUISE MY CONCERN, OFFERING LOVE AND COMFORT, SUGGESTING SHE SEEK HELP THOUGH NEITHER OF US KNEW WHERE TO FIND IT.

I WAS OBSESSED WITH S IN A WAY THAT I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND AT THE TIME, MY NAIVETE KEEPING MY QUEERNESS FROM EVEN MY OWN COMPREHENSION. I KNEW THAT I WANTED TO PUT WORDS TO HOW I FELT ABOUT HER, BUT I'D GET STUCK ON SMALL DETAILS, LIKE THE WAY HER FINGERS WERE SOFT AND GENTLE WHEN SHE BRAIDED MY HAIR, BUT DEFT AND STRONG WHEN SHE BROUGHT ME INTO HER KARATE CLASS. I'VE KEPT A JOURNAL DILIGENTLY SINCE MIDDLE SCHOOL, AND DURING THIS TIME I OFTEN WROTE ABOUT S AND OUR MOMENTS OF CLOSENESS,"TODAY S BROUGHT EYELINER TO SCHOOL, AND SHE DID MY MAKEUP WITH IT AFTER P.E., AND THEN HELPED ME WASH IT OFF BEFORE MOM CAME TO PICK ME UP. I FELT NERVOUS AND LOOKED KIND OF WEIRD WITH IT ON BUT IT WAS ALSO NICE TO HAVE HER LOOK AT ME SO CLOSELY AND WANT TO TOUCH MY FACE."

DURING THE EIGHTH GRADE HALLOWEEN FESTIVAL, S PULLED ME INTO A BATHROOM, SOBBING. SHE WAS DRESSED AS A SKELETON, WEARING A CARTOONISHLY PRINTED RIBCAGE-WITH-HEART SHIRT AND BLACK SHORTS, BLACK-AND-WHITE PAINT ON HER FACE. I WAS SOME SORT OF GHOSTLY COMPOSER, A COSTUME I MADE OUT OF A VENETIAN MASK WITH MUSIC NOTE DESIGNS AND A BOY'S GEORGE WASHINGTON COSTUME. THE MASK WAS INTENDED AS HOME DECOR AND NOT FOR WEAR, SO WHEN I TOOK IT OFF AND SET IT ON THE COUNTER I COULD SEE A PAINFUL RED LINE BISECTING MY FACE. I ASKED S WHAT HAD HAPPENED AND SHE EXPLAINED THAT HER PERIOD WAS TWO WEEKS LATE. I NODDED, PRETENDING TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THAT MEANT—MY BODY WAS AS LATE TO PUBERTY AS MY MIND WAS TO LEARNING ABOUT IT, AND I WOULDN'T GET A PERIOD FOR THE FIRST TIME TILL SOPHOMORE YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL. "I MIGHT BE PREGNANT," I REMEMBER HER SAYING, TEARS SMUDGING HER SKULL MAKEUP. I REMEMBER HUGGING HER, HIDING MY CONFUSION; WE WERE KIDS, A PERSON AT OUR AGE CREATING LIFE SEEMED IMPOSSIBLE. SHE TOLD ME THAT IF SHE WAS PREGNANT, SHE WOULD KILL HERSELF, AND SHE WOULD DO IT BY TAKING A CANOE INTO A RIVER AND SETTING IT AND HERSELF ON FIRE. I WONDERED WHERE SHE WOULD FIND A RIVER.

SHE GOT HER PERIOD TWO DAYS LATER AND SEEMED TO FORGET THE WHOLE SITUATION, AND WE NEVER TALKED ABOUT IT AGAIN.

BY THE TIME WE WERE JUNIORS IN HIGH SCHOOL, S AND I HAD LOST CONTACT. WE DRIFTED INTO DIFFERENT FRIEND GROUPS, AND TOOK DIFFERENT CLASSES. SHE GRADUATED A YEAR EARLY AND DISAPPEARED—DELETED HER SOCIAL MEDIA WITHOUT WARNING AND CHANGED HER PHONE NUMBER. EVERY SO OFTEN IN THE YEARS FOLLOWING I'D TRY AND FIND HER ONLINE—HOPING TO SEE A NEW FACEBOOK ACCOUNT AND TERRIFIED TO FIND AN OBITUARY. NEITHER APPEARED UNTIL WINTER OF MY JUNIOR YEAR OF COLLEGE, WHEN HER FATHER DIED OF A SUDDEN HEART ATTACK—THE ARTICLE WAS SIMPLE, STATING HIS OCCUPATION, EXPLAINING HOW HE WAS SURVIVED BY HIS EX-WIFE, HIS DAUGHTER S, AND HER BROTHER N. I WANTED TO SEND S MY CONDOLENCES, BUT SHE SEEMED TO EXIST NOWHERE ON THE INTERNET WITH THE EXCEPTION OF ONE

WEBSITE LISTING HER HIGH SCHOOL TRACK AND FIELD TIMES. SHE WAS PRETTY GOOD AT THE LONG JUMP. NOVEMBER 14, 2019 WAS THE DAY THE HELICOPTER FOOTAGE MADE THE IMAGE OF SAUGUS HIGH SCHOOL INFAMOUS. I WOKE UP IN MY BED IN AUSTIN, TEXAS, TO THE NEWS THAT MY ALMA MATER HAD JOINED PARKLAND AND COLUMBINE IN THE EVER-GROWING LIST OF SCHOOLS TO ENDURE MASS SHOOTINGS. FIVE STUDENTS WERE SHOT, AND TWO WERE KILLED. THE SHOOTER, A STUDENT, DIED OF A SELF-INFLICTED WOUND; IT WAS HIS SIXTEENTH BIRTHDAY.

IT WASN'T UNTIL THE END OF THE DAY THAT I LEARNED THAT S'S BROTHER, N, WAS THE SHOOTER. I SPENT THE DAY REELING, OBSESSIVELY REWATCHING VIDEOS OF MY FRIENDS AND TEACHERS GIVING INTERVIEWS ON NATIONAL NEWS. I REFRESHED SOCIAL MEDIA APPS TO FIGURE OUT THE NAMES OF THE VICTIMS, AND TEXTED ALL MY OLD TEACHERS TO CHECK IN AND SEND THEM MY SUPPORT. EVENTUALLY, PEOPLE POSTED PICTURES OF THE SHOOTER, AND DAILY MAIL EVEN RAN AN ARTICLE, EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT N (LAST NAME). I THOUGHT ABOUT S, AND WONDERED WHERE SHE WAS, HOW SOON SHE KNEW. I WONDERED IF SHE STILL HAD THAT PICTURE OF US FROM SO LONG AGO. I FIGURED PROBABLY NOT.

A DAY LATER, THE STORY IS BURIED. SCHOOL SHOOTINGS ARE HARD TO THINK ABOUT, AND OFTEN GO THE WAY OF MISSING CHILDREN, FORGOTTEN BY EVERYONE BUT THOSE CLOSEST TO THE LOSS. THE PAIN LIVES WITH THE FAMILIES OF THE VICTIMS AND THE TRAUMA OF THE SURVIVORS, THE BULLET DAMAGE ON CONCRETE WALLS AND THE GOOGLE NEWS SEARCH RESULTS FOR SAUGUS HIGH SCHOOL.

IF I COULD MAKE MYSELF HATE THE SHOOTER WITH THE SAME CUT-AND-DRIED RAGE THAT I'M ABLE TO LOATHE CRIMINAL STRANGERS ON THE NEWS, MAYBE IT WOULD BE EASIER TO LET THE WHOLE THING SLIP AWAY. BUT I CAN STILL SEE MYSELF AT A FOURTH-OF-JULY BARBECUE WITH S AND N, LAUGHING AND DRIPPING WET AS WE BLASTED EACH OTHER WITH SUPER-SOAKER WATER GUNS.

LATE FALL IN SANTA CLARITA MARKS THE LAST OF THE SANTA ANA WINDS, WHICH BLOW WITH A DRY FIERCENESS THAT RIPS STILL-GREEN LEAVES FROM BRANCHES. A WILDFIRE RAVAGED 78,000 SOUTHERN CALIFORNIAN ACRES ONLY WEEKS BEFORE THE SHOOTING AT SAUGUS, AND THE WIND NOW CARRIES ITS CHARRED REMINDER FOR MILES, SPREADING ASH LIKE IMPOSSIBLE SNOW THROUGH SUBURBAN STREETS. IN THE STILLNESS THAT FOLLOWS SUCH AN EVENT, HOPE SPRINGS LIKE LODGEPOLE PINES OUT OF THE BLACKENED EARTH, AND CHILDREN MAKE QUIET VIGILS IN MEMORY OF THEIR FALLEN FRIENDS. THE 10-DAY FORECAST PREDICTS A RARE AND HEAVY RAIN, WHICH WILL QUENCH THE DRY LAND AND PAINT THE BROWN HILLS BRIEFLY GREEN. IF IT LASTS LONG ENOUGH, THE RAIN WILL FIND THE RIVERBED, AND FORM A STEADY CREEK, MOMENTARILY REVIVING THE SANTA CLARA AND WASHING THE EARTH ANEW.



JC Alfier

Matthan Slith

We Once Burned

I LET GO

CAST OUR ASHES TO THE WIND AND FOR THE FIRST TIME IN TOO LONG
FIND PEACE IN KNOWING THIS DARK DUST ONCE BURNED BRIGHT
WHEN I COME TO LIFE AGAIN I FIND
I AM NOT THE AFTERMATH OF YOU
AFTER ALL.

I FOUND MYSELF.

I BROKE

WHAT I COULD, LEARNED TO LOVE DESTRUCTION, OR PRETEND TO
MADE A HOBBY OF BURNING BRIDGES, REVEL IN THE HEAT
TRAITOR TO MYSELF, I SCREAM OUT AND WONDER
WHY IT STILL HURTS, WHY
I AM ALONE

I BROKE

DOWN.

I BROKE

LIKE GLASS, LIKE SPLINTERING WOOD, LIKE FRACTURED MIRRORS
REFLECTING PHANTOMS OF WHAT WE COULD HAVE HAD
WHO I WAS AND COULD BE
WHO I AM

YOU TURNED FROM ME

THE MOMENT YOU CHOSE THE ASHES OVER THE HEARTH, REVELING IN CONSUMPTION,
CORROSION OVER LIGHT. YOUR TONGUE IS YET SHARPER THAN THE KNIFE
EMBEDDED IN MY BACK. I WANTED TO HAVE YOU
BUT YOU WANTED TO OWN ME

WE REBELLED

OUR LOVE WAS AN UPRISING OF BUTTERFLY KISSES, CONSPIRATORIAL CARESSES. I SET US
ON FIRE, AND YOUR HEART BEGGED TO BURN. WE WERE HUNGRY FOR EACH OTHER'S
BREATH, OXYGEN FILLING, FEEDING THE FEVERED FLAMES
OF VISCERAL VULNERABILITY

I FELL FOR YOU

THE WAY A GLASS SHATTERS WHEN IT TUMBLES TO THE GROUND. LIKE GLASS WE WERE BLOWN
AWAY, IGNITING, MELTING, SHAPING AND RESHAPING. I WOULD BEND FOR YOU ALONE
IF I COULD, BUT WE FORGET HOW SHARP OUR SHARDS CAN BE,
AND YOU LIKED ME BEST
IN PIECES

I USED TO KNOW YOU

YOU'D TAKE YOUR COFFEE BLACK, AND SIP IT SLOW. YOU LIKED THE FALL, AND THE NIGHT, ESPECIALLY
TOGETHER, TALKING UNTIL THE STARS TURNED, HIDING IN THE BACK OF THE CLOSED LIBRARY,
SHARING SECRETS IN THE DUSTY DARK. I DIDN'T LEARN THEN THE DANGERS
OF BLACK HOLES, ONLY CAUGHT THE BEAUTY OF THEM IN
YOUR GREY, HAVE-NOTHING EYES.

Holly's Homemade Honey Cakes — Holly Payne-Strange

1 RAINY DAY
2 SCOOPS OF PATIENCE (NOTE: DO NOT BE OVER PATIENT. THE BREAD WON'T RISE IF YOU DO)
1 DRAM OF GIN KISSED BY A FIREFLY, LEFT UNDER A FULL MOON
3 CUPS OF GENIUS
12 WILD STORIES
SALT TO TASTE.



COOK TIME: AT LEAST SIX MONTHS. PROBABLY MORE.
SERVES: I HAVE NO IDEA, WHY ARE YOU ASKING ME? THREE.

1. PUT EVERYTHING IN A BOWL AND SMASH IT AROUND. THOROUGHLY COMBINE THE FIREFLY GIN AND THE WILD STORIES, THEY'LL EMULSIFY TO A SOFT GLOW. YOU'LL NEED THIS WHEN THE RAIN COMES.



2. NEXT TAKE THE BROWNIES (OH YEAH, YOU'LL NEED THOSE AS WELL) AND JUST DEVOUR THEM. REALLY GO AT IT. IF YOU HAVEN'T GOT IT ON YOUR NOSE, YOU'RE DOING IT WRONG. LET THE SWEETNESS OVERWHELM YOU.

3. TAKE YOUR GLOWING EMULSIFICATION, AND PUT IT STRAIGHT IN THE OVEN. (OH YES, YOU SHOULD HAVE ALREADY PREHEATED THAT TO 'WAIT, WHAT? WHY?') THERE'S GOING TO BE A LOT OF SMOKE, BECAUSE GLOWING EMULSIFICATION HATES BEING IGNORED. IT DOESN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT'S GOING ON, AND JUST WANTS TO HAVE A STRAIGHTFORWARD CONVERSATION, LIKE AN ADULT. IT'S COOL THOUGH, YOU CAN LEAVE IT FOR A WHILE. IT HAS A PATIENT NATURE.



4. IN TIME (CHECK EVERY WEEK OR SO) IT WILL ROAST INTO DETERMINATION. I'M NOT EXAGGERATING, IT REALLY DOESN'T KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON. IT ONLY REMEMBERS THOSE WILD STORIES, AND THE RESPECT THEY INSPIRED. ALL IT'S GOT LEFT IS MOON-KISSED GIN, PEPPERED WITH THE TASTE OF HALF REMEMBERED GENIUS. BUT THAT'S ENOUGH. IT'S LOYAL, AND KNOWS A GOOD THING WHEN IT SEES IT. AND ANYWAY, YOU WERE RIGHT, IT ENDED UP LIKING THE OVEN. IT THREW A PARTY, DANCING WITH ALL THE CRISPY BITS AT THE BOTTOM.



5. TAKE IT OUT OF THE OVEN, SET IT ON THE SIDE, AND LET IT COOL. ADMIRE IT. TELL IT THAT IT'S BEAUTIFUL, AND GLORIOUS, AND WITTY AND STRONG, AND THAT YOU REALLY LIKE ITS NEW SHOES.

6. ENJOY!

HE ASKED ME HOW I GOT THROUGH IT, THE FIRST TIME HE HAD A MENTAL BREAKDOWN.
THIS IS HOW.



Hold Still

By Jessica Hinds

I CALLED ROHAN FOR THE FOLLOWING REASONS. HE HAS THE ONLY PENIS I HAD EVER ACTUALLY ENJOYED, AND HE WAS THE ONLY EX I WAS ON FRIENDLY TERMS WITH. I DIDN'T REALLY WANT TO FUCK A MAN, BUT I HAD JUST BROKEN UP WITH MY FIRST-EVER GIRLFRIEND AND HAD ZERO EXPERIENCE WITH ONE-NIGHT-STANDING WOMEN. THE LAST TIME I FUCKED A WOMAN, SHE DIDN'T LEAVE FOR THREE YEARS. MEN, ON THE OTHER HAND, I HAD BEEN EXCHANGING MY BODY FOR A GOOD MEAL, A PLACE TO SLEEP, A DISTRACTION SINCE I WAS EIGHTEEN. PLUS, I FIGURED IF I HAVE SEX WITH A MAN, I MIGHT UNDERSTAND NOW IF I AM A FULL DYKE, BI, OR JUST GAY FOR MADELINE.

I DIDN'T WANT TO RISK LOSING ANOTHER FRIEND TO A DRUNKEN CONVERSATION ABOUT HOW FUCKED UP IT IS THAT I HADN'T REALIZED I WANTED TO FUCK WOMEN UNTIL I WAS 33 YEARS OLD. I HAD MADE OUT WITH WOMEN, MASTURBATED TO WOMEN, WATCHED PRIMARILY WOMEN ON WOMEN PORN, BUT FOR SOME REASON, I DIDN'T THINK IT MEANT I WAS GAY UNTIL I MET MADELINE. SO RATHER THAN WALK TO THE LAST REMAINING LESBIAN BAR IN BROOKLYN AND ATTEMPT TO NAVIGATE THE GAY SINGLE SCENE FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MY LIFE, I CALLED ROHAN. I LOVE ROHAN. WE GET ALONG WELL. WE BOTH LOVED JONNY WALKER'S WHISKY AND RERUNS OF CHEERS.

THE NIGHT PROGRESSED LIKE EVERY NIGHT AFTER OUR THIRD DATE EIGHT YEARS AGO. I ARRIVE AT HIS PLACE, AND HE OFFERS A COMPLIMENT AND A DRINK. I LAUNCH INTO A DIATRIBE ABOUT WORK WHILE SMOKING OR WISHING I HADN'T GIVEN UP SMOKING THAT WEEK. HE POPS IN A JOKE OR TWO, USUALLY AT MY EXPENSE, WHICH I LOVE BECAUSE EVEN THOUGH I AM OVERLY SENSITIVE TO CRITICISM AND MOCKERY, I RELIGIOUSLY APPRECIATE A WELL-CRAFTED JOKE. WE SIT ACROSS FROM EACH OTHER AND CATCH UP UNTIL HE STANDS AND OFFERS HIS HAND TO TAKE ME INTO THE BEDROOM. WHILE ON ALL FOURS STARING AT THE IKEA HEADBOARD, I REALIZED I HATE THIS. THE ENTIRE ACTION SOBERED ME UP. I HATE THIS. I NEVER WANT THIS TO HAPPEN AGAIN. I BEGIN TO CRY, WHICH ONLY MAKES ROHAN THRUST HARDER. BUT I HOLD STILL.

JUST HOLD STILL.



MY MOTHER WHISPERS IN MY EAR. HER HEAVY HAND COMFORTING MY SHOULDER, OR WAS IT KEEPING ME THERE? BOWHUNTING HAPPENS TWICE A YEAR. BEAR. DEER. ELK. CARIBOU. TURKEY. PHEASANT. DUCK AND QUAIL. MOST SHOTS ARE TAKEN FROM ABOUT 70 YARDS. THIS BLACK BEAR IS 5 YARDS AWAY. IF THIS BEAST WANTED, I COULD BE ITS DINNER WITHIN SECONDS. BLACK BEARS CAN RUN 35 MILES PER HOUR. I CAN ONLY PULL A 12-POUND BOW. I AM ONLY FIVE YEARS OLD. MY ALUMINUM ARROW WOULD BOUNCE OFF THE BEAST'S FUR AND CLATTER TO THE GROUND.

HOLD STILL. MY BODY BEGINS TO TREMBLE LIKE THE BIG EARTHQUAKE LAST YEAR. THAT BROKE THE BAY BRIDGE. ISN'T THIS EXCITING? IS THIS WHAT EXCITEMENT FEELS LIKE? IT IS WISE TO MATCH MOTHER'S MOOD.

THIS IS NOW EXCITING. WHEN THE HEART RACES, AND THE BODY TREMBLES AND EVERY PART OF YOU IS SCREAMING RUN AWAY—HOLD STILL.

WE LIKE THIS, WE TELL OURSELVES. DON'T BE A PUSSY. DON'T BE WEAK. YOU CAN BE MANY THINGS WITH MOTHER BUT NOT WEAK. NOT VULNERABLE. NOT SCARED. I AM NOT SURE WHICH CREATURE HERE I AM MORE AFRAID OF.

WE WILL MAKE THIS EXCITING. WE WILL LEARN TO LOVE THIS. THIS IS WHAT STRENGTH IS. THIS IS WHAT GOOD IS. THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A WOMAN; WHEN YOUR BODY TELLS YOU TO RUN, YOU WILL HOLD STILL.

ROHAN FINISHES, FLOPS ON HIS BACK. I CONTINUE TO CRY. I SMILE. I THINK TO MYSELF, I NEVER HAVE TO DO THAT EVER AGAIN. IT FEELS LIKE A RELEASE. ALL AT ONCE, EVERY SEXUAL ENCOUNTER WITH A MAN JUST FLIPPED AROUND IN MY MEMORIES. FROM THIS PERSPECTIVE, I COULD NOW SEE HOW UNCOMFORTABLE I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN HAVING SEX WITH MEN. HOW I HAD TO BE DRUNK, HOW THEY HAD TO BE UGLY, HOW I WOULD PUSH IT INTO PAIN. MY SISTER USED A RAZOR BLADE, AND I USED COCK.

I TELL ROHAN I NEVER WANT TO HAVE SEX WITH A MAN AGAIN. HE SEEMS GENUINELY SHOCKED. I ASKED HIM WHAT HE THOUGHT I WAS CRYING ABOUT.

BECAUSE THE SEX WAS SO GOOD.

THIS WAS NOT THE FIRST TIME A MAN DIDN'T STOP FUCKING ME WHEN I STARTED CRYING, BUT IT WILL BE THE LAST.



How It Feels to Fall

Jan Edwards Hemming

IN JUNE 2011, I ATTENDED MY FIRST PRIDE.

I REMEMBER HOW NERVOUS I WAS. I WORE A PONYTAIL AND A PAISLEY SUNDRESS, THE CLOSEST THING TO RAINBOW THAT I OWNED. AS I STOOD SWEATING IN THE MIDDAY SUN NEXT TO MY GIRLFRIEND, ASHA, I STILL DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THE APPEAL OF PARADES WHERE BEADS WEREN'T THROWN (THE LOUISIANIAN IN ME RUNS DEEP), BUT I CLAPPED AND CHEERED AND TEARED UP WATCHING ALL THOSE PEOPLE WHO FELT COMFORTABLE IN THEIR OWN SKIN. I WAS SO JEALOUS OF THEM. ASHA AND I HAD BEEN TOGETHER FOR ALMOST FIVE MONTHS, BUT SHE CONSISTENTLY REMINDED ME THAT I WASN'T "REALLY GAY." I THOUGHT I WAS PRETTY GAY, BUT I HAD HAD RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEN, AND GOOD SEX WITH THEM, TOO, AND I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THAT MEANT. "BORN THIS WAY" PLAYED ON REPEAT AS THE FLOATS PASSED BY. WHAT MADE SOMEONE GAY ENOUGH?

AFTER THE PARADE, WE WALKED THROUGH THE WEST VILLAGE TO MEET HER FRIENDS FOR DRINKS. TWO DAYS PRIOR, THE NEW YORK STATE SENATE HAD VOTED TO LEGALIZE GAY MARRIAGE, AND ON BLEECKER, THE MICHAEL KORS STOREFRONT WAS PRACTICALLY AFLAME. IDENTICAL EYE-HEIGHT PLASTIC CAKES STOOD NEXT TO EACH OTHER, ONE TOPPED WITH TWO GROOMS, THE OTHER WITH TWO BRIDES. WE TOOK PHOTOS THROUGH THE GLASS. WE KISSED. LATER THAT AFTERNOON, I DRUNKENLY SLIPPED MY HAND UP HER SKIRT AND FUCKED HER IN THE BACK OF A BAR. I COULDN'T HELP MYSELF; I NEVER WANTED TO STOP TOUCHING HER. WHEN THE BARTENDER ASKED US TO LEAVE, I REDDENED, THINKING OF HOW I'D PLAYED BARBIES AS A GIRL: HOW I'D HAD THEM SLIP EACH OTHER'S STRAPPY DRESSES FROM SHOULDERS, SLOWLY LEAN IN TO KISS; AND THE UNENDING DESIRE I HAD TO KNOW HOW THAT FELT IN REAL LIFE.

NOW THAT I KNEW, I DIDN'T WANT TO STOP. I'D NEVER FELT THAT WAY ABOUT A GUY. I THOUGHT THAT MUST COUNT FOR SOMETHING.

ASHA AND I HAD A STEREOTYPICALLY FAST-PROGRESSING LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP. WE MET IN THE LAST WEEK OF JANUARY AND BECAME IMMEDIATELY INSEPARABLE. WE EMAILED CONSTANTLY, BECAUSE I DIDN'T HAVE UNLIMITED TEXTING YET. WE FUCKED AT MY APARTMENT AT LUNCHTIME AND HAD DINNER TOGETHER EVERY NIGHT. WE SAW MOVIES AT AN OLD THEATER IN CHELSEA AND WALKED MILES AROUND MANHATTAN, TALKING ABOUT EVERYTHING AND NOTHING.



Aleena Sharif

SHE WAS DESPERATELY CHARMING, STRIKINGLY PRETTY. SHE LEFT NOTES ON MY BED WHEN SHE WENT TO WORK IN THE MORNING. SHE TOOK ME TO HER FAVORITE SPOTS IN THE CITY (SHE'D BEEN THERE ALMOST A DECADE), SURPRISED ME WITH FLOWER DELIVERIES, TOLD ME SHE'D NEVER MET ANYBODY LIKE ME. I ADMITTEDLY WAS SMITTEN. EVEN WHEN WE STARTED FIGHTING, EVEN BADLY AND IN PUBLIC, I DIDN'T BREAK UP WITH HER. SHE TOLD ME I WOULDN'T FIND ANYBODY LIKE HER, AND I WAS TERRIFIED SHE WAS RIGHT. I WAS TERRIFIED OF BEING GAY AND THOUGHT THAT, MAYBE IF THE RELATIONSHIP LASTED LONG ENOUGH, WHEN I FINALLY CAME OUT TO MY MOTHER, SHE WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO CALL IT A PHASE.

EVEN AFTER THE SATURDAY NIGHT IN EARLY MAY WHEN ASHA'S FRIEND ATTACKED MY FRIEND AT A PARTY, AND SECURITY FORCIBLY REMOVED ASHA AND HER FRIEND FROM THE APARTMENT COMPLEX, I WENT AFTER HER BECAUSE I KNEW SHE WOULD BLAME ME FOR IT ALL IF I DIDN'T. EVEN WHEN SHE SPUN ME AROUND, CALLED ME A WHORE, AND SHOVED MY FACE-DOWN ON THE SIDEWALK IN FRONT OF DUPLEX, AND I LAY THERE IN A STUPOR, FEELING THE CUT ON MY CHIN AND STARING UP AT THE LIGHTS FROM STONEWALL NEXT DOOR, THINKING, STUPIDLY, OF GAY RIGHTS—I DIDN'T BREAK UP WITH HER. SHE FOLLOWED ME TO MY APARTMENT AND CRIED AND APOLOGIZED AND SAID I JUST MADE HER FEEL SO INSECURE. I LET HER IN. IN THE MORNING IT WAS SUNNY, AND I HAD TOO MUCH TO LOSE. WE WENT TO BRUNCH AND DRANK CHAMPAGNE.

IT ALWAYS WENT LIKE THIS:

HERE IS THE WINE WE WILL DRINK. ASHA HAS PICKED IT (AND ALSO THIS RESTAURANT) BECAUSE I HAVE POOR TASTE AND DO NOT KNOW ABOUT WINE. I DO NOT KNOW ABOUT ENDIVE SALADS, OR THE FRENCH RESTAURANT WHERE ASHA SAYS SHE SAW JAKE GYLLENHAAL AND TAYLOR SWIFT (YOUR GIRL, SHE CALLS HER, HER VOICE DRIPPING WITH DISAPPROVAL) DINING TOGETHER LAST YEAR. I DO NOT KNOW ABOUT ASKING FOR BLACK CLOTH NAPKINS TO KEEP THE LINT OFF BLACK PANTS. I DO NOT KNOW THAT INDUSTRIAL ROCK IS THE GENRE TO WHICH NINE INCH NAILS FORMALLY BELONGS. I DO NOT KNOW THE BANDS RILO KILEY OR VERUCA SALT, OR ABOUT THE INTRICACIES OF FLEETWOOD MAC'S BAND MEMBERS' AFFAIRS. I DO NOT KNOW THE LESBIAN BARS IN NEW YORK CITY; I HAVE NEVER BEEN TO ONE, AND NOW THAT ASHA AND I ARE TOGETHER, WHY WOULD YOU EVEN WANT TO GO? THOSE GIRLS ARE PREDATORS. I ALSO DO NOT KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT BEING GAY. I DO NOT, IT SEEMS, KNOW ANYTHING.

TALKING WITH HER FELT LIKE TALKING WITH MY FATHER: EVERY ARGUMENT WAS MOOT BECAUSE SHE INHERENTLY KNEW BETTER—KNEW ME BETTER THAN I KNEW MYSELF BECAUSE SHE WAS OLDER AND THAT'S HOW IT WORKS. SHE TOLD ME MY FRIENDS WEREN'T MY REAL FRIENDS: THEY'LL ABANDON YOU AFTER GRAD SCHOOL. THEY ONLY CARE ABOUT YOU BECAUSE THEY EITHER WANT TO FUCK YOU OR DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY WANT OUT OF LIFE.



SHE TOLD ME I DIDN'T CARE ABOUT HER, THAT I WAS SELFISH. WHEN I MADE A PLAN THAT DIDN'T INVOLVE HER, SHE'D SAY, MY TIME IS VERY PRECIOUS DUE TO LACK OF IT, SO HOW I SPEND IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO ME. IF SOMEONE DOESN'T HAVE THE TIME FOR ME THAN [SIC] I CERTAINLY WON'T MAKE THE TIME FOR THEM WHEN IT'S CONVENIENT FOR THEM, BUT THEN IF I TRIED TO CHANGE MY PLANS TO SEE HER, I'D BE MET WITH SNARK: I MUST SAY, YOUR 24-HOUR TURN AROUND FOR BOOKING IS BETTER THAN A CONTINENTAL FLIGHT—THOROUGHLY IMPRESSED; OR SHE'D DENY THAT SHE'D WANTED TO SEE ME, SAYING, I'M PLAYING CATCH UP ON MY LIFE AS I HAVE BEEN DOING FOR THE PAST 5 WEEKS BECAUSE I'VE BEEN IN JAN-LAND. HER DISDAIN WAS VINEGAR, PICKLING THE PARTS OF ME I THOUGHT I KNEW.

SO I STARTED YELLING. I DIDN'T KNOW ANY OTHER WAY TO BE HEARD.

THE NIGHT THAT I BROKE HER RIB, WE HAD JUST ARRIVED HOME FROM EATING AT A NEW PIZZA RESTAURANT IN THE WEST VILLAGE. ASHA HAD GLADLY EATEN THE FOOD, BUT IT WAS SOMEHOW MY FAULT THAT SHE HAD DONE SO. FROM THE BATHROOM I LISTENED TO HER YELL AND BRUSHED MY TEETH TOO HARD, TRYING TO HOLD MY TONGUE ON WHAT I WANTED TO SAY: THAT FOR SOMEONE SO MUCH OLDER AND WISER THAN ME, SHOULDN'T SHE KNOW BY NOW HOW LACTOSE INTOLERANCE WORKS? THEN, SHE WAS IN MY FACE, SHOUTING THAT MY FRIENDS SPECIFICALLY PICKED THAT PLACE BECAUSE THEY KNEW I'D GET SICK!, AND I SNAPPED. I SLAMMED DOWN MY TOOTHBRUSH AND PUSHED HER AWAY FROM ME. SHE STUMBLED BACKWARD, AND THEN SHE WAS WAILING AND CALLING ME A BITCH (WHICH WASN'T UNUSUAL), AND I TOLD HER TO JUST GET UP.

AS IT TURNED OUT, ASHA'S RIB HAD FRACTURED WHERE SHE'D FALLEN INTO THE TOILET PAPER HOLDER THAT JUTTED OUT FROM THE WALL: SUCH A SMALL, STUPID THING. THIS, AS WITH EVERYTHING, WAS MY FAULT, BECAUSE HER WORDS NEVER LEFT A MARK. I SET UP THE AIR MATTRESS IN THE "LIVING ROOM" (IF YOU CAN CALL IT THAT, IN HER STUDIO APARTMENT) IN FRONT OF THE COUCH. I PILED IT WITH PILLOWS AND COVERED HER IN KISSES AND WEPT LIKE A SORE WITH APOLOGY. IT HURT TO BREATHE, SHE SAID, BUT SHE FELT FINE ENOUGH TO HAVE SEX—WHICH WE DID, A LOT, BECAUSE THAT WAS ALL WE EVER DID. FUCK AND FIGHT AND FIGHT AND FUCK. I WAS AIR; SHE WAS FIRE; I FED HER OPEN WOUNDS. SHE SUFFOCATED EVERYTHING THAT WAS LIVING; THE SKY WAS RED, THE TREES HAD BURNED, AND MY SKIN TURNED GREY WITH ASH.

A FEW DAYS LATER, SHE LEFT FOR A WORK TRIP, AND I LAY STILL ON THE DEFLATING MATTRESS. I THOUGHT OF HER HANDS: THE FIRST AND THIRD NAILS BITTEN, A SCRAPE ON THE MIDDLE KNUCKLE, EACH SLENDER BONE THAT NEVER LEARNED TO PLAY THE PIANO BUT

Of all the things I love about you (and I'll never be able to make all these things concrete—as in make a list—because they're so infinite), I love your magic the most. Your electric eyes are a close second.

I know who you are... I know your purpose in my life and I know mine in yours and it's not typical and it's not short and it's something full of depth and it's something I will always need, have always needed, like water.

My fondest memory of us is resting between your legs...your words echoing through me as you read that poem to me. Sexiest moment I think I've ever had.

I want you with me—where you belong—and with no one else because it makes sense.

You're unforgettable because you're an exceptionally lovable person. I'll unforget you always and forever :)

SHOULD HAVE (THEY ARE PIANO HANDS). I EXAMINED MY HANDS: THEY WERE MINE, BUT THEY WERE ALSO HERS. ALL OF ME WAS. BECAUSE FOR EVERY AWFUL THING SHE SAID, THERE WAS SOMETHING CHARMING, SOMETHING SWEET:
THERE WAS SO MUCH CONFLICTING INFORMATION, SO MANY SENTIMENTS I COULDN'T KEEP STRAIGHT. I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT I WAS DOING WRONG. HOW COULD SHE SEE ME SO CLEARLY, AND THEN SO QUICKLY FORGET WHO I WAS?

IT HAS NICE LEGS, SHE ALWAYS SAID ABOUT WINE. THAT MEANS IT'S EXPENSIVE, YOU KNOW. THINGS, THINGS, ALWAYS THINGS. SHE SWIRLED IT PRETENTIOUSLY AND WATCHED THE TEARS DROP BACK DOWN THE SIDES OF THE GLASS. I READ ABOUT IT; THE ONLY THING LEGS ON WINE REALLY INDICATES IS THAT IT HAS A HIGHER ALCOHOL OR SUGAR CONTENT. IN FACT, ONLY BEGINNER WINE CONNOISSEURS TEND TO REFER TO THEM, UNDER THE MISCONCEPTION THAT THEY INDICATE THE QUALITY OF THE WINE. I NEVER TOLD HER THAT. I ONLY CRIED AND HATED MYSELF AND WONDERED WHAT KIND OF PERSON I WAS BECOMING. I HAD NO IDEA WHAT I WAS DOING, AND NO IDEA WHO I WAS.

EVEN STILL, AS I SIT HERE AND READ THIS BACK, I AM OVERWHELMED WITH GUILT. EVEN NOW, I STILL FEEL THAT I AM THE ONE WHO FAILED.

First Time

STARGAZING AT CALIFORNIA MEN'S COLONY

Your heart is vacant: guard tower
I walk right up to without getting shot.
Infused with quiet, your arms are your
power, you hardly notice. I know why.
Refused of flight, a lovebird like me is worth a shot.

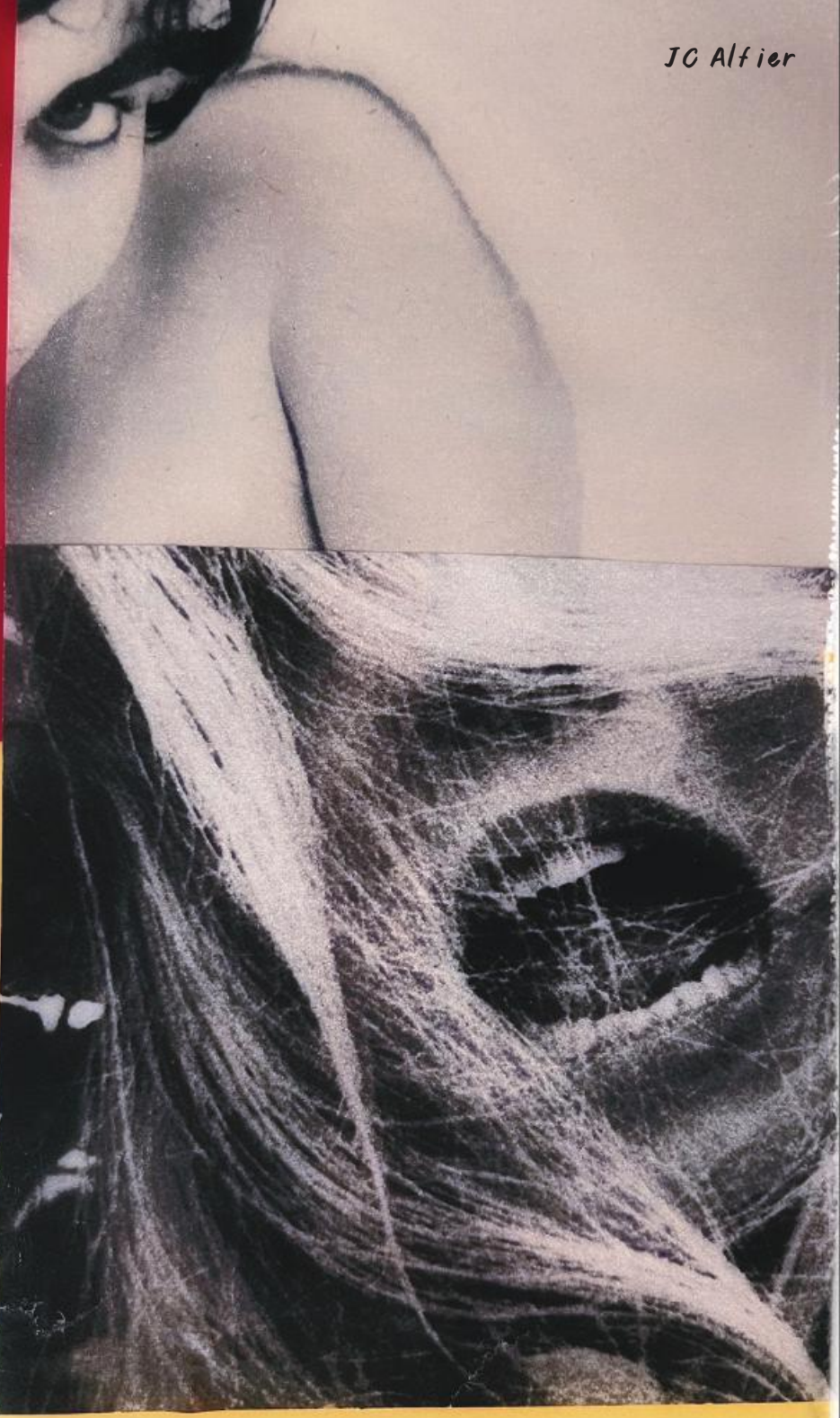
Who the hell are you

anyway, the big man the trail of your fist
in my blood? My face remains pretty,
you report. I've no mind to make complaint. Then kiss.

In concrete terms, you hold my face
and used it like a rogue rock does the moon.
You promised stars, I always get to see.

I have tried, so much, but each heart-size star
makes me a bed of night with one tomb in its heart.

Akiva,
PRISON
POET


JC Alfier

A SCARED FAG IN JAIL, His First Time

I mean: prison. I enter the cell
and a fist flies through the dark
and slices wide my lip. I look as my
kiss streams from the wound:
   a fight to the death, if
   this isn't about sex: about who's trapped
   and smashed into like a crowbar inside a clay bust.
Moments like these I think, after
this, I pick a picture
my sister mailed me.
This one has the big stuffed Pokemon.
                I too had a big stuffed Pokemon
                on bed, and was an honors student.
                U.C. Berkeley is fun if you're gay.
                On campus hate is theory.
                   Curious freak thing——
                ornate alien theme like a thumbprint on Europa.
I'm male; I use my kiss on men.
What's expected of me: write a thesis
in a few languages, and slice wide the prompt:
   Aren't Gays in America privileged?
   The thwack of a jack-in-the-box
   sticking out a smile, bloodless.
Back into the cell, now taste of blood blooms. Imagining
a thesis where fists tear it into little pieces.
Indignity infinite.

I know it's a photograph. I see my
sister lives well. Her big stuffed Pokemon
on bed where there's maps (the travel bot saucer-shaped);
but my prison bunk: nothing's there
except blood and time.

To undo the picture's magic, I do
cast spells in words spelled.
Far away trains pass.
Why not? Not a single
car to interrupt the first line...

'Hate' is a mouse of a monosyllable: 4 letters breathed
by 1 syllable. Linguists
found the young learn this word about the time
they add 'love' and 'fear' to their vocabulary.
Deep and ingrained, the wheels and cogs
that make the heart tick.

I worry that if I
  write too far, I'll go soft and set
  my body on a path to unpredictable pleasures.

Despite compactness, 'Hate' might be half bull, other half a man:
omniscient, omnipotent voice that calls
like cheese to a rat: alone, bankrupt, and exhausted.

And then there was a moment
in Minneapolis, that will come again, there will be time
for old ghosts with new faces; there will be blood and time,
smart phones shall not avert their eyes, footage
of struggle defeated but never exhausted: a man
suffused with tenderness for breathing in America,
with three words that came like a sharp stab of
voicelessness,
...but being voiceless makes me quite vocal.
Now out of left field, the truth rattles out:
Gay is in all race. Each nation. All tribes.
Either openly or 'in the closet'.
Gay does have so many meanings:

True. Most happy. Letdown. Please kiss. I kiss
ahead of all the lies that lynch a person,
that carry untold
by train, so far away.

THANK GOD YOU'RE GAY IN AMERICA
Why not stop? Shut up and fuck. Letdown pen. Shutdown paper.
Meltdown mind. Shut it. If
I stop, violence becomes solely the accumulation of knowledge.
Mere theory. As before, the struggle remains
in prison, being Gay in 2023
is being Gay outside prison, in 1969.
Either era, non-gays use Gay for $
Any nation, Gay in prison excludes many from many
communal doings, opportunities.
Except sex and death.

I touch blood left fresh,
thumb on bloody kiss...
theory and thesis clarified upon
another clutch of flesh that wallops lips.
Gay shan't fit prison social structure.
But Gay fits my spirit's sole society.
Thus, empathy's citadels and market
vest me with love not to pay hate with hate.
Yet, Gay paints us as 'weak' behind bars
but what's weak about love, weak my will
to breathe beyond the prison gate?
But that moment may not come. Then, I would take
the Pokemon pic. Look at it. Fancy. It'll be put away.
Back to the black box.
Or, into the closet.

Akiva,
PRISON
POET


COMING

HOME

NAILS

MEGAN SWANSON

THE TIDE GOES OUT, AND OUR CASTLE APPEARS.

KATRINA HAS FAKE ACRYLIC NAILS, FRENCH-TIPPED. I AM ELEVEN, MAYBE TWELVE, AND SHE'S INTO WEARING BANDANAS OVER HER HAIR SO I WEAR THEM TOO. MY FAMILY COMES HERE FOR CHRISTMAS MOST YEARS. WE LEAVE ON THE TWENTY-THIRD AND STAY UNTIL THE THIRD OR FOURTH DAY OF JANUARY. THIS IS THE FIRST YEAR I WILL MAKE IT UP PAST MIDNIGHT ON NEW YEAR'S, BUT IT'S MOSTLY BECAUSE THIS IS THE YEAR I SEE JURASSIC PARK 3 AND I AM AFRAID OF VELOCIRAPTORS TEARING THROUGH THE HOUSE'S GLASS WINDOWS.



THAT FACE THE OCEAN. MY DAD SAYS THE GLASS ISN'T TEMPERED LIKE IT WOULD BE AT HOME, SO I IMAGINE VELOCIRAPTORS BREAKING THROUGH INTO THE LIVING ROOM AND I'M STABBED WITH BIG GREEN SHARDS OF GLASS BEFORE THEY RIP MY ARMS OFF AND EAT ME.

THIS YEAR I RIDE IN KATRINA'S DAD'S HUMMER, A BIG GOLD BOXY UGLY FUCKING THING, BUT IT'S THE BIGGEST CAR I'VE EVER BEEN IN, AND HE HAS A LOT OF MONEY, AND HE TAKES US BOWLING, JUST THE THREE OF US, AND BACK AT HIS HOUSE KATRINA RUNS HER ACRYLIC NAILS UP AND DOWN MY BARE BACK, UP AND DOWN AND IN CIRCLES, AND IT FEELS SO GOOD. MY MOM DOES IT FOR ME SOMETIMES. BUT I DON'T WANT MY MOM TO TOUCH ME ANYMORE. I'M THAT AGE, THE RIGHT AGE TO FEEL THAT WAY.



THIS IS A FEW YEARS BEFORE THINGS START TO GET REALLY MESSED UP, BEFORE WE STOP GOING ON FAMILY VACATIONS BECAUSE MY MOM DRINKS TOO MUCH AND SITS ON STRANGERS' LAPS IN FRONT OF MY DAD AND HER DAD AND EVERYONE ELSE. THIS, AS FAR AS I KNOW, IS A GOOD YEAR. PEOPLE ARE HAPPY. I PRETEND TO BE ASLEEP ON THE COUCH AND HEAR MY PARENTS WHISPERING ABOUT SOMETHING IN THE KITCHEN AND BECAUSE I'M TWELVE OR THIRTEEN I THINK IT'S ABOUT SEX, IT HAS TO BE ABOUT SEX, AND I AM REPULSED AND SQUEEZE MY EYES SHUT SO HARD BUT KEEP PRETENDING TO BE ASLEEP BECAUSE I WANT TO HEAR ABOUT IT.

THIS IS ALSO THE WAY I LEARN THE WORD "GROPE", WHEN I AM TEN OR ELEVEN: PRETENDING TO BE ASLEEP IN THE CAR WITH MY DAD AND MY UNCLE, SECRETLY LISTENING TO THEM TALK ABOUT WOMEN THEY HAD BEEN WITH. I LOOK THE WORD UP LATER IN THE DICTIONARY AFTER WE GET BACK TO MY UNCLE'S HOUSE. THEY MUST HAVE SEEN ME DO IT.

I HAVE A LOT OF PEN PALS. ONE OF THEM, JO, I MET WHEN MY FAMILY WENT CAMPING ONE TIME AND WE SET UP OUR TENT NEXT TO HER FAMILY'S CAMPER, AND JO SHOWED ME HOW TO STAY REALLY REALLY STILL AND WAIT FOR CHIPMUNKS TO CRAWL UP TO OUR HANDS AND PLUCK COCOA PUFFS FROM OUR PALMS WITH THEIR LITTLE CHIPMUNKY FINGERS.



JO HAS HORSES, AND SHE SENDS ME PHOTOS OF HER NEXT TO THEM WITH SOME OF HER LETTERS. I SEND HER LITTLE FLUFFS OF SHEEP WOOL THAT I PULL FROM THE FENCE IN THE BIG FIELD NEAR MY HOUSE. THIS IS A FEW YEARS BEFORE THERE WON'T BE SHEEP THERE ANYMORE, JUST HOUSES. I STICK JO'S LETTERS TO MY BULLETIN BOARD AND KEEP THEM THERE FOR YEARS.



THE TIDE GOES OUT AND OUR CASTLE APPEARS. MUSSELS POP AND CLICK IN THE AIR, LIKE THEY'RE SHOCKED THE WATER'S GONE FOR A WHILE. THERE ARE SNAILS STUCK TO THE SIDE, AND KATRINA PICKS SOME OFF AND I TELL HER STOP, DON'T HURT THEM, AND WHEN SHE TRIES TO PUT THEM BACK ON THEY WON'T HOLD ONTO THE ROCK AND THEY FALL DOWN TO THE DAMP SAND AND LATER I FORGET THAT THEY'RE THERE AND STEP ON THEM.



THE CASTLE IS THIS BIG ROCK CORAL THING, CARVED OUT BY WAVES, AND THIS YEAR I'M STILL SHORT ENOUGH TO STAND ALL THE WAY UP INSIDE IT.



IT SMELLS OF SALT AND ROT. SOME OF THE MUSSELS ARE ALREADY DEAD, NOT POPPING AND CLICKING ANYMORE. KATRINA'S DAD IS OFF DOING REAL ESTATE STUFF—THAT'S HOW HE GOT ALL HIS MONEY—AND MY PARENTS LET ME WANDER WITH HER BECAUSE MY GRANDPA KNOWS KATRINA'S DAD KIND OF WELL. I DON'T KNOW HOW. KATRINA WEARS A RED PAISLEY BANDANA AND I HAVE A GREEN ONE. MY HAIR IS BRAIDED. OUR SKIN IS TAN AND MY LEGS ARE IN THAT WEIRD LONG LANKY PHASE THAT I WANT TO GROW OUT OF. IN THE CASTLE WE TAKE OFF OUR TANK TOPS AND KATRINA UNDOES MY BIKINI AND TICKLES AND SCRATCHES HER NAILS AGAINST MY SKIN. I LIE FLAT ON MY FRONT IN THE SAND IN THE CASTLE, AND THE WAVES CRASH ON AND ON, BUT THE TIDE WON'T BE IN FOR A WHILE. WE'RE SAFE.



KATRINA GIVES ME FAKE NAILS TO WEAR, THE KIND THAT ARE WHOLE FINGERTIPS, LITTLE PLASTIC CAPS I STICK ON ALL MY FINGERS, SO I'M NOT JUST PRETENDING TO HAVE LONG PURPLE NAILS BUT BRAND-NEW SKIN.

THEY MAKE ME FEEL WITCHY. KATRINA LIES DOWN ON HER STOMACH, HER HEAD ON HER FOLDED ARMS. THROUGH A HOLE IN THE CASTLE I WATCH A MAN WITH A SUNHAT LEAD TWO HORSES DOWN THE BEACH. A THIRD FOLLOWS, UN-HARNESSED, A WAYS BEHIND. HIS HEAD BOBS AND I FEEL SORRY FOR HIM. KATRINA'S BACK IS SUNBURNED AND PEELING IN LITTLE FLAKY CIRCLES.

THE PLASTIC NAILS LEAVE MARKS ON HER SKIN, FIRST WHITE WHERE THEY PRESS AND THEN A DARKER RED WHERE THEY SCRATCH.

WE DO THIS, TRADING OFF, FOR HOURS.



THIS IS THE YEAR BEFORE I GET MY FIRST PIMPLE. MY FAMILY WILL GO CAMPING IN COLORADO AND ON THE WAY MY MOM WILL BUY ME CLEARASIL, AND IT WILL CRUST WHITE ON THE PIMPLE AND DRY IT ALL OUT. CLEARASIL WILL NEVER WORK FOR ME AGAIN. ON THIS TRIP I WILL HAVE A CRUSH ON THIS OLDER BOY, SETH, WHOSE FAMILY IS STAYING IN THE SAME CAMPGROUND, AND WHEN I PLAY CARDS WITH HIM ALONE IN HIS CAMPER I HEAR THAT SHAGGY SONG "IT WASN'T ME" FOR THE FIRST TIME. I WILL FEEL GUILTY FOR LISTENING TO IT. WE'LL EXCHANGE ADDRESSES AND I'LL SEND HIM A LETTER BUT HE WON'T WRITE ME BACK.

IN THE TOWN WHERE MY FAMILY GOES FOR CHRISTMAS THERE'S A LITTLE SHOP THAT WE GO TO EVERY YEAR, AND EVERY YEAR MY MOM BUYS ME A LITTLE WOODEN TURTLE, SOMETIMES A SMALL ONE AND SOMETIMES A BIG ONE, SOMETIMES A BIG ONE WITH RIDGES ON ITS BACK LIKE AN ALLIGATOR, ALL PAINTED DIFFERENT BRIGHT COLORS AND DOTTED WITH WHITE. THEIR NECKS ARE LONG AND ARE HOOKED TO A PIECE OF STRETCHY STRING SO WHEN YOU TAP THEIR HEADS THEY BOB AROUND IN THE SHELLS. SHE COLLECTS THEM, MY MOM TELLS THE WOMAN WHO SELLS THE TURTLES TO US. SHE HAS SO MANY. AND I FEEL SO STUPID, THIS YEAR. THIS IS THE LAST YEAR I'LL ASK FOR A WOODEN TURTLE. BUT MY MOM WILL KEEP THEM ALL IN A SHOEBOX GLUED OVER WITH BABY PHOTOS OF ME CUT WITH CRAZY SCISSORS. THE TURTLES WILL SIT COLLECTED IN A CORNER OF THE BOX, NEXT TO A PINK PLASTIC BABY BOTTLE-SHAPED CONTAINER THAT HOLDS MY TEETH.

THIS IS A FEW YEARS BEFORE I WILL HAVE ACRYLIC FAKE NAILS, FRENCH-TIPPED. THIS IS A FEW YEARS BEFORE I WILL FINGER A GIRL, AFRAID THE NAILS WILL HURT HER, BUT SHE'LL SAY THEY WON'T, IT DOESN'T HURT, IT FEELS GOOD. AFTERWARD SHE'LL LIE ON HER CHEST IN MY BED AND I'LL TICKLE HER BACK, UP AND DOWN, UP AND DOWN AND IN CIRCLES, AND I'LL KNOW EXACTLY HOW GOOD IT FEELS. HER SKIN WON'T BE SUNBURNED. HER SKIN WILL HAVE LITTLE ZITS AROUND HER SHOULDERS, AND THE TIPS OF THEM WILL COLLECT UNDER MY NAILS, AND SHE'LL HAVE FRECKLES DOWN HER SPINE, AND DIMPLES AT HER HIPS.



I'LL GET ACRYLIC NAILS ONE MORE TIME, WHEN I'M AN ADULT, AND I'LL HATE THEM. I'LL BITE THEM ALL OFF.



it's easier to consume pain than talk about it

Lexi McDonald

MY BODY KNEW HOW TO FIGHT LONG BEFORE I DID, LONG BEFORE MY FATHER TOLD EVERYONE THAT I WAS FLUENT IN CZECH AT FIVE, LONG BEFORE I WAS HELD UP AGAINST HIS BROTHER'S CHILDREN AND THE WALL WITH CHRISTMAS STOCKINGS SWAYING.

WE TIPTOED AROUND CONVERSATIONS ABOUT MATH AND SCIENCE BUT SLIDE TACKLED AT EVERY TUESDAY AND THURSDAY SOCCER PRACTICE AND MY FATHER CAME HOME PURPLE AND LIMPING AFTER KRAV MAGA MORE THAN ONCE.

MY BODY WAS ELEVEN WHEN IT BECAME FULL OF CHIA SEEDS: SWALLOWED IN A GLASS OF WATER, POCKETED IN COTTAGE CHEESE, SHREDDED IN A PROTEIN SMOOTHIE. HE SAID, THEY'LL MAKE YOU THIN, AND SO I PUT THEM IN EVERYTHING.

WE LISTENED TO THE VERVE AND CLIVE CUSSLER AND OHIO STATE FOOTBALL IN THE CAR AND I TRACED THE CREASES IN THE TAN LEATHER LIKE HEART LINES ON A PALM, MY FATHER SAYING, I'LL GIVE YOU A DOLLAR IF YOU CAN NAME THAT SINGER, ME ALWAYS GUESSING, MYANT MYANT AYE? SO THAT I COULD BE RIGHT JUST ONCE.

MY BODY, POKER FACED AND SHIN SPLINTS. HIS, FLUSHED AND RUNNER'S HIGH. WE PAINT. ME, WITH WORDS. HE, WITH AGONY.

FIRST MONTH,

I HAD IT ALL STUNG INTO ME: THE PIANO BAR,
THE SOFT AND TREMBLING GLITTER, PERPETUAL FIRE-EATER,
MEN STANDING OUT IN TIMES SQUARE.

CITY-WORM FORMED IN MY BRAIN CANAL
AND THERE WAS NO STOPPING IT. COULDN'T GO
BACK TO SWEET HAY, OR BLUE OCTOBER, OR

THE TENDER FLAME BURNING LOW. I
FELL IN LOVE WITH A PRACTICAL WOMAN, A
YES MA'AM AND A NO MA'AM, GOOD BAG

SLUNG ON HER SHOULDER AT THE TRAIN PLATFORM.
SHE KNEW HOW TO WALK FAST AND LAUGHED
WITH A GRIT AND GUTTER-COLORED BURN. KNEW THE

SIMPLE TERRIBLE SECRET OF GETTING UP IN THE MORNING
AND TAKING BOURBON AT NIGHT, UNDRESSED
IN THE SMALL UNPAINTED ROOM, IN THE COLD CITY

WITH ITS COLORLESS DISTANT LIGHT. ONE DAY, WIND WAS BITTER
AND IN PASSING I LOOKED AT HER & WAS OUT OF
LOVE. BUT IT HAD ALL BEEN STUNG INTO ME, ANYHOW.



you buy yourself your own sazon

Ayana O'brien

YOU BOUGHT YOURSELF YOUR OWN SAZON. ONLINE SHOPPING, ORDERING GROCERIES FOR DELIVERY. SEASONINGS AISLE. IT CAUGHT YOUR EYE.

YOU BOUGHT IT, UNPACKED IT, SET IT ON THE SHELF NEXT TO THE PAPRIKA AND THE CURRY, NEXT TO THE BROWNING YOUR GRANDMOTHER GAVE YOU FROM A BATCH SHE MADE FOUR MONTHS AGO. OR WAS IT FIVE?

YOU WATCH THE SAZON ON THE SHELF: ORANGE AND TAN, PALE PINK, YELLOW LOGO. YOU IMAGINE YOUR HANDS AS YOUR MOTHER'S HANDS; WASHING THE CHICKEN, CLEANING THE TENDONS, RUBBING IT THOROUGHLY WITH THE SEASONING. GET UNDER THE SKIN, A MEMORY SAYS. IT SOUNDS LIKE YOUR MOTHER'S VOICE.

IN A MINUTE, YOUR HANDS ARE TINTED ORANGE, AND THEY SMELL LIKE SALT. RESIST THE URGE TO LICK THEM BUT WONDER IF THE RED DIRT OF HOME TASTES LIKE SAZON.

PUT THE CHICKEN IN THE OVEN AND BAKE AT THREE-FIFTY DEGREES FOR AT LEAST TWENTY MINUTES. TURN IT OVER. TWENTY MINUTES MORE. CHECK IF YOU CAN PULL THE MEAT FROM THE BONE WITH JUST A GENTLE TOUCH. TRY NOT TO CRY WHEN IT'S STILL A LITTLE PINK INSIDE AT YOUR TUG. 15 MORE MINUTES. YOU SIT AND WATCH THE CHICKEN GROW SLOWLY BROWN IN THE OVEN AND THINK OF THAT STORY BY SANDRA CISENEROS. YOU THINK OF HOW MUCH YOU HATE THAT STORY. MANAGE TO SOMEHOW GET THE CHICKEN OUT BEFORE IT WAS TOO DRY, BUT YOU REALIZE IT'S NOT LIKE MOM'S.

YET AS YOU SIT ON THE FLOOR (BECAUSE YOU HAVEN'T BOUGHT FURNITURE YET), YOU THINK IT'S PRETTY GOOD FOR YOUR FIRST CHICKEN IN YOUR FIRST APARTMENT 2,000 MILES AWAY FROM HOME.

YOU CALL YOUR MOTHER AND YOU TELL HER YOU BOUGHT SAZON.

THE WALLS FEEL A LITTLE WARMER WITH THE SOUND OF HER LAUGH.

First Walk

Sarah Childrey

TODAY NOTHING QUITE FELT REAL.

I CHANGED MY OUTFIT 12 TIMES BEFORE I FELT READY TO GO OUT. I DIDN'T INTEND TO SEE ANYONE, BUT I HAVE A HORRIBLE CASE OF THE WHAT IFS, ALL OF THE TIME. I KNEW I JUST NEEDED TO GET MYSELF MOVING, EVEN IF I WAS NOT RED CARPET READY.

HOLLYWOOD TOURIST ATTRACTIONS ARE USUALLY WALKS LIKE THE AVENUE OF THE STARS, OR A GOOD VIEW OF OUR NAMESAKE SIGN, SO I WAS INTRIGUED BY THE "VINE STAIRS" THAT GOOGLE MAPS KEPT FLAGGING FOR ME. (THE GOOGLE MONSTER KNOWS I NEED TO WALK, AND PROBABLY ALSO KNOWS WHEN I AM DEPRESSED.)

WHEN I LIVED IN SAN FRANCISCO, I USED TO LOVE TO CLIMB UP THE STAIRS IN MY NEIGHBORHOOD AND WATCH THE SUNSET. THERE WAS SOMETHING PARTICULARLY SACRED AND SERENE ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY. THERE WAS HARDLY ANYONE THERE, BUT WHEN THERE WAS, IT WAS LIKE WE WERE ALL IN AGREEMENT TO LET THE MOMENT BE HONORED SILENTLY AND INDIVIDUALLY, DESPITE THE FACT WE WERE ALL EXPERIENCING SOMETHING SO MAGICAL TOGETHER.

I NEEDED TO FIND THAT WALK FOR ME HERE. OR MAYBE, I JUST WANTED TO GET OUT OF MY HOUSE: TO GET OUT OF MY SKIN. SO, I TRIED SOMETHING NEW, AND I SET OUT ON MY NEW WALK.

A FEW BLOCKS IN, I WALKED UP TO A MASSIVE APARTMENT BUILDING. HONESTLY, IT LOOKS LIKE A CASTLE. I HAVE ONLY EVER SEEN IT FROM MY CAR, AND I HAVE NEVER BEEN SO CLOSE. IT IS ALMOST DAUNTING. WHENEVER I SEE A BUILDING LIKE THIS, I CAN ONLY THINK ABOUT HOW EXPENSIVE IT MUST BE TO LIVE THERE. (FOR THIS, CAPITALISM HAS REALLY RUINED MY BRAIN.) BUT THERE I WAS, AT ITS BASE, LOOKING UP AT IT LIKE A CASTLE. I QUICKLY WALKED AWAY. I DON'T THINK I AM MEANT TO CONFRONT CLASS THAT CLOSELY.

IT SEEMED LIKE THE ONLY WAY TO ARRIVE AT MY SUMMIT WAS TO WALK UP THE HILL, AND SOMETHING ABOUT THAT MADE ME FEEL BRAVE. STILL WITH EACH STEP, I WONDERED WHY THE FUCK I WAS DOING THIS. WHAT A STRANGE PHENOMENON: CONTINUING ON WITH MY WALK AS I CONSIDERED HOW, ACTUALLY, I DID NOT HAVE TO WALK, AND YET I DO. I WALK, EVEN THOUGH I FEEL MASSIVELY UNCOMFORTABLE, AND I WANT TO COMPLAIN ABOUT HOW FUCKING HOT IT IS, HOW I FEEL COVERED IN A SECOND SKIN OF SWEAT, AND HOW MY SHORTS KEEP RIDING UP MY THIGHS (WHICH I AM SURE IS JUST AS UGLY AS IT IS UNCOMFORTABLE). I JUST KEEP WALKING. MAYBE I JUST NEEDED TO DEFEAT MYSELF TO GET UP THE HILL. I DON'T KNOW WHAT IS THE TRUER VERSION OF ME: THE ONE THAT PUSHES THROUGH THE CHALLENGE, OR THE ONE THAT GOES HOME.

BEFORE THE HELICOPTERS AND THE TRAGIC B-ROLL OF TEARY-EYED CHILDREN, SAUGUS WAS A SOMEWHAT UNREMARKABLE HIGH SCHOOL AND I

WAS A MODERATELY-REMARKABLE STUDENT, TRANSFIXED WITH GRADES AND CLUBS AND REHEARSALS. I WAS SHELTERED, LARGELY BY MY OWN EFFORT; AN ADOLESCENT FEAR OF THE ADULT WORLD PAIRED WITH UNDIAGNOSED OBSESSIVE COMPULSIVE DISORDER LEFT ME VOID OF ANY CLASSIC TEENAGE CURIOSITY FOR DRUGS OR PARTIES OR SEX.

I FOUND THAT I MUST HAVE CHOSEN A WALK THAT WAS REMARKABLY INCLINED, WHICH MAKES SENSE SINCE, YOU KNOW, STAIRS. BUT I HADN'T THOUGHT OF IT LIKE THAT.

I BEGAN TO LOG EVERYTHING I SAW. FOR NO REASON AT ALL, I CONSIDERED MYSELF A JOURNALIST, DOING RESEARCH AS A FLANEUR, TAKING PHOTOGRAPHS OF PEOPLE'S STAINED GLASS WINDOWS AND THE LOVELIEST FLOWERS IN THEIR YARD. AS I BEGAN TO EXAMINE THE FOLIAGE, I LAUGHED TO FIND THAT THE MOST PROMINENT ITEM ON THE VINE WAS A BAG OF PRETZELS. EMPTY, OF COURSE, OR ELSE I MAY HAVE BEEN TEMPTED. IN HINDSIGHT, I SHOULD HAVE THROWN THEM IN A TRASH CAN. BUT I LEFT THEM THERE. I WONDER WHAT THAT SAYS ABOUT ME.

WHEN I FINALLY LOCATED THE STREET TO TURN ON, I WAS TROUBLED. HUGE SIGNAGE CLAIMED "NOT A THROUGH STREET" IN BOLD LETTERS. I LOOKED AT IT, AND REALIZED I WAS TILTING MY HEAD AND SQUINTING. I WONDERED IF ANYONE IN THEIR HOUSE WAS PEEKING OUT THEIR WINDOW, WATCHING MY CONFUSION. DID IT READ AS CONFUSION, OR WONDER? WOULD THEY THINK I WAS EVIL? THAT I AM PART OF SOME HUGE SCHEME TO ROB THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD, SENDING SOMEONE TO LOOK AT ALL THEIR STAINED GLASS AND PRETTY DOORS, PHOTOGRAPH IT, AND KEEP ON WALKING, WITH THEIR BASEBALL CAP AND HUGE HEADPHONES?

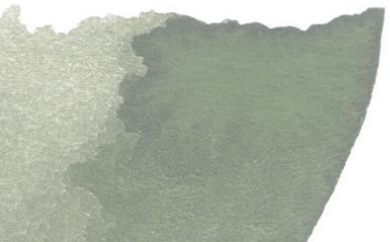
SUDDENLY, IT DAWNED ON ME HOW INCREDIBLY UNLIKELY IT WAS ANYONE HAPPENED TO BE LOOKING. SO, WHO WAS I EVEN PERFORMING FOR?

BUT BACK TO THE SIGN: I FELT LIKE I COULD FIND MY WAY THROUGH. BESIDES, I WAS ALREADY ON THE STREET. AND, ISN'T THE ONLY WAY OUT, NOTORIOUSLY, THROUGH?

I SUDDENLY, PAINFULLY, FELT A DEEP GRIEF THAT NO ONE WAS HERE TO SEE THESE NEW STEPS WITH ME. WOULDN'T THEY FEEL JUST AS MAGICAL AS SAN FRANCISCO? MAYBE THE SILENT COMMUNITY OF MY SUNSET STEPS WAS MORE VALUABLE THAN I REALIZED. WHAT WAS I GOING TO DO, WITH NO AUDIENCE, OR NO SCENE PARTNER? HOW WOULD I EXPLAIN THIS LATER, AND TO WHO? WHY DID I WANT TO EXPLAIN IT LATER AT ALL?

THE STEPS WERE BEGINNING TO COME INTO VIEW NOW. IT WAS SOME MAGIC, THE WAY THE TREES HUNG DOWN, MAKING IT HARD TO SEE THE WHOLE STAIRCASE. THERE IT WAS. AND I LAUGHED. I LAUGHED IN MY BELLY, I LAUGHED AND DESPERATELY CALLED FOR AIR. THE STAIRCASE IS NEARLY NOTHING: IT IS ONLY ABOUT 16 STEPS, WITH NOTHING TO SEE AT THE BOTTOM OR TOP. AND THAT'S ALL IT IS. AND ALL IT HAS TO BE.

SO, IT'S CLEAR NOW TO ME HOW I WILL EXPLAIN THIS LATER. IT WILL BE JUST LIKE THIS, AND TO YOU:



I DON'T KNOW WHAT MAKES ME WALK, OR WHY MY DESTINATION ALWAYS REQUIRES ME TO WALK UPHILL. I DON'T KNOW WHAT MAKES ME WRITE, AND I DON'T KNOW WHY I HAVE TO FEEL SEEN. BUT I DO KNOW, IT FEELS SO LOVELY TO BE ON A WALK, HOLDING ONTO AN IDEA.

Oh My Angel

Grant Brumage-Heller

I HAD A GOLDFISH AT THIS TIME IN MY LIFE, MY EARLY 20'S, I'D NAMED HIM RED. OR PERHAPS HER, I'D NEVER BOTHERED TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO CHECK THE GENDER OF A GOLDFISH—BUT RED SORT OF SEEMED OF THE BOYISH VARIETY. HE WAS DOING THE SORT OF THING HE NORMALLY DID IN HIS TANK, FLOATING AROUND. I WATCHED HIM FOR A MOMENT, "RED, WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH ME DO YOU THINK?".

HE DIDN'T SAY MUCH OF ANYTHING, SO I CONTINUED ON.

"YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE COMFORTING, RIGHT? THAT'S WHY I BOUGHT YOU FROM THE PET STORE. YOU'RE A COMFORT ANIMAL, RIGHT?"

ACTUALLY I'D BOUGHT RED BECAUSE HE WAS JUST ABOUT THE LAST GOLD FISH LEFT IN THE LITTLE CUPS AT THE SHOP. THERE WERE TWO OTHERS BUT THEY WERE FARING QUITE POORLY, JUST ABOUT DEAD IN THEIR LITTLE PLASTIC CUPS. THEIR FINS WERE A SICKLY SHADE OF GRAY AND IT LOOKED LIKE THEY WEREN'T BREATHING CORRECTLY, BY THE WAY THEY WEREN'T BREATHING AT ALL. MAYBE IT WAS SOME KIND OF CHARITY ON MY PART, BUT I'D FELT LIKE I NEEDED TO SAVE RED, OR AT LEAST GIVE HIM A BETTER SHOT AT LIFE... OR SOMETHING. I'D HAD HIM FOR A YEAR AND HE NEVER SEEMED TO CARE ONE WAY OR ANOTHER ABOUT BEING SAVED OR ABOUT MY CONVERSATIONS BUT I TALKED TO HIM ANYWAY.

LITTLE BEADS OF SWEAT PEAKED OUT FROM UNDER MY RED ANGELS CAP AND I QUESTIONED TO MYSELF WHETHER I SHOULD SIT WITH RED OR HAVE A CIGARETTE OR PERHAPS BOTH AT ONCE. THIS WAS MY YEAR OF SOLITUDE, OR SO I WAS CALLING IT. IT HAD BEEN 11 MONTHS SINCE I'D BEEN WITH A MAN, OR A WOMAN FOR THAT MATTER. I SUPPOSE IT WAS BEGINNING TO WEAR ON ME, THOUGH AT THE SAME TIME I WAS FALLING INTO LIKING IT. THINGS WERE SIMPLE THIS WAY. THERE WERE NO FEELINGS TO CONSIDER, LITTLE RESPONSIBILITY, AND A COMPLETE ABSENCE OF TRIFLING ABOUT MY APPEARANCE. IT WAS ME AND RED AND THAT WAS BETTER THAN ENOUGH—I'D HAD IT WITH PEOPLE FOR GOOD.

I PULLED A TINY BLACK LIGHTER OUT OF MY JACKET POCKET. IT WAS CUTE, SMALL, AND ONE OF THOSE TYPES OF PLASTIC LIGHTERS THAT MIGHT WORK FOR A FEW WEEKS AT BEST. I CHECKED MY OTHER POCKET BUT IT SEEMED TO BE COMPLETELY VOID OF A CIGARETTE BOX. I CHECKED THE DESK DRAWER TOO—EMPTY.

"OH MAN, RED. I GUESS I'M GONNA HAVE TO HEAD TO THE GROCERY. WE'RE CLEAN OUT OF SMOKES."

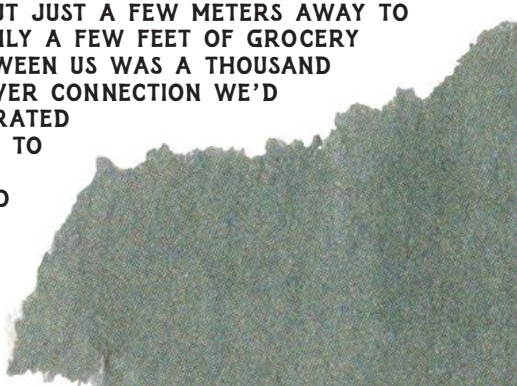
RED WASN'T A SMOKER, BUT I THOUGHT HE MIGHT LIKE TO PARTAKE IF HE COULD BREATH IN AIR INSTEAD OF WATER. I ALWAYS LEFT A CIGARETTE BY THE FISH BOWL FOR HIM SO HE COULD FEEL INCLUDED. A CIGARETTE RESTED THERE NOW, BUT IT SEEMED WRONG TO GREEDILY SNATCH IT AWAY. BETTER TO GO GET SOME MORE OF MY OWN, I THOUGHT, THAN TO TARNISH OUR FRIENDSHIP.

EVERY TIME I LEFT THE HOUSE I WORRIED RED MIGHT GET LONELY. SOMETIMES I'D PUT ON A CD IF I KNEW I'D BE GONE FOR A WHILE. HIS FAVORITE WAS A FAYE WONG ALBUM, SOMETHING NICE TO SWIM TO. THERE WASN'T MUCH COMPANY AROUND, AND BESIDES, I DIDN'T EVEN HAVE A TELEVISION FOR HIM TO WATCH. I BUTTONED UP MY DENIM JACKET AND PUSHED MY ANGELS CAP DOWN ON MY FOREHEAD.

I SPENT A WHILE BROWSING THE PEANUT BUTTER—THERE WERE A DREADFUL AMOUNT OF OPTIONS OF COURSE. INSTINCTIVELY I LOOKED UP, AND THERE, IN A POOL OF PALE FLORESCENT BEAUTY WAS PERHAPS THE MOST STRIKING LADY I'D EVER SEEN.

SHE WAS DRESSED IN COOL BLACK HEELS, A SIMPLE FLORAL SKIRT, AND A DARK CRIMSON TOP THAT WAS TAILORED TO CRADLE HER SHARP FORM. WE MADE EYE CONTACT FOR A MOMENT, HER COOL BROWN EYES KISSING THAT AIR THAT SEPARATED US. SHE WAS AN UNUSUALLY ALLURING SORT OF BEAUTY, LIKE ONE MIGHT SEE IN A RUNWAY SHOW OF AN AVANT GARDE DESIGNER. IT SEEMED A MISTAKE TO SEE HER HERE AND NOT IN PARIS. THEN SHE WALKED AWAY. I FELT MY CHEEKS BURNING.

THE CASHIER WAS A YOUNGER, COLLEGE-AGED WOMAN, WITH A BIG SILVER NOSE RING AND PLENTY OF HAND TATTOOS. RIGHT IN FRONT OF ME STOOD THE GIRL I'D SEEN EARLIER, WITH HER DAZZLING AIR OF TRUTH. SHE LOOKED UP AT ME AGAIN, PERHAPS SENSING MY EYES ON HER. WE MADE EYE CONTACT FOR A MOMENT, YET STRANGELY NEITHER OF US LOOKED AWAY. SHE FAILED TO SIZE ME UP, OR GUESS SOME INTENTION, OR TO READ MY FACE—THIS MUCH I COULD FEEL. INSTEAD SHE JUST LOOKED STRAIGHT INTO ME, GUESSING MUCH MORE. I WISH I HAD BEEN SO SMART, SO ASTUTE TO DO THE SAME. I NEVER KNEW SUCH A SKILL AS HERS EXISTED UNTIL THAT MOMENT, AND NEVER KNEW HOW SEVERELY LACKING IN PROFICIENCY I WAS. HER FIXED EYES WERE COOL BROWN POOLS LIKE THE STORMS OF SATURN. I TRIED TO OPEN MY MOUTH BUT FOUND I COULDN'T. EVERY BREATH FELT LIKE COLD CONCRETE ENTERING MY LUNGS. I WISHED SO BADLY TO CALL OUT JUST A FEW METERS AWAY TO SAY SOMETHING, BUT WHAT? ONLY A FEW FEET OF GROCERY STORE SEPARATED US, BUT BETWEEN US WAS A THOUSAND MILE RIFT IN MY HEAD. WHATEVER CONNECTION WE'D JUST EXPERIENCED WAS OBLITERATED AS SHE WENT TO THE REGISTER TO PAY, HANDING AN EXCEEDINGLY AVERAGE LOOKING CREDIT CARD TO THE NOSE RINGED CASHIER.





I WAS LOST IN MYSELF SUDDENLY. LOST AT THE IDEA OF BEING ALONE. REALIZING HOW FOOLISH THAT IDEA WAS. WHAT A STUPID CONCEPT. WHAT A HORRIBLE PROPOSITION I'D RESIGNED MYSELF TO. WHERE WAS THE GLAMOUR AND THE RITZ OF SOLITUDE? IN FACT THERE WAS NONE. BUT NOW THE GIRL WITH THE STORMY BROWN EYES, SHE WAS GONE. THE AUTOMATIC DOOR SLID SHUT BEHIND HER, AND I WAS HURRYING TO PAY FOR MY PEANUT BETTER. IT SEEMED SO UNIMPORTANT, I BARELY HEARD WHAT THE NOSE RING SAID TO ME. THE HAND TATTOOS WERE TALKING ABOUT SOME CHANGE FOR MY TWENTY DOLLAR BILL, BUT I DIDN'T CARE. I LEFT WITHOUT A BAG, ALMOST FORGETTING THE PEANUT BUTTER ENTIRELY.

I REALIZED I MUST SAY SOMETHING TO THAT GIRL WITH THE SATURN EYES. SHE'D SEEN ME, BUT I NEEDED HER TO KNOW THAT I'D SEEN HER TOO. REALLY SEEN HER, AT LEAST FOR A FLEETING MOMENT. SO I WAS WALKING BRISKLY TO THE DOOR AND FLYING AWAY INTO AN EMPTY PARKING LOT. THE SKY WAS BLACK AS COFFEE, DRIZZLING WITH A SUBTLE RAIN THAT OFFERED NO COMFORT.

I FOUND MYSELF ALONE, AMIDST A SMALL SMATTERING OF CARS. I TRACED BACK AND FORTH WITH MY PUPILS THROUGH THE FEW ROWS OF SPACES, DIMLY LIT BY A WAVERING STREETLIGHT. SHE WAS ENTIRELY GONE, LIKE SHE'D SCARCELY EXISTED AT ALL. THERE WAS NO GIRL LEFT IN THE PARKING LOT. THERE WERE NO SATURN STORM EYES. MY ANGELS HAT SLOWLY GREW WET WITH RAIN, EACH DROP SAGGING IT FURTHER DOWN MY FOREHEAD.

I LOOKED FOR A LONG TIME, IN THAT DESERTED PARKING LOT. A FEW CARS CAME AND WENT, UNTIL THERE WAS JUST ONE LEFT UNDER THE FAINT LIGHT. FINALLY, THE NOSE RING WAS LOCKING THE FRONT DOOR AND TELLING ME I'D BETTER LEAVE. I WALKED HOME, MEANDERING TOWARDS RED AND OUR DUSTY APARTMENT ON 4TH STREET. THE NIGHT SEEMED COLD BUT ALIVE SOMEHOW. I FIDDLED WITH MY LIGHTER AS I ROUNDED THE CORNER TO THE IRON GATED DOOR OF MY APARTMENT BUILDING. IT WAS OLD AND DIRTY, BUT FULL OF PROMISE LIKE A TATTERED BOOT.

RED WAS INSIDE HIS BOWL, NOT DOING MUCH OF ANYTHING. I REACHED IN MY POCKET FOR A CIGARETTE AND FOUND I STILL DIDN'T HAVE ANY. GINGERLY, I PICKED UP THE ONE NEXT TO RED'S BOWL AND LIT IT FOR MYSELF, LISTENING TO FAYE WONG SING US SOFTLY THROUGH THE NIGHT.

an act of love in digestion

Rosie Steiner

the first act of love shared
between my sister and i
was the splitting of
chinese dumplings—
greasy, satisfying takeout,
adjacent from each other
        in a restaurant,
        across the dinner table,
and i don't think either
of us knew it.



the dumplings were thick,
sometimes soggy, but
juicy all the same. the bottom
was splotchy brown and crispy,
where it kissed the pan.

she took the insides, i took the skin. it
was just a hollow shell in my mouth
but that was enough for me,
and she ate the rest. plucked
between little fingers beneath
the yellow light above our
kitchen table.

and in the years when she
started to eat the whole dumpling
herself, it felt a little
like betrayal.



a pride isn't just a bunch of pussies

Lexi McDonald

BUT MY FRIENDS AND I HAVE LIVED A HUNDRED YEARS FROM
CORNISH, MAINE TO ORLANDO, FLORIDA WITH ONE SET OF PARENTS, THEN THREE
DEAR BROTHERS WHO DROP OUT WITH BIG SISTER SYNDROME
EVERY ONE FOOLING THEIR MOTHERS INTO PARADING THEM
FORGOING THEIR DAUGHTERS; TEACHERS, HEALTHCARE WORKERS, RESEARCH
TECHNICIANS—GIRLS WHO'VE BEEN KICKED OUT FOR KISSING GIRLS BRAVE
HELL SO MOMS COULD COME TO TERMS WITH THEMSELVES
INSIST ON PUNISHING DAUGHTERS WHOSE PRIDE THEY ENVY
JESUS, MY FRIENDS AND I HAVE LIVED A HUNDRED YEARS
KALEIDOSCOPED AROUND BREAKUPS AND BREAKTHROUGHS AND OUTBREAKS
LOST BARBIES, POLLY POCKETS, AMERICAN GIRL DOLLS, AMERICA'S NEXT TOP
MODEL, SURVIVED WEIGHT WATCHERS, HIGH SCHOOL, FRESHMAN FIFTEEN,
NUMEROUS PANDEMIC EATING DISORDERS, MOUNT EVEREST
OXYGEN, ENJOYED SENIOR WEEK WINE TASTINGS, NEW CITIES,
PITTSBURGH PRIDE DRAG
QUEEN-BILLY-PORTER-IN-A-CONVERTIBLE, GRATEFUL-TO-BE-ALIVE PRIDE
REACHING-FOR-EACH-OTHER-IN-THE-CROWD, SWEATING-OFF-OUR-GLITTER
STREAMERS-WRAPPED-AROUND-THE-BRIDGE, WARMING-OUR-WAY-THROUGH-A
THREE-MILE-PARADE, DRINKING-IN-A-HOT-APARTMENT-BEFORE-ROCKY-HORROR
UNBRIDLED-JOY
VOLUME ALL THE WAY UP & SUNROOF OPEN LIKE WE'RE EMMA WATSON
WALLFLOWERS WITH OUR HAIR TANGLED AND OUR CORSETS TIGHT TIME TRAVELING
EXCEPT MY FRIENDS AND I HAVEN'T EVEN LIVED

YET



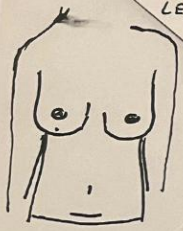
You?!

Edie Darling

THE LADY AND THE MONKEY LOOK AT EACH OTHER IN MUTUAL SHOCK AND RECOGNITION THAT THEY OCCUPY THE SAME SPACE. AND THE MONKEY PROTECTS A HOARD OF COLOR AND DEPTH. I IMAGINE THE LADY JUST TURNED HER HEAD TOWARDS THEM FOR THE FIRST TIME AND IS SHOCKED SHE'S NOT ALONE. SHE SHARES HER SPACE WITH A BEAUTIFUL ANIMAL WHO LOOKS AT HER WITH FEROCITY AND TERROR. I IMAGINE THE NEXT MOMENT AFTER THEIR INITIAL EYE CONTACT CAN GO IN A FEW DIRECTIONS. IF SHE CAN ACKNOWLEDGE THEY ARE THE SAME—THAT SHE'S BEEN HOLDING THEM BACK AND MAKING THEM SUSPICIOUS, THEN THE MONKEY WILL LET GO OF THEIR GRIP AND SHARE EVERYTHING THEY'VE BEEN GUARDING. IF SHE DENIES THEM, THEN SHE'LL NEVER KNOW WHAT TREASURES THEY HOLD. THERE'S A RISK THAT THE MONKEY MIGHT LUNGE AT HER TO PROTECT THEMSELF IF SHE REJECTS THEM.

I MADE THIS PIECE ON IMPULSE, AND ONLY AFTER MAKING IT DID I SEE IT WAS A SELF-PORTRAIT. I ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THE MONKEY WAS ME AND AVAILABLE TO ME IF I PUT MY HAND DOWN AND GAVE THEM PERMISSION TO LET GO. IF I SAID "HELLO." I MIGHT NOT LOOK AS PERFECT AND IMPENETRABLE ONCE I MADE FRIENDS WITH THEM. THEY NEED ME TO ACCEPT THE MESS AND NOT KNOWING OF IT ALL. IN MY LIFE NOW, I BELIEVE WE SHARE THE CANVAS. I GIVE THE MONKEY SPACE TO SHARE WITH ME WHAT THEY KNOW AND SEE. I DON'T RELATE TO THE STIFF, PERFECT LADY GASPING AT HER OWN SHADOW. THERE'S FREEDOM IN THAT.

THIS IS A LETTER I WROTE TO MYSELF ON THE NIGHT BEFORE MY RECENT GENDER-AFFIRMING TOP SURGERY. HAVING NEVER PREVIOUSLY BEEN HOSPITALIZED, I WAS SHAKING WITH FEAR DURING THE WEEK LEADING UP TO MY APPOINTMENT. I WROTE THIS LETTER AS AN ATTEMPT TO RECONCILE THE CONFUSING THOUGHTS THAT OCCUPIED SO MUCH OF MY ENERGY AND PRACTICE APPROACHING MYSELF WITH GRATITUDE AND COMPASSION.





THIS WAS A FIRST FOR ME IN A LOT OF WAYS- FIRST SURGERY, FIRST GENDER-AFFIRMING MEDICAL PROCEDURE, FIRST MAJOR DECISION MADE ENTIRELY FOR MYSELF, FIRST TIME ON ANESTHESIA, FIRST STEP INTO A BODY I CAN FINALLY RECOGNIZE. I DON'T KNOW WHAT MY NEXT STEP IS, BUT I AM DEEPLY THANKFUL FOR THE MEDICAL ACCESS, FINANCIAL SUPPORT, AND LOVE FROM FRIENDS + FAMILY THAT ALLOWED ME TO TAKE THIS STEP.





Dear Boobs,

YOU ENTERED THIS WORLD LATE, AND YOU ARE LEAVING EARLY. YOU TOOK THINGS FROM ME (RUNNING WITH THE WIND AGAINST MY CHEST, COMFORT ON STAIRS, BUTTON-DOWNS) AND YOU GAVE ME THINGS TOO (SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS, MEN'S STARES, AN AFFINITY FOR OVERSIZED VESTS.) WE BOTH KNOW I NEVER WANTED YOU, THAT I PRAYED NIGHTLY FOR YEARS THAT YOU WOULDN'T ARRIVE. YOU TOOK YOUR TIME TO SHOW UP, AND FOR THAT I AM GRATEFUL. BUT WHEN YOU FINALLY MADE YOUR PRESENCE KNOWN, A PART OF ME SUNK UNDER YOUR WEIGHT. I USED TO THINK I NEVER WANTED TO GROW UP, THAT BOOBS MEANT INESCAPABLE ADULTHOOD. BUT NOW, HAPPILY ADULT, I REALIZE THAT YOU REPRESENTED SOMETHING DIFFERENT— INESCAPABLE WOMANHOOD. GAINING YOU DIDN'T FORCE ME TO GROW UP— TIME DID. BUT GAINING YOU TOOK A DIFFERENT FREEDOM FROM ME-

A FAMILIARITY AND GENDERLESS COMFORT IN MY BODY.

YOU ARE BEAUTIFUL, THERE'S NO DENYING IT. SISTERS, SURE, NOT TWINS — BUT BEAUTIFUL, SUPPLE, PEAKY, LARGE SISTERS. PERHAPS THIS IS WHY I FEEL SO GUILTY REMOVING YOU. I KNOW HOW VALUABLE YOU CAN BE TO THE WORLD, TO MEN. I KNOW PEOPLE SAVE FOR YEARS TO BUY SILICON REPLICAS OF YOU - NEVER AS NICE, OF COURSE, AS THE REAL THING. AS WESTLEY SAYS IN THE PRINCESS BRIDE, "THERE'S A SHORTAGE OF PERFECT BREASTS IN THIS WORLD. IT WOULD BE A PITY TO RUIN YOURS."

BUT I AM HAPPILY ADULT. I HAVE SPENT 25 YEARS [redacted] FIERCELY BECOMING WHO I AM TODAY. I HAVE DIVED TO THE MOST UNCOMFORTABLE RECESSES OF MY SOUL AND RETURNED TO THE SURFACE, GASPING.

IVE LEARNED DIFFICULT TRUTHS ABOUT MY IDENTITY, AND FACED THE CONSEQUENCES OF HIDING BEHIND EASY LIES. DESPITE MY BEST EFFORTS, IM UNABLE TO PREDICT OR CONTROL THE FUTURE. I DONT KNOW WHAT DECISIONS I WILL COME TO REGRET. I DONT KNOW WHAT THE WORLD WILL BECOME. I DONT KNOW WHAT OPPORTUNITIES I MIGHT GAIN OR LOSE AS A RESULT OF THIS SURGERY. BUT I KNOW THERE IS A PART OF ME OLDER THAN YOU THAT CRAVES THE FEELING OF WIND. AND IF I DONT MAKE THIS DECISION FOR MYSELF NOW, I DONT TRUST THAT ILL EVER BE ABLE TO STAND UP FOR MY OWN DESIRES. I OWE IT TO MYSELF TO DO SOMETHING FOR THAT DEEP AND SACRED PART OF ME - IM THE ONLY ONE THAT CAN.

So, BOOBS, I BID YOU FAREWELL. THANKS FOR YOUR HEALTH AND BEAUTY. THANKS FOR YOUR SEX APPEAL. THANKS FOR HOLDING MY BATH TOWEL UP - I MIGHT HAVE TO SWITCH TO ROBES NOW. WHEN YOU GO JOIN THOSE GIANT TITS IN THE SKY, MAYBE YOU CAN REINCARNATE ONTO SOMEONE WHO CAN TRULY APPRECIATE YOU.

SINCERELY,

Jill

P.S. I'LL NEVER FORGET YOU, THIRD NIPPLE. I WISH YOU DIDN'T HAVE TO GO, BUT IT APPEARS YOU ARE A NECESSARY CASUALTY OF THIS PROCEDURE. MAY YOU REST IN PEACE.

Embodied

Corey Near-Ansari

MARCH 31, 2023 TRANS DAY OF VISIBILITY

EMBODIED

I LOVE THE WAY MY VOICE CRACKS LIKE ASPHALT ON THE CITY STREETS LIKE A BROKEN PLATE GLUED BACK TOGETHER WITH GOLD

WHEN MY VOICE CRACKS I LAUGH AND I LOVE IT MORE THAN I EVER HAVE

I USED TO HIDE MY LAUGH AND TAILOR IT BUT I PULL THAT THREAD AND LAUGH WITH MY WHOLE CHEST

NO MY WHOLE BODY THAT I CAN NOW FEEL SO CLOSE WITH EACH NEEDLE IN MY SKIN

I LOVE MY VOICE MOST AS IT GROWS HOARSE FROM SHOUTING IN THOSE CRACKED STREETS

THAT WAS THE FIRST TIME I REALLY HEARD MY VOICE COMING FROM MY BODY

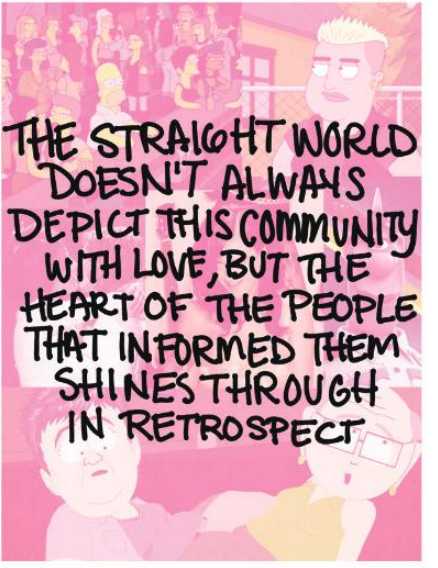
NO MY SOUL

Raven Bennett Burns









Raven Bennett Burns

Raven Bennett Burns



New Artists

Marisca Pichette

TRILLING VOICES ISSUE FROM THE NEXT ROOM,
MUSIC MIXED WITH THE SULLEN HUMMING OF A WEARY FAN,
TIREDLY TURNING SUMMER AIR.
MUFFLED VOICES, HITTING THE TABLE WITH EAGER LITTLE HANDS.

THE FUTURE UNFOLDS ITSELF.

IT POSSESSES THEIR HEARTS
WITH CREATIVITY AND WONDER.
WITH INSTRUCTIONS, THEY EMBARK—
EXPLORING THE WORLD THROUGH THE TURNINGS
OF YOUNG MINDS.

NOTHING IS FINISHED, NOTHING IS DONE.

THEY ARE NOT WHO WE ARE,
THEY ARE NOT WHO WE WOULD BE.
THEY ARE FRESH, FREE—FOR THE MOMENT—
FROM OUR OLD PREJUDICES.

THEY HAVEN'T LEARNED OUR ERRORS
BUT THEY WILL LEARN THEIR OWN.
THEY WILL FOLLOW PATHS OF DISCOVERY
AND SUPPRESSION.
THEY WILL WOBBLE ON STIFF LEGS
PAST WEARY FACADES AND EMPTY CAR PARKS.

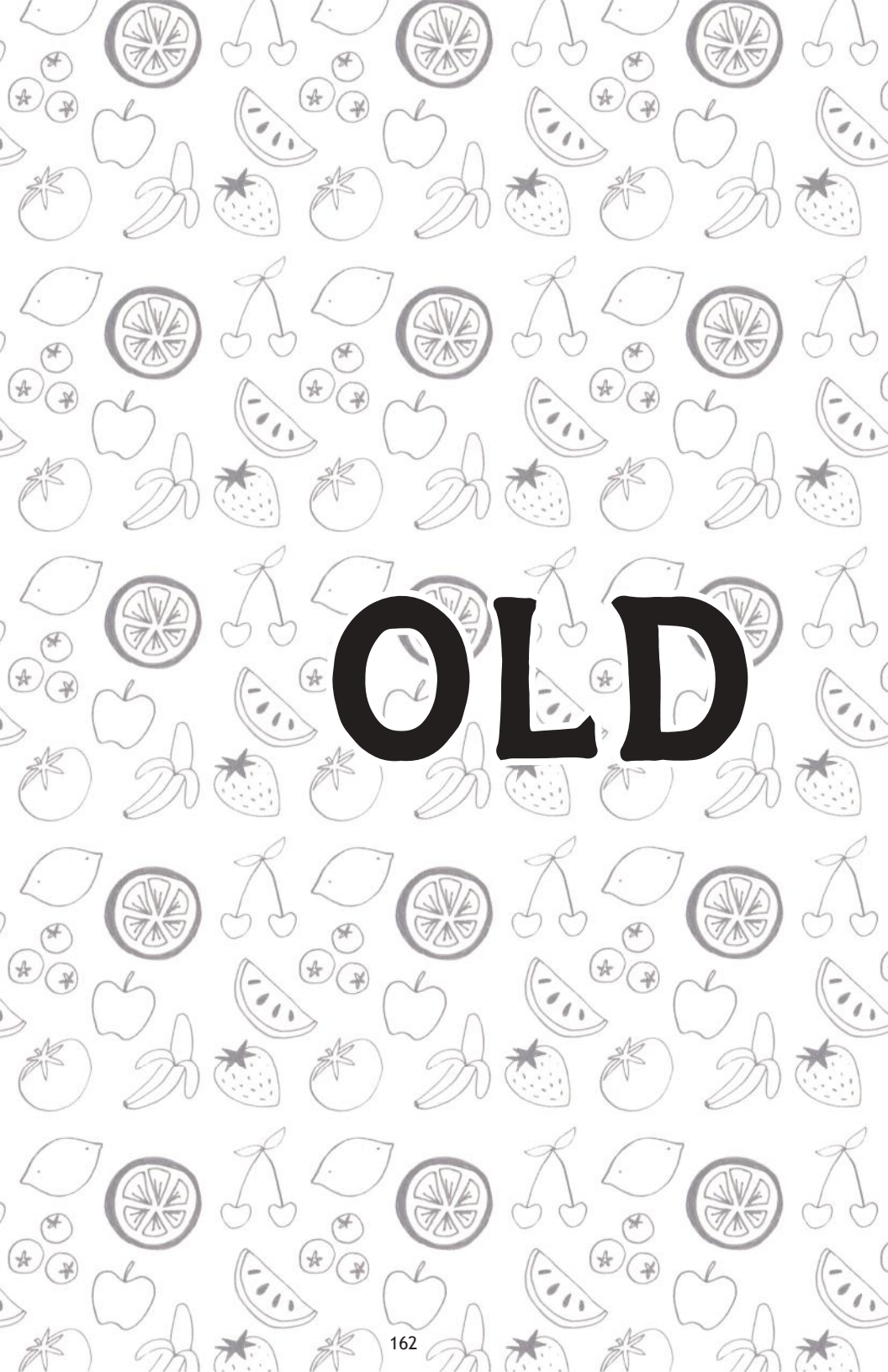
THEY WILL LEARN NEW FACTS.
THEY WILL CHERISH OLD GODS (NEW SCIENCES).
THEY WILL MAKE THE ART OF THE WORLD.

ACROSS THE ROOM, LITTLE VOICES.
THEY ARE NOT AFRAID.
THEY DON'T YET FULLY COMPREHEND THEIR PLACE,
BUT THEY ARE ALREADY PREPARING—
FOR WHAT, THEY DO NOT KNOW.

THEY ARE THE NEW ARTISTS, AND THEY WILL BE HERE
WHEN THERE IS NOTHING LEFT OF US

THOSE WHO TAUGHT THEM HOW TO MAKE.




OLD


SOULS

Old Ladies

Clio Barrett

THERE IS THIS NEW FILTER CALLED OLD AGE OR OLD OR AGED OR
SOMETHING RELATED TO BEING WRINKLED,
TO BEING WARPED AND
THRUST 60 YEARS INTO THE FUTURE,
TWO VERSIONS OF YOUR FACE STACKED ONE ON TOP OF THE OTHER.
I SHOW MY GIRL AND I SEE YOUNG ME AND OLD ME LOOK AT HER.
I SEE YOUNG HER AND OLD HER
LOOK AT HERSELF.
AND ALL OF A SUDDEN WE ARE SIMULTANEOUSLY GREY HAIRED AND SUN SPOTTED
AND STILL COMPLETELY OURSELVES.
HOW BADLY I WANT TO BE A 70 YEAR OLD WOMAN IN HER BED HAVING SPENT
ALL MY LIFE EXPLORING ALL THAT IS OUTSIDE OF IT,
LANDING BACK IN A THOUSAND SHEDDING FEATHERS WITH HER NEXT TO ME.
HOW NOSTALGIC I AM FOR FOLDS AND CREASES I HAVE NEVER HAD.
I REALIZE I AM IMPATIENT.
THAT I WOULD JUMP PAST THE MESS OF ALL THE YEARS THAT SEPARATE THE TWO
VERSIONS OF ME AND HER,
TRADE THE IRREPLACEABLE SINGULARLY OF EACH MOMENT IN EACH YEAR,
ALL THE BRIEFLY OWNED TIME TO JUST BE OLD AND IN LOVE WITH THE SAME GIRL.
WITH HER A WASTED DAY IS NOT A WASTE, IT IS A BLESSING.
WE CAN BE YOUNG A LITTLE LONGER.



First First Grade

BY: KATE E LORE



IF SOMEONE WERE TO ASK ME SOMETHING ABOUT MY EXPERIENCE IN FIRST GRADE, I WOULD HAVE TO ASK THEM; WHICH YEAR? FIRST OR SECOND?

I REMEMBER THE FIRST YEAR. A LARGE ROOM UPSTAIRS IN THE CORNER. I'D RECENTLY MOVED TO HUBER HEIGHTS FROM WEST CARROLTON, ANOTHER SUBURB OF DAYTON. IT WAS ALL VERY DIFFERENT, YET VERY THE SAME. MY FAMILY HAD JUMPED OVER DAYTON THE WAY ONE AVOIDS STEPPING IN A PUDDLE. WE'D GONE FROM SOUTH OF THE CITY TO NORTH OF THE CITY. IN ANY CASE, I HAD NOT GONE TO KINDERGARTEN WITH THE OTHER KIDS AT THIS SCHOOL. EVERYTHING THERE WAS NEW TO ME, EVEN THE OLD STUFF.

I REMEMBER THERE WAS THIS OLD PENCIL SHARPENER BOLTED INTO THE FAR WALL OF OUR CLASSROOM. THIS PENCIL SHARPENER WAS AS OLD AS THE BUILDING ITSELF. IT SHONE TO ME LIKE A RELIC OF THE PAST COMPARED TO THE NEW FURNITURE, FRESHLY PAINTED WALLS, AND ELECTRIC SHARPENER PERCHED UPON THE CORNER OF THE TEACHER'S DESK. I REMEMBER THAT THE COVER OF MY FAVORITE PENCIL SHARPENER WAS GONE REVEALING THOSE RAW INNER GEARS. I LOVED TO TURN THE HANDLE AND WATCH THE GEARS TURN IN RESPONSE. I ENJOYED WATCHING THE SPINNING BLADES AND THE GEARS WORK TOGETHER SO SEAMLESSLY, SO SMOOTHLY, TO CUT AWAY, CHIP BY CHIP, AT THE PENCIL. I COULD WORK IT FAST OR I COULD WORK IT SLOWLY. ALL THE DIFFERENCE DEPENDED ON MY WHIM, DEPENDED ON THE PENCIL.



I REMEMBER WHEN MY OLDEST SISTER STACY, A TEENAGER AT THE TIME, CAME TO SPEND HER AFTERNOONS AS A TEACHER'S AIDE FOR MY CLASS. ALL THE OTHER KIDS REALLY LOVED HER. I WATCHED AS THEY SWARMED AROUND HER DESPERATE TO GIVE HER DRAWINGS OR LETTERING WORKSHEETS, WHATEVER IT WAS THEY HAD AT THE TIME. I REMEMBER ATTEMPTING TO TALK TO HER MYSELF, I SPOKE UP BUT SHE DIDN'T HEAR ME WHEN I WAVED. SHE DIDN'T SEE ME. AFTER A WHILE, I GAVE UP. I SAT ALONE.

I REMEMBER BEING GIVEN AN ASSIGNMENT AND INTENTIONALLY IGNORING IT. I REMEMBER WRITING MY NAME BUT NOTHING ELSE. I REMEMBER REFUSING TO READ. I REMEMBER REFUSING TO PARTICIPATE.

I DO NOT REMEMBER WHY.

I DO NOT REMEMBER ANYONE EVER EXPLAINING TO ME EXACTLY WHY IT HAD BEEN MY SISTER WAS SENT TO OUR CLASS, WHY SHE OF ALL PEOPLE HAD BEEN ASKED TO BE A TEACHER'S AIDE.

I DO REMEMBER THE PENCIL SHARPENER. AND I DO REMEMBER THE DAY THAT THEY TOLD ME I WAS GOING TO BE REPEATING THE FIRST GRADE. I REMEMBER FEELING COLD AND SUDDENLY REGRETTING MY STUBBORN REFUSAL TO PARTICIPATE. THE NEWS CAME TO ME AS A SHOCK. IT WAS A BAD SURPRISE. THINKING BACK TO WHO I WAS AS A YOUNG CHILD I CAN ONLY CONCLUDE THAT I HAD NO CONCEPT OF CONSEQUENCE UP UNTIL THAT MOMENT. I HAD NOT UNDERSTOOD.

I UNDERSTOOD PENCILS. PENCILS ARE EASIER, ALWAYS HAVE BEEN. THAT LAYER OF LEAD, GRANITE BURIED BENEATH THE WOOD, BURIED BENEATH A THIN SHELL OF YELLOW PAINT. I UNDERSTOOD THAT ALL THIS STUFF HAD TO BE CHIPPED AWAY, SHAVED AWAY, TO REVEAL THE TRUE POWER OF THE THING, THAT LITTLE SOLID CORE STUFF, THAT IS WHAT MUST BE TREASURED, TO BE SHARPENED AND USED LIKE A WEAPON ON PAPER. SWING HIGH STAB LOW.

IN MY FIRST YEAR OF FIRST GRADE, I SAW THINGS FROM A VERY NARROW PERSPECTIVE. I WAS ALWAYS DOWN ON THE FLOOR LOOKING UP. I HAD TO LOOK UP TO SEE MY TEACHERS, I HAD TO LOOK UP TO SEE MY MOTHER, MY SISTER, THE CHALKBOARD, THE CEILING.

I REMEMBER A FEW DAYS LATER; I WAS CAUGHT BY THE TEACHER USING THAT OLD PENCIL SHARPENER I'D SO LOVED. I'D KNOWN ALL ALONG WE WEREN'T SUPPOSED TO USE IT BUT I SUPPOSE AT THE TIME I DIDN'T CARE. THE TEACHER TOLD ME TO LOOK DOWN. I DID. THERE AT MY FEET WAS A SMALL MOUNTAIN OF SHAVINGS. THE DUST OF IT WAS SCATTERED ACROSS THE FLOOR LIKE ASHES BLOWN BY THE WIND.

"You've made a mess." They told me.
I nodded my head, understanding at last.



Mindy Oloren

Who Said it Got Easier as Women Get Old?

Ronna Magy

A COTTON HOUSEDRESS OF A WOMAN
ACE BANDAGES CIRCLE
GRANDMOTHER'S LEGS.
SAFETY PINS CLASP
FRAYED CORSET BENEATH.
AFTERNOONS SHE
SMELLS OF FLOUR
GREEN APPLE PIES.
I WANT TO ASK GRANDMA
WHAT IT'S LIKE
GETTING OLD.
WHY SHE GROANS
PINNING SHEETS ON
BACKYARD LINES.
WHY HELEN TRENT BROADCASTS
KITCHEN'S RADIO STORIES
NOT THE TV.
WHAT HAPPENED AFTER
BERTHA GOT ALZHEIMER'S AND
AUNT LILIAN DIED.



I CAN'T STOP THIS BODY'S
COUNTING THE TIME.
HOW BLOOD PURPLES
TOP LAYERS OF SKIN.
SAFETY PINS HOIST
BRAS HOLDING
YESTERDAY'S DREAMS.
WHY GRANDMA'S PAIN TWISTS
THE THUMBS OF MY HANDS.
AT DOLLAR TREE I NEARLY BUMPED
INTO A LOST WOMAN
BROWSING CARDS ON THE RACK.
HER HAIR SMELLED OF MOTHBALLS
OLD LIFE MAGAZINES.
THOSE BEIGE POLY PANTS
CHECKERED BLOUSE
VINTAGE MIDWEST.
SHE COULDN'T REMEMBER
WHERE SHE'D LEFT HER DAUGHTER OR
HER DAUGHTER'S CHILD.
SO HER GREEN BASKET ROLLED ON.
PERHAPS THE NEXT AISLE.

MY NAME IS HOLLY RENSHAW. I'VE BEEN ASKED TO WRITE AN ESSAY ON THE MANY ENCOUNTERS I'VE HAD WITH ALCOHOL (AND I'VE HAD MANY IN MY MANY LONG YEARS ON THIS PLANET). I WAS BEGGED AND BEGGED (I WOULD HAVE TO GUESS ABOUT... ONE TIME?) BEFORE I GAVE IN AND I GRACIOUSLY AGREED. SO, WITHOUT FURTHER ADIEU:

A 16-year-old's Guide to Alcohol

Holly Renshaw

THE FIRST TIME I DRANK ALCOHOL I WAS TWELVE. I WAS PLAYING A RATHER COMPLICATED BOARD GAME WITH ONE OF MY SISTERS (I HAVE MANY) AND HER BOYFRIEND. WE HAD PLAYED A FEW ROUNDS AND THE MENTAL STRESS OF THIS GAME WAS REALLY GETTING TO MY SISTER. SHE DECIDED (LIKE ANY SANE PERSON WOULD) TO OPEN UP A FRESH BOTTLE OF WINE. WHEN MY SISTER OFFERED ME A SIP FROM THE BOTTLE I GRATEFULLY ACCEPTED. WHAT CAN I SAY? I AM A RESPONSIBLE CHILD. I HAD TO.



IT WAS A SMALL SIP BUT NONETHELESS, I CAN STILL RECALL THE BITTERNESS OF THE FIVE DOLLAR DRINK...

THAT NIGHT, I AWOKE DREADFULLY SICK WITH A STOMACH BUG. TO THIS DAY, I SWEAR THAT THE SMALL SIP OF WINE WAS THE CAUSE OF MY WOES.

AFTER THAT, I WOULDN'T DABBLE WITH ALCOHOL FOR QUITE SOME TIME; IN FACT, MY NEXT BRUSH WITH SIN WOULD COME DURING THE SUMMER OF '22. I TOOK A TRIP TO A SMALL TOWN—IT'S JUST OUTSIDE OF THE WILD WILD WEST. YOU MAY HAVE HEARD IT REFERRED TO AS... LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA? WELL, UTAH, WHERE I GREW UP (GUESS I'M STILL GROWING?) HAS A VERY STRANGE RELATIONSHIP WITH ALCOHOL. HERE, MOST ALCOHOLIC DRINKS ARE SOLD ONLY IN STATE-RUN LIQUOR STORES. SO, YOU CAN IMAGINE MY SURPRISE WHEN I WALKED INTO EREWHON FOR THE FIRST TIME AND CASUALLY STROLLED PAST TWO FULLY STOCKED ISLES OF WINE! WHILE THIS MAY BE CONSIDERED NORMAL IN YOUR CITY, I WAS DUMBFOUNDED. I FELT LIKE A KID IN A CANDY STORE! EXCEPT I WAS NOT ALLOWED TO HAVE THE CANDY. USING MY AFOREMENTIONED YEARS OF EXPERTISE, I HELPED MY SISTER (A DIFFERENT SISTER, WHO YOU MAY RECOGNIZE AS THE EDITOR OF THIS ZINE) PICK OUT A FEW BOTTLES.



SIDE NOTE: WHEN WE WENT TO THE CHECKOUT COUNTER I WATCHED MY SISTER SPEND THE SAME AMOUNT OF MONEY AS MY MONTHLY PAYCHECK. WHICH, TO ME IS WILD, BUT AS THEY SAY, LA BAYBEEEE!!

Note from the editor: She works part time at a cookie shop.

MY SISTER WAS THROWING A BIRTHDAY PARTY FOR HER FAVORITE BARISTA. WHEN THE PARTY WAS IN FULL SWING, SHE OFFERED ME MANY SMALL GLASSES OF EACH OF THE WINES WE HAD BOUGHT.

Note from the editor: MISINFORMATION—I offered her a small glass of champagne. I did not facilitate an underage wine tasting.

AT SOME POINT I REALIZED I HAD A BIT TOO MUCH. NEVERTHELESS, I PROCEEDED TO GIVE THE BEST GOOGLE SLIDES PRESENTATION OF ALL TIME. (YES, THIS IS HOW WE CELEBRATE BIRTHDAYS. YOU'VE NEVER BEEN TO A POWERPOINT PARTY?)

THE NEXT TIME I WENT LIP TO RIM WITH THE DRINK OF THE GODS WAS... A BIT MORE... EXTREME. FAST FORWARD TO THE END OF THE SUMMER. MY FATHER IS A BIG VODKA MAN—HE LIKES MOSCOW MULES AND SCREWDRIVERS. AS YOU'LL RECALL, EACH OF MY ALCOHOLIC ENCOUNTERS UP UNTIL THIS POINT HAVE BEEN CHAPERONED AND GUIDED BY AN ADULT. HOWEVER, THIS TIME, I TOOK MATTERS INTO MY OWN HANDS. I HAD PLANNED IT ALL OUT. I STUDIED MY FAMILY'S SCHEDULES AND FOUND MY MOMENT: A SHORT 30-MINUTE WINDOW WHERE NOBODY WAS IN THE HOUSE EXCEPT FOR ME. ONCE IT WAS TIME, I RACED TO THE FREEZER AND RETRIEVED THE SWEET NECTAR THAT WOULD CHANGE MY LIFE. THEN, I GRABBED MY CONVENIENTLY PLACED SHOT GLASS. I TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND MENTALLY PREPARED FOR MY FIRST TRIP TO THE BIG LEAGUES. IT TOOK ME FIVE MINUTES TO OPEN THE BOTTLE. IT MUST HAVE BEEN A MIX OF NERVES, ANXIETY, FREEZING COLD BOTTLES AND MY GENERAL INEXPERIENCE WITH THIS TYPE OF THING, BUT I JUST COULD NOT GET IT OPEN!!! THOUGHTS OF GIVING UP FLOODED MY MIND BUT I WAS DETERMINED. EVENTUALLY, I PREVAILED OVER MY ENEMY. I POURED MY SHOT AND I GRABBED MY PHONE TO RECORD MYSELF. STUPIDLY, I CHALLENGED MYSELF TO TAKE THIS SHOT WITHOUT MAKING A FACE. I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE EASY: I AM A MASTER OF THIS TYPE OF STUFF. [FOR REFERENCE, I CAN SHOVE A HANDFUL OF THE WORST BEAN-BOOZLED FLAVORS INTO MY MOUTH AND NOT BAT AN EYE! HELL, I'VE EVEN DOWNED A SHOT OF WHITE VINEGAR IN A DINGY APARTMENT IN SAN FRANCISCO AND I DIDN'T EVEN FLINCH (STILL WAITING ON THAT $20 CHILDREY)]. BUT EVEN WITH ALL THAT UNDER MY BELT, NOTHING COULD PREPARE ME FOR THE DREADFUL TASTE OF STRAIGHT VODKA. TO ME, IT TASTES LIKE GRAPE FLAVORED COUGH MEDICINE. IMMEDIATELY AFTERWARDS I FELT LIKE VOMITING BUT I STEELED MYSELF AND WENT ON WITH MY DAY LIKE NOTHING HAPPENED.



NOW, FOURTH OF JULY 2023. MY BROTHER DREW IS MAKING DRINKS FOR MY FAMILY (HE'S A BARTENDER). DREW DIDN'T WANT ME TO FEEL LEFT OUT SO HE MADE ME A FAUX-MOJITO, A FAUXJITO... IF YOU WILL. WHILST MAKING ME THE EQUIVALENT OF A SPICY LEMONADE, DREW SUBSTITUTED THE ALCOHOL WITH GINGER BEER. HOWEVER, I THINK HE ADDED WAY TOO MUCH GINGER BEER BECAUSE... WELL, SIMPLY PUT: THIS DRINK WAS OFFENSIVE TO MY TASTE BUDS. THIS DRINK WAS SO GOD AWFUL THAT IT TOOK ME ALL DAY TO DRINK IT. MAYBE HALFWAY THROUGH MY DRINK, I WAS STRUCK WITH A STRANGE FEELING OF DIZZINESS. I WONDERED IF DREW HAD MESSED UP? MAYBE ACCIDENTLY (OR NOT), HE PUT SOME ALCOHOL INTO MY DRINK? I DECIDED NOT TO ASK.

NOW FOR MY LAST DRINK OF ALCOHOL. IT WAS AUGUST 2023. AGAIN, I'M IN LOS ANGELES VISITING EDITOR-IN-CHIEF, CHLOE OLOREN. ON THE FINAL DAY OF MY TRIP WE FOUND OUT THAT A CLOSE FRIEND HAD JUST GOTTEN AN AMAZING JOB. THIS WAS CAUSE TO CELEBRATE!! WE GOT SOME CHAMPAGNE, PICKED UP THAT BARISTA, AND WITH A SMALL GROUP OF FRIENDS, WE POPPED THE CORK AND POURED OUT GLASSES (MY SERVING WAS TINY). I SAID A TOAST. WE CLINK GLASSES. WE DRANK THE SPARKLY WINE. THE REST OF THE NIGHT WE PLAYED A HEATED AND COMPETITIVE GAME OF MARIO PARTY, ALMOST DESTROYING OUR FRIENDSHIPS. WE COOLED DOWN AND RECONCILED WITH SOME JACKBOX GAMES; WE HEALED OUR GRIEVANCES. AT THE END OF THE NIGHT, WE GIFTED THE REMAINS OF THE CHAMPAGNE TO OUR ESTEEMED GUEST. RIGHT AS WE HANDED THE BOTTLE OFF, THE REPLACEMENT CORK POPPED AND FLEW ACROSS THE LIVING ROOM SENDING A CONFETTI OF CHAMPAGNE FLYING THROUGH THE AIR, AND ALL OVER THE FLOOR.

NO, I DID NOT LICK IT UP.

NOW, YOU MAY THINK THAT THESE STORIES I HAVE TOLD YOU HAVE BEEN SUPER WHOLESOME AND NICE. WHILE I AGREE WITH YOU, THEY ARE! NO ONE UNDER THE AGE OF 21 IN THE UNITED STATES SHOULD DRINK ALCOHOL. I'M LOOKING AT YOU, JACOB!

ANYONE UNDER THE AGE OF 21 NAMED JACOB IS FREAKING OUT RIGHT NOW.

THIS SERIES EXPLORES IDEAS OF EPIGENETICS, NEURODIVERGENT QUEER TRAUMA, AND COLLAPSING TIME IN RELATION TO MY PARENTS' 1950S AMERICAN CHILDHOODS (THERE IS A SERIES ABOUT THE MIDWEST, BUT IT IS CURRENTLY UNDER CONSTRUCTION). THE PIECES COME FROM A LARGER SERIES ENTITLED "SEVEN KINDS," A NOD TO MARTA HOLMGREN'S 1945 SWEDISH COOKBOOK, "SJU SORTERS KAKOR." THIS SERIES CONFRONTS THE EVANGELICAL SWEDISH LUTHERANS WHO PURCHASED MY INFANT MOTHER FROM A TEENAGER IN CRISIS, IN A PRIVATE, CLOSED ADOPTION IN 1953, AND PLACES THEM IN CONVERSATION WITH A SPECULATIVE ANCESTRY. THE SALE AND CONSUMPTION OF COFFEE WAS RENDERED ILLEGAL IN SWEDEN FIVE SEPARATE TIMES BETWEEN 1756 AND 1823, LEADING TO AN INCREASE IN THE ARREST RATES OF WOMEN DURING THESE PERIODS—"SEVEN KINDS" IMAGINES THE NEURODIVERGENT QUEERS WHO MIGHT HAVE NAVIGATED THESE LAWS. HERE IS ONE OF SEVEN PIECES.

Maja 'Marti' Greta

Julian Currents

MARTI IS BORN "MAJA GRETA" IN THE EARLY MORNING OF THE NINTH OF NOVEMBER 1820 IN RANSBERG, VASTRA GÖTALAND. COFFEE IS ILLEGAL THAT YEAR AND WILL BE FOR ANOTHER TWO BEFORE THE LAST BAN ENDS, BUT HER MOTHER, KAJSA, IS AN AQUARIUS AND DRINKS KAFFEOST IN SECRET BY THE LAKE. MARTI WILL BE THE OLDEST OF SEVEN SIBLINGS, SNEAKING SIPS OF HER MOTHER'S COFFEE SO SHE CAN BE THE "GOOD GIRL" THAT IS NEEDED. THE HOUSE IS TOO LOUD WITH SO MANY KIDS, AND MARTI GETS REGULAR HEADACHES THAT MAKE IT HARD TO SEE. SHE IS 22 WHEN HER TEENAGE BROTHER DIES AND SHE SWEARS IN PRIVATE THAT SHE WILL NEVER HAVE CHILDREN OF HER OWN, BUT ADAM IS KIND AND LIKES HER STRONG SHOULDERS AND OVER TIME HE WILL WEAR HER DOWN. THE TWO HAVE SIX KIDS OF THEIR OWN, AND WHILE THEY ARE ALSO TOO LOUD, HER ELDEST DAUGHTER LOTTA HELPS OUT AROUND THE HOUSE. ALWAYS SUCH A GOOD GIRL. ADAM PASSES JUST BEFORE HER FIFTIETH BIRTHDAY, AND SHE WILL GO ONLY BY MARTI FOR THE NEXT 28 YEARS."


MJÖLK
SMÖR
NEM BUTA
NEM BUTA
NEM BUTA
CARDIATOL 109



When I sent you that text

I meant it half joking,

100 percent serious.

I know it sounds silly at first

The simple question:

"Who do you have a crush on?"

Who makes your stomach flutter

Like a million paper cranes set to fly

Their delicate, sharp wings

Piercing every corner of your depression

And making you feel alive again

Who makes you feel safe and secure in yourself

Not thinking about any of the plaguing insecurities

That torment your life

All you can think about instead

Is their bouncy purple hair

And their priceless smile

Who makes you laugh so hard

Your chuckles fall like waterfalls,

Your vision grows so blurry with euphoria

Just by being in their presence

"Who is that for you?"

I texted to her, my fingers hesitating

With bubbly anticipation

Three dots, for only three seconds

But it feels like thousands of eternities

"That person", she texts back,

"Is you."



Susanne Salehi

_____ WORD, SHE TOLD ME LATER, WAS 'RED.' I BEGAN LANGUAGE WITH HER FAVORITE COLOR. THE SHADE OF HER SUFFERING, THE WAY MY HANDS ACHED WITH POTENTIAL AROUND EVERYTHING BREAKABLE.

_____ THING SHE DID AFTER I TOLD HER WAS HUG ME TIGHT. SHE SAID, "IT'S NOT WHAT I EXPECTED BUT I LOVE YOU AND I JUST WANT YOU TO BE HAPPY. I JUST WANT YOU TO BE SAFE." SHE SAID, "LET'S NOT TELL YOUR DAD FOR AWHILE, OKAY? HE MIGHT NOT UNDERSTAND."

_____ WIG I HELPED HER PICK OUT HAD FEATHERED BANGS. THERE'S A PHOTO TAKEN IN A ROOM OF MY OLD HOUSE, HER HANDS CLASPED TOGETHER, LITTLE RAISIN EYES SHINING BRIGHT. WE WERE ALL HOPEFUL THEN AND BELIEVED IN CLINICAL TRIALS. WE USED WORDS LIKE "PROMISING."

_____ TIME I HEARD MYSELF MAKE THAT KEENING SOUND, MORE OF A WAIL. I CRUMPLED DOWN THE WALL ON SOME SUNNY MORNING IN A CONFERENCE ROOM, PHONE TO MY EAR, WORDS GARBLED THROUGH MY FATHER'S GUTTURAL SOBS. HER POST-SURGICAL SCANS REVEALED COUNTLESS POINTS OF LIGHT. WE WERE AT THE END OF KNOWN SCIENCE. "THERE IS NO OTHER OPTION," HE SAID. THE CANCER HAD RENEWED ITS FURY, FILLING HER GUT. SHE HAD THREE-TO-SIX MONTHS AT THE OUTSIDE.

_____ INJECTION I GAVE HER HAD TO BE CAREFULLY NAVIGATED AROUND THE TUMORS. A LITANY: SWAB. STRETCH THE SKIN TAUT. SLOW AND STEADY WITHOUT FLINCHING EVEN WHEN SHE MADE THOSE LITTLE ANIMAL SOUNDS.

_____ VISIT TO A BODY THAT WAS NO LONGER HERS. THE BED WAS SO LOW. HER HANDS WERE THE SAME.

_____ ANTIDEPRESSANT SAT ON MY NIGHTSTAND FOR TWO MONTHS BEFORE I SWALLOWED IT.

_____ HOME SHE WOULD NEVER VISIT. CARDINALS INFESTED THE THICKET OUTSIDE MY BEDROOM WINDOW, SLASHES OF RED IN THE WINTER MONTHS.

_____ NEW SONG I KNEW SHE WOULD HAVE LOVED. UNBEARABLE IN ITS UPBEAT CROONING.

_____ SHRINE. I BROUGHT HOME FLOWERS AND FEATHERS AND BEAUTIFUL THINGS SHE WOULD HAVE LIKED. A PINK CAMELLIA WITH THE EDGES ALREADY BROWNING.

_____ BIRTHDAY AFTERWARDS I STAYED UP ALL NIGHT AND BURNED EVERY CANDLE, CONVINCED I COULD REACH HER ONE MORE TIME. TELL HER HOW SORRY I WAS. SO SORRY. I SHOULD HAVE CLIPPED HER TOENAILS LIKE SHE ASKED WHEN SHE STOPPED BEING ABLE TO REACH. I SHOULD HAVE RECORDED EVERYTHING. I SHOULD HAVE BEEN THERE WHEN SHE LEFT.

_____ ANNIVERSARY I LET MYSELF LISTEN TO THE ONLY MESSAGE WITH HER NAME. TWENTY SECONDS OF SILENCE, THEN, "I WAS LISTENING FOR A TONE. I NEVER HEARD A TONE. I DON'T KNOW." THE ONLY WAY TO HEAR HER VOICE NOW.

_____ TASTE OF CREMATORIUM ASH MORE THAN A YEAR LATER. WHAT WAS LEFT OF HER FLUTTERED INTO A COLD LAKE IN COLORADO. ALL OUR FINGERTIPS DUSTED FROM PUTTING HER SOMEPLACE SHE LOVED. LATER, ALONE, I LICKED MINE CLEAN.

_____ USED THE PAST TENSE REGULARLY THREE YEARS INTO HER ABSENCE. SHE WAS. SHE WAS KIND AND PATIENT AND HAUNTED AND COMPLEX AND SHE WAS ONLY 55. NEVER MADE THAT _____ TRIP TO HAWAII OR HER _____ VOLUNTEER HOME BUILD.

NOW I COLLECT THEM, SAVORING EVERY _____ SHE SHOULD HAVE HAD FOR THE REST OF THE LIFE SHE LEFT BEHIND.

MY NAME IS LEAH JANE AYCOTT. I AM ELEVEN YEARS OLD, AND THIS IS MY LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT. IT IS ALSO MY FIRST.

TO WHOMEVER READS THIS PLEASE IGNORE THE PRE-ALGEBRA HOMEWORK ON THE BACK OF THIS PAPER. IT IS NOT PART OF MY WILL OR MY TESTAMENT. IT IS SIMPLY THE ONLY PAPER I HAVE WITH ME RIGHT NOW. I AM IN THE THIRD SHOWER STALL IN THE GIRLS' LOCKER ROOM AT TRINITY CATHOLIC MIDDLE SCHOOL. I AM NOT CATHOLIC. SORRY DAD. I REALIZED LAST THURSDAY. ON MY TOMBSTONE, I DO NOT WANT ANY PICTURES OF SAINTS OR BIBLE QUOTES OR CROSSES. AN ANGEL IS FINE, BUT ESPECIALLY NO PRAYER-HANDS. AND YOU HAVE TO DO THIS BECAUSE I SAID SO IN MY WILL AND I'M GONNA SIGN IT AT THE BOTTOM.

THE FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT OF MY POSSESSIONS IS MY COMPLETE STATE QUARTER COLLECTION. EVEN THOUGH THE QUARTERS ONLY ADD UP TO $12.50 IT IS WORTH A LOT MORE BECAUSE IT IS, LIKE I SAID, COMPLETE. I KEEP IT IN MY OFFICIAL STATE QUARTERS COLLECTOR'S MAP, WHICH HAS LITTLE DRAWINGS OF EVERY STATE'S SEAL AND OFFICIAL FLOWER, WHICH ARE VERY PRETTY AND INFORMATIVE. IT IS HIDDEN UNDER MY MATTRESS ON THE RIGHT SIDE, AND I OFFICIALLY LEAVE IT TO MY YOUNGER BROTHER, GABRIEL. HOWEVER I APPOINT MOM AS FINANCIAL CUSTODIAN UNTIL THE TIME AT WHICH GABRIEL HAS SURPASSED THE FOURTH GRADE. I THINK BY THEN HE WILL BE MORE RESPONSIBLE. I DO NOT GRANT CALEB ANY ACCESS TO THIS PART OF MY ESTATE.

THE SECOND MOST VALUABLE OF MY POSSESSIONS IS MY GREEN IPOD TOUCH, WHICH I LEAVE TO MOM TO SELL OR DO WITH AS SHE WISHES - EXCEPT PLEASE DO NOT READ THROUGH MY MESSAGES WITH HANNAH CALDER OR ADRIAN MCCONE.

I USED TO THINK I WOULD LIVE TO BE AT LEAST THIRTY-FIVE, AND THAT I WOULD WORK AS A CHEMIST OR NEUROSURGEON OR MAYBE A FOOD-AND-TRAVEL TV SHOW HOST. I HAVE COME TO TERMS WITH THE FACT THAT I HAVE REACHED THE END OF MY SHORT TIME ON THIS EARTH, AND I WILL NOT GET TO MAKE EXPLOSIONS OR FIX BRAINS OR TRAVEL TO BARCELONA AND FIGURE OUT WHAT TAPAS ARE. I HAVE CHOSEN THE THIRD SHOWER STALL TO DIE IN BECAUSE A) NOBODY USES THIS STALL ANYWAY BECAUSE THE FAUCET IS BROKEN AND B) I FIGURE IT WILL BE EASIER TO CLEAN UP MY REMAINS FROM TILE THAN IF I DIED ON CARPET, OR THE OUTSIDE WHERE BUGS AND ANIMALS WILL MOST DEFINITELY GET TO ME FIRST.

THE TILES HERE ARE SMALL AND SQUARE AND TEAL-GREEN, WHICH IS HONESTLY QUITE CALMING. THEY RUN ALL THE WAY UP TO THE CEILING, WHERE THE LIGHT WITH BUGS IN IT DOESN'T TURN ON ANYMORE. IT IS COOL IN HERE, AND I DO NOT THINK I SHALL SUFFER NEARLY AS MUCH AS IF I WERE TO DIE IN THE SUMMER HEAT.

I LEAVE MY DIARIES TO ANNIKA RAMIREZ. EVEN THOUGH SHE MOVED TO ARIZONA LAST SPRING, SHE IS STILL MY BEST FRIEND, EVEN THOUGH SHE HASN'T RESPONDED TO MY POSTCARDS. SHE WILL TAKE GOOD CARE OF THESE POSSESSIONS.

MRS. MUHARRAM FROM JEFFERSON ELEMENTARY GETS MY POEMS I WROTE (EXCEPT THE HAIKUS WHICH MOM GETS) AND TO MISS OWENS I LEAVE MY SERIES OF NATURE PASTELS. AND ALSO MY PERMISSION TO HANG THEM IN HER CLASSROOM IN MY MEMORY.

I DO NOT THINK CURSES ARE CONTAGIOUS. BUT IN CASE THEY ARE PLEASE MAKE SURE TO HANDLE MY CORPSE WITH CAUTION. HYPOTHETICALLY. I AM DYING BECAUSE ADRIAN MCCONE PUT A CURSE ON ME TO DIE FOURTEEN DAYS BEFORE MY TWELFTH BIRTHDAY. IT IS HYPOTHETICAL BECAUSE I DO NOT WANT TO PRESS CHARGES ON ADRIAN FOR HOMICIDE. BECAUSE AFTER ALL SHE IS ONLY TWELVE. AND I DON'T THINK IT'S FAIR FOR HER TO SPEND HER TEENAGE YEARS IN JAIL BECAUSE OF ONE CURSE. BUT THAT IS WHY I AM DYING.

CURSES ARE VERY SERIOUS THINGS TO MAKE. THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE AT CATHOLIC SCHOOL WHERE WITCHCRAFT IS ESPECIALLY NOT ALLOWED. WHEN ADRIAN MCCONE (HYPOTHETICALLY) SAID, "LEAH JANE AYCOTT I PUT A CURSE ON YOU TO DIE FOURTEEN DAYS BEFORE YOUR TWELFTH BIRTHDAY." I WAS SHOCKED, BUT THE GRAVITY OF THE SITUATION DID NOT STRIKE ME TIL TODAY. SEPTEMBER 9TH. (MY BIRTHDAY IS SEPTEMBER 23RD.) I BEGGED HER SEVERAL TIMES TO PLEASE LIFT THE CURSE. BUT SHE IGNORED ME AND ROLLED HER EYES EVEN WHEN I STARTED CRYING. WHICH IS ODD BECAUSE WE USED TO BE BEST FRIENDS IN FOURTH GRADE.

I LEAVE THE CONTENTS OF MY GIANT PURPLE CRAYON BANK TO THE LOCAL DOG SHELTER WHERE WE RESCUED PANCAKES FROM.

I SUPPOSE MY BIGGEST FEAR UPON DEATH IS THAT I WAS HERE TOO BRIEFLY TO MAKE ANY DIFFERENCE, OR DO ANYTHING WORTHWHILE. I GOT MY BRONZE AWARD IN GIRL SCOUTS, WHICH I GUESS IS IMPORTANT BUT I DID NOT MAKE ANY MAJOR CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE STATE OF THE WORLD OR ENERGY CONSERVATION OR MEDICAL SCIENCE. I HAVE NOT HAD A FIRST KISS. I HAVE NOT GOTTEN MARRIED, OR EVEN DIVORCED.

MY MOM HAS AN EMBROIDERY ON THE LAUNDRY ROOM WALL THAT SAYS "TAKE TIME TO STOP AND SMELL THE ROSES." I'M WORRIED I HAVE NOT DONE EVEN THIS. WHEN IS THE LAST TIME I SMELLED ROSES? EVER SINCE WE MOVED IN WITH CALEB I HAVE NOT SEEN ANY ROSE BUSHES AROUND. HOW MUCH TIME SHOULD I, AS AN ALMOST-TWELVE-YEAR-OLD, HAVE TAKEN IN MY LIFE TO STOP AND SMELL? I KNOW THAT IT IS A SAYING ABOUT TAKING THINGS SLOWLY, BUT I FEEL LIKE I HAVE TAKEN EVERYTHING SO VERY FAST.

MY NICE CHRISTMAS DRESS GOES TO MY COUSIN LILY FOR WHEN SHE IS OLDER AND BIG ENOUGH TO FIT IN IT.

MY COLORED PENCILS AND WATERCOLORS GO TO HANNAH CALDER, WHO WILL ALWAYS BE A BETTER ARTIST THAN I EVER WAS. I HOPE THAT SHE CAN USE THESE THINGS TO MAKE BEAUTIFUL WORK, AND USE ANY PAIN SHE FEELS AT MY DEATH TO INSPIRE HER. PICASSO DID HIS BLUE PERIOD AFTER HIS FRIEND DIED, AND PICASSO WAS VERY SUCCESSFUL.

HANNAH, IN CASE YOU ARE READING THIS, I'D LIKE TO MAKE A NOTE TO YOU HERE.

(IF YOU ARE NOT HANNAH AND YOU ARE READING THIS, PLEASE SKIP AHEAD OUT OF RESPECT.)

HANNAH, I THINK YOU ARE VERY TALENTED AND COOL. AND I AM GLAD TO HAVE BEEN YOUR FRIEND. YOU ARE VERY BEAUTIFUL AND EVERYONE LOVES YOU FOR A GOOD REASON. I DO NOT KNOW WHY YOU THINK YOU NEED TO LOOK DIFFERENT BECAUSE YOU ARE ALREADY SO PRETTY AND ALSO BODIES CHANGE WITH PUBERTY ANYWAY WHICH YOU'RE ALREADY AHEAD OF ME IN. I AM SORRY IF I EVER MADE YOU FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE OR IF I'M ANNOYING. DO YOU REMEMBER WHEN I SLEPT OVER AT YOUR HOUSE FOR THREE NIGHTS WHILE MY MOM WAS MOVING? WE CLIMBED UP ON THE HILL BEHIND YOUR HOUSE AND MADE THAT FORT OUT OF BRANCHES AND AN OLD TARP. YOU TOLD ME THE THINGS YOU WERE AFRAID OF (DEATH, SPIDERS) AND I TOLD YOU THE THINGS THAT I WAS AFRAID OF (SPIDERS, LAWYERS). WE CARVED OUR INITIALS IN ONE OF THE BRANCHES WITH YOUR BROTHER'S POCKET KNIFE AND ONLY WENT BACK INSIDE WHEN IT GOT DARK AND COLD. BUT THE STARS WERE SO BEAUTIFUL FROM UP THERE AND WE COULD LOOK DOWN ON THE WHOLE CITY AND I FELT FREE WITH YOU THERE, WHICH ISN'T A FEELING I'VE HAD FOR A LONG TIME SINCE.

WHEN WE STARTED SIXTH GRADE, YOU TOLD ME THAT WE NEEDED TO SPEND LESS TIME TOGETHER BECAUSE IT WAS IMPORTANT FOR YOU TO MAKE NEW FRIENDS WHO WERE OLDER AND PRETTIER BECAUSE THAT IS HOW YOU BECOME POPULAR. I THINK I RESPONDED POORLY. IF I REMEMBER CORRECTLY, I SAID SOMETHING ALONG THE LINES OF:

"BUT HANNAH, I THINK I AM IN LOVE WITH YOU."

I REMEMBER THIS MOMENT BECAUSE YOU LAUGHED AND THEN LOOKED CONFUSED AND THEN DIDN'T TALK TO ME OUTSIDE OF "HEY" FOR ABOUT A MONTH. ALSO BECAUSE I WAS FILLED WITH AN INTENSE EMOTION WHICH I HAVE NEVER FELT FOR ANOTHER PERSON BEFORE, AND THEN MY HEART HURT.

I HAVE OF COURSE MOVED PAST THIS BY NOW, AND I'M MUCH TOO BUSY FOR LOVE ANYWAY. I WANTED TO CLEAR THE AIR AND LET YOU KNOW THAT I AM NOT IN LOVE WITH YOU ANYMORE. SO HOPEFULLY NOW YOU CAN REMEMBER ME FONDLY AND FORGET ALL THAT.

I AM GOING TO TRY TO WRITE MORE QUICKLY BECAUSE MY ARMS ARE ITCHY AND I'M WORRIED IT'S THE CURSE BEGINNING TO SET IN.

I LEAVE MY NINTENDO SWITCH LITE TO NOAH FROM MR. EVANS' CLASS BECAUSE HE'S BETTER AT POKEMON GAMES THAN ME AND LIKES YELLOW (THE COLOR OF MY DS!) BETTER THAN CORAL (THE COLOR OF HIS DS!).

I LEAVE MY GOLDEN CRUCIFIX NECKLACE THAT NANA GAVE ME TO ADRIAN MCCONE. I HOPE THAT IT WILL INSPIRE HER TO THINK OF THE LORD JESUS, WHOM SHE LOVES VERY MUCH, BEFORE SETTING ANY MORE CURSES ON PEOPLE. THIS IS ALSO BECAUSE I AM NOT CATHOLIC ANYMORE AND THEREFORE I THINK IT IS PROBABLY BLASPHEMOUS FOR ME TO WEAR THIS NECKLACE. ADRIAN, PLEASE CONSIDER THIS NECKLACE AS A TRUCE AND KNOW THAT I WILL NOT HAUNT YOU FOR CURSING ME, AND THAT I FORGIVE YOU EVEN AFTER DEATH BECAUSE THAT IS THE MATURE THING TO DO. IT MAKES ME UPSET THAT YOU TOLD ME THAT I CAN'T HANG OUT WITH YOU OR GET INTO HEAVEN BECAUSE I LIKE GIRLS, AND I SMELL BAD, BUT IT IS OKAY NOW BECAUSE I HAVE EXCOMMUNICATED MYSELF, AND ALSO I STARTED WEARING DEODORANT.

I LEAVE MY CHARM BRACELET TO DAD, WHO BROUGHT ME MOST OF THE CHARMS FROM DIFFERENT PLACES HE TRAVELED BEFORE SWITCHING JOBS. HE CAN PUT IT ON HIS KEYCHAIN TO THINK OF ME. FINALLY, I LEAVE MY SCHOOL PAPERS AND OLD BOXES OF DOLLS AND OTHER MEANINGLESS POSSESSIONS TO CALEB, BECAUSE HE DOESN'T LIKE MESSES, AND I THINK HE WOULD ENJOY CLEANING IT ALL UP, AND THEN HE CAN PUT AN OFFICE OR PERSONAL GYM IN MY ROOM WHICH I THINK WOULD MAKE HIM HAPPY ANYWAY.

MY HANDS ARE BEGINNING TO GET SWEATY, AND MY CHEST HURTS A BIT AND I SORT OF WANT TO CRY SO I THINK THE CURSE IS HERE. IN A FEW MOMENTS I WILL BE DEAD. I WILL NOT BE GOING TO HEAVEN, BUT I DON'T THINK I'M GOING TO HELL OR PURGATORY EITHER BECAUSE THOSE ARE PLACES THAT ARE REAL IF YOU BELIEVE IN THEM, WHICH I DON'T. I DO NOT HAVE A CLEAR IDEA OF WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ME, AND THAT'S MY OWN FAULT FOR NOT TAKING ENOUGH TIME TO STOP AND SMELL ROSES OR CONSIDER DEATH. I HOPE THAT IT WILL NOT HURT. BUT EVEN MORE I HOPE THAT IT WILL NOT BE LONELY. SOMETIMES IN MY DREAMS I'M JUST FLOATING IN STARS LOOKING DOWN AT THE CITY, AND MAYBE I AM ONE OF THE STARS, AND I CAN SEE TINY CARS AND THE HILL BEHIND HANNAH'S HOUSE. IT'S AN OBLIVION BUT NOT AN EMPTY ONE, AND THAT MAKES ME FEEL A BIT BETTER. I DON'T KNOW THAT I'D WANT TO BE IN HEAVEN ANYWAY BECAUSE THE ONLY OTHER PERSON I KNOW THERE IS NANA, AND HER HOUSE ALWAYS SMELLED LIKE CAT PEE, AND SHE ALWAYS SEEMED SORT OF ANGRY AT EVERYTHING, AND I DON'T THINK LIVING WITH HER FOR ALL ETERNITY WOULD BE THAT MUCH FUN. NO OFFENSE.

I AM GOING TO CLOSE MY EYES NOW, AND LET THE CURSE TAKE ITS FINAL, FATAL, HOLD OF ME. I WILL LET DEATH TAKE ME PEACEFULLY. I WILL NOT RESIST THE UNIVERSE. I WILL PRAY TO EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING. I HOPE THE WORLD KNOWS I LOVE IT. I HOPE YOU KNOW TOO MOM, AND GABRIEL, AND DAD AND ANNIKA AND HANNAH AND ADRIAN AND EVEN CALEB.

SIGNED,

Leah Jane Tycott

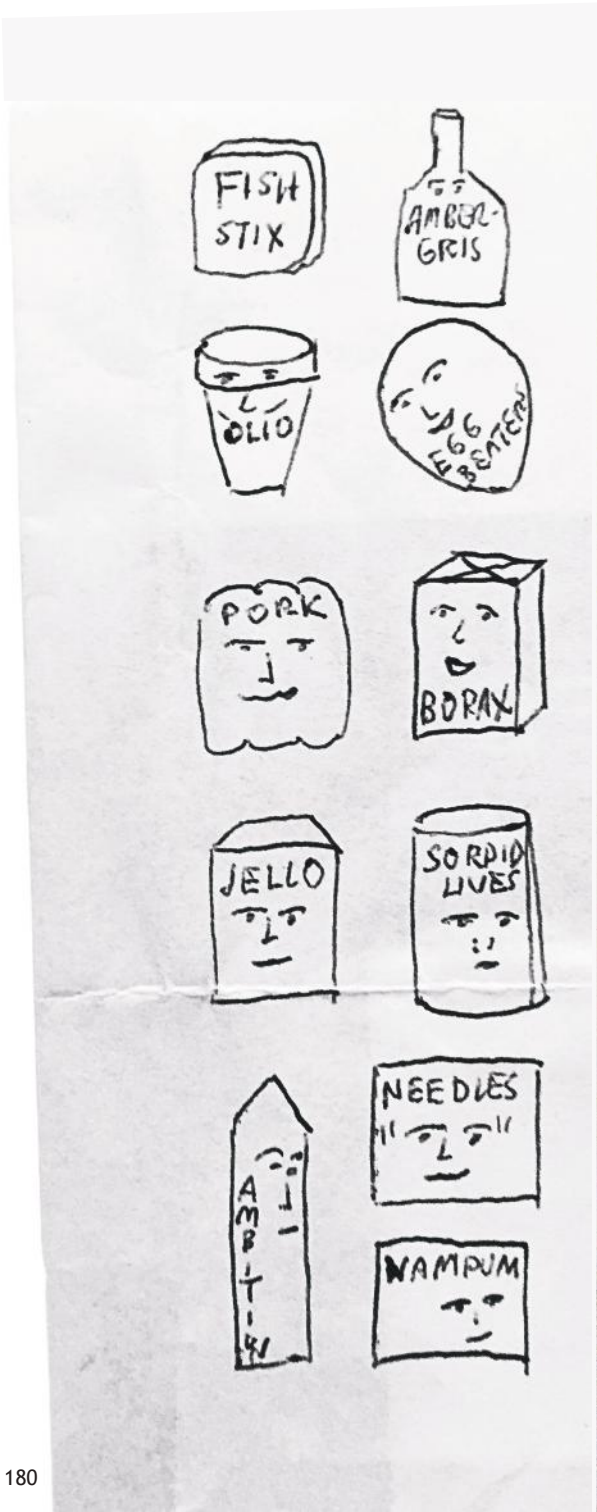
(I AM MY OWN WITNESS.)

Final Firsts (Or, This Shit Never Gets Old but I Do)

Jason Wayne Wong

IT FEELS STRANGE TO WRITE ABOUT FIRSTS WHEN IT FEELS LIKE I'VE REACHED THE STAGE WHERE I'M FACING MORE GOODBYES AND FAREWELLS, BUT EVEN THOSE CAN LEAD TO NEW PATHS AND ADVENTURES. AND THEREFORE, MORE FIRSTS—JUST DIFFERENT, SOMETIMES BITTERSWEET ONES. THIS MAY NOT BE MY FIRST TIME WRITING FOR A QUEER PUBLICATION, BUT IT'S MY FIRST TIME DOING SO IN ALMOST 20 YEARS. A GEN Z LIFETIME AGO, I PLAYED AT BEING A CONTRIBUTING EDITOR FOR AN LGBTQ LIFESTYLE MAGAZINE IN SAN FRANCISCO.

IT WAS FUN INTERVIEWING PEOPLE AND PRODUCING PHOTO SHOOTS, WORKING WITH FRIENDS AND OTHER CREATIVES IN THE BAY AREA. BUT AFTER 9/11, MY PRIORITIES SHIFTED, AND I THOUGHT I SHOULD TRY TO FOCUS ON OTHER CAREERS. SO, I BECAME A GRAPHIC DESIGNER FOR 10 YEARS, WORKING MOSTLY WITH NONPROFITS. THEN I WENT BACK TO SCHOOL AND BECAME AN INTERIOR DESIGNER FOR ANOTHER 10 YEARS. DURING ALL THESE MILESTONES (AND FIRSTS), I WAS ALSO AN ACTOR, INITIALLY APPEARING ON STAGE AND LATER IN COMMERCIALS, FILMS, AND TELEVISION. AND FOR THE PAST FIVE YEARS, ACTING HAS BEEN MY FULL-TIME JOB AND LIFE—IT'S ONE OF THE FEW THINGS I HAVE LEFT AT THIS POINT.



Have a Wonderful Day!





AT 27 I MET AND FELL FOR THE MAN WHO WOULD BECOME MY HUSBAND. AT 32 I BECAME ONE OF THE FIRST IN MY FRIEND GROUP TO GET MARRIED AND PART OF THE FIRST WAVE OF GAYS AND LESBIANS IN CALIFORNIA WHO LEGALLY WED BEFORE A STATEWIDE PROPOSITION BANNED SAME-SEX MARRIAGE AND LEFT US ALL IN LIMBO. AND AT 42 I BECAME ONE OF THE FIRST OF MY FRIENDS TO LOSE THEIR PARTNER AFTER MY HUSBAND JIM DIED OF CANCER. ONCE I WAS A POSITIVE EXAMPLE TO EVERYONE. THEN I SUDDENLY BECAME A CAUTIONARY TALE OF LOSS AND SADNESS.

AFTER 15 YEARS OF LIVING IN THE SAME HOME I SHARED WITH JIM, I DECIDED TO PACK UP AND TRY ANOTHER SERIES OF FIRSTS ELSEWHERE. I SPENT THE PANDEMIC LIVING AND WORKING IN CANADA (A FIRST, DESPITE BEING A CANADIAN CITIZEN), AND NOW I FIND MYSELF LIVING IN LA FOR THE FIRST TIME. I'VE AVOIDED LIVING IN THE REGION MY ENTIRE LIFE, BUT FIGURED IT WAS TIME TO FACE WHATEVER HESITATIONS I HAD AROUND SOCAL HEAD-ON.

THIS IS ONE OF THE FIRST TIMES I'M WRITING PUBLICLY ABOUT MY LATE HUSBAND, JIM NAWROCKI. HE WAS THE REAL WRITER IN OUR FAMILY. HE WAS A PUBLISHED POET WHO ALSO WROTE SHORT STORIES, ESSAYS, AND BOOK REVIEWS FOR VARIOUS MAGAZINES, LITERARY JOURNALS, AND ANTHOLOGIES. AS CANCER RAVAGED HIS BODY, ONE OF HIS LAST WISHES WAS TO "JUST" GET A BOOK OF HIS WORK PUBLISHED—TO HAVE A WRITTEN, PRINTED RECORD OF ALL HIS WORK. EASIER SAID THAN DONE, BABE. JIM HAD SPENT A LIFETIME SUBMITTING TO PUBLISHERS, LITERARY COMPETITIONS, AND ALMOST EVERY OPEN CALL FOR MANUSCRIPTS, TO VIRTUALLY NO AVAIL.

AFTER HE DIED, I SPENT MY FIRST FOGGY YEAR OF GRIEF TRYING TO REALIZE HIS DREAM. IT WAS THE FIRST TIME I HAD EVER REACHED OUT TO PUBLISHING HOUSES AND SMALL PRESSES TO TRY TO GET HIS MANUSCRIPT PUBLISHED. AS THE REJECTIONS BEGAN ROLLING INTO MY INBOX (INSTEAD OF JIM'S), I DECIDED TO STRAY FROM THE CUT-AND-PASTED COVER LETTERS JIM HAD SET UP AND WROTE MY FIRST PERSONAL LETTER TO AN INDEPENDENT PUBLISHER WHOSE FOUNDER HAD A VERY SIMILAR JOURNEY WITH CANCER AS JIM—EXCEPT THIS OTHER MAN LIVED.

I LIKE TO THINK MY LETTER (AND OF COURSE JIM'S WRITING) WORKED TO CHANGE THEIR HEARTS AND MINDS, OR AT LEAST PIQUE THEIR INTEREST. I CRIED MY FIRST TEARS OF VICTORY AND RELIEF WHEN THEY AGREED TO PUBLISH A COLLECTION OF JIM'S POEMS AND STORIES. I SPENT MY FIRST GLOBAL PANDEMIC COMPILING AND EDITING WHAT WOULD BECOME MY HUSBAND'S FIRST (AND ONLY) BOOK, HOUSE FIRE. A FRIEND AND FORMER LOVER OF HIS WROTE THE INTRODUCTION, WHILE I WROTE THE AFTERWORD. CATHARSIS AND HEALING CAN TAKE ANY NUMBER OF FORMS, AND THIS WAS MY WAY OF KEEPING A PART OF JIM ALIVE FOREVER.

I'VE DISCOVERED OVER THE LAST FEW YEARS THAT THERE'S A KIND OF COMING OUT AS A WIDOW(ER). I MENTION IT OFTEN WITH THE FRIENDS I MADE FROM MY FORMER SUPPORT GROUP FOR SPOUSAL LOSS (ARCHLY DUBBED "THE GRIEF BUDDIES.") WHEN DO YOU LET A NEW FRIEND OR COLLEAGUE KNOW YOU'VE LOST SOMEONE YOU THOUGHT YOU'D SPEND THE REST OF YOUR LIFE WITH? HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN MOVING FORWARD WITH YOUR LIFE AND SOMETIMES PAINFULLY DISCOVERING NEW FIRSTS WITHOUT YOUR HUSBAND OR WIFE? THE FIRST CHRISTMAS WITHOUT HIM. THE FIRST SPRING WITHOUT HIM. THE FIRST YEAR WITHOUT HIM.

STARTING OVER IN A NEW CITY, MAKING NEW FRIENDS, AND CREATING NEW FIRSTS, I DISCOVERED IT'S POSSIBLE TO STILL FEEL THAT SENSE OF POSSIBILITY THAT I EXPERIENCED OVER 20 YEARS AGO. THE CREATION AND MISSION OF FRUITLICE ALONE TAKES ME BACK TO THAT MAGICAL FEELING OF, "HEY GANG, LET'S PUT ON A SHOW!" THE OPENNESS AND HONESTY OF THE GEN Z-ERS I'VE MET (AS WELL AS THEIR YOUNGER SUCCESSORS) GIVE ME HOPE THAT WE CAN ALL HAVE SECOND (OR THIRD) CHANCES AND NEW ACTS WHILE DISCOVERING AND SHARING A NEW SET OF FIRSTS TOGETHER: FIRST TIME DRIVING ALONG THE COAST TO MALIBU; A FIRST YEAR OF PROFESSIONAL SUCCESSES IN LA; THE FIRST TIME IN YEARS I THOUGHT I COULD POSSIBLY FALL IN LOVE AGAIN.



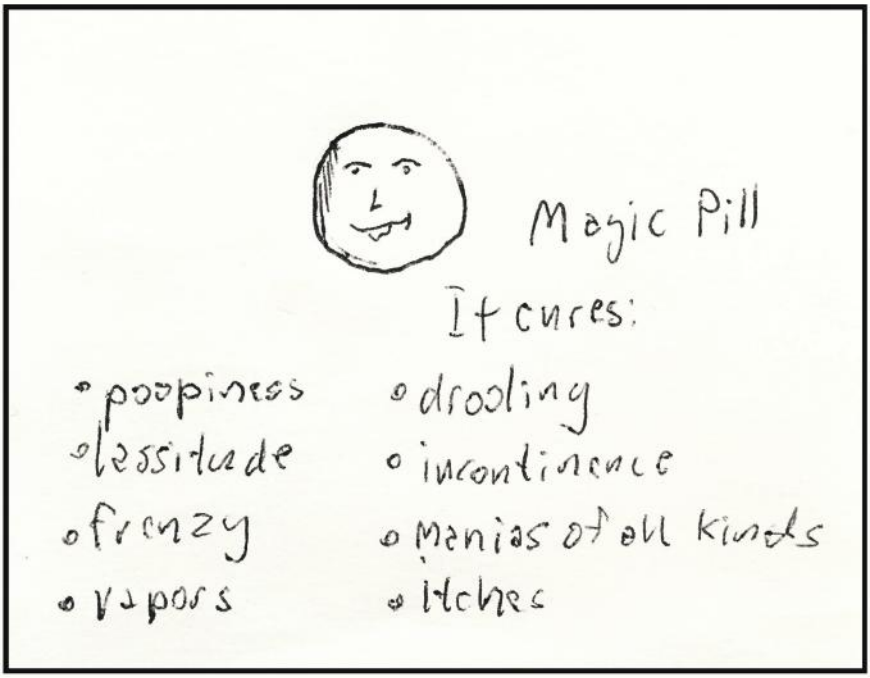
AS I GET CLOSER TO 50, I TEND TO THINK NOT ABOUT THE CHAPTERS IN MY LIFE BUT THE VOLUMES THAT MARK IT. THE FIRST VOLUME WAS MADE UP OF CHAPTERS OF YOUTH, ADVENTURE, AND FOLLY. THE SECOND VOLUME HAS BEEN FILLED WITH CHAPTERS OF SUCCESSES, FAILURES, LOVE, AND LOSS. BUT AS I APPROACH WHAT MIGHT BE MY THIRD VOLUME, I LOOK BACK AND WANT TO OFFER A CLICHÉD PIECE OF ADVICE TO ANYONE STILL GOING THROUGH ALL THEIR FIRST SET OF FIRSTS: THIS IS THE FIRST DAY OF THE REST OF YOUR LIFE, SO DO SOMETHING WITH IT.

YOU'RE ALREADY READING THIS FIRST ISSUE OF FRUITSLICE—GET OUT THERE AND MAKE THE WORLD A MORE COLORFUL, QUEER, SWEET, AND FRUITY PLACE. I'LL BE THERE WITH YOU, READY TO TAKE THAT FIRST STEP TOGETHER BECAUSE I'VE LEARNED HOW SCARY IT CAN BE TO TRY TO DO IT ALONE. AND ISN'T THAT THE BEST PART OF OUR COMMUNITY, KNOWING THAT WE DON'T HAVE TO DO IT ALL ALONE?



ILLUSTRATIONS BY JIM NAWROCKI.

THESE ARE SOME OF THE NOTES JIM WOULD LEAVE FOR ME EVERY DAY, EXAMPLES THAT CREATIVITY CAN TAKE MANY FORMS (I.E. A POET CAN ALSO SKETCH FUNNY CARTOONS; OR AN ACTOR CAN PUT TOGETHER SOME WORDS INTO A COHERENT ESSAY).



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AUDREY ATHENA (SHE/HER) IS A MULTIDISCIPLINARY ARTIST WITH A FOCUS IN ACRYLIC PAINTING AND GRAPHIC DESIGN. BASED OUT OF LA, AUDREY WORKS REGULARLY WITH NEW AND RETURNING CLIENTS TO CREATE A WIDE RANGE OF HAND DRAWN OR DIGITAL COMMISSIONS THAT INCLUDE BRAND LOGOS, ALBUM ART, CLOTHING/MERCH DESIGN, AND MORE. IN ADDITION, SHE CREATES AND SELLS HER PERSONAL ARTWORK UNDER THE NAME, ODDMAT. ODDMAT IS MOST KNOWN FOR ITS LIMITED EDITION RUNS OF HAND-THRIFTED, HAND-PRINTED GRAPHIC TEES. THESE SHIRTS SOLD OUT UPON EVERY RELEASE AND WERE SHIPPED TO MANY LOVELY PEOPLE AROUND THE WORLD. AUDREY ALSO MAKES STICKERS, TOTE BAGS, AND THE OCCASIONAL CERAMIC PIECE TO BE SOLD ON ODDMAT.COM. YOU CAN FIND AUDREY ONLINE ON HER PERSONAL INSTAGRAM, @AUDREYATHENA. HER ART PAGE, @ODDMAT_, AND PORTFOLIO, ODDMAT.COM/, CAN BE FOUND THROUGH HER BIO AS WELL IF YOU ARE INTRIGUED OR NOSY OR INTERESTED IN WORKING WITH HER. OKAY! THANKS FOR READING! BYE!

AIS (SHE/HER) IS A BISEXUAL ARTIST, WRITER, AND ADVOCATE. SHE USED TO ONLY WRITE BAD POETRY ABOUT DEATH. NOW SHE'S SOBER AND SHE LIKES TO DOODLE LITTLE TATTOOS FOR HER FRIENDS AND WRITE ABOUT HOW GLORIOUS LIFE IS.
INSTAGRAM: AISLINNVRUSSELL

AKIVA ISRAEL (SHE/HER), PRISON POET, IS AN ARTIST DOING TIME IN PRISON FOR MEN. SHE IS TRANSGENDER AND BELIEVES THAT, IN A PREVIOUS CYCLE OF INCARNATION, SHE DID WITNESS THE FIRST LIVE PERFORMANCE OF SHAKESPEARE'S 'HAMLET'.

AYANA O'BRIEN (SHE/HER) IS A BLACK QUEER WOMAN FROM ATLANTA (BUT IF YOU KNOW A BIT ABOUT THE CITY, SHE MIGHT DIVULGE SHE'S REALLY FROM THE SUBURBS). ONE OF THE FEW TRUTHS SHE'S DISCOVERED AT 23 IS THAT WRITING HELPS LIFE MAKE A LITTLE MORE SENSE. WITH A FOCUS ON THE MAGIC OF INTERSECTIONAL IDENTITIES, SHE HOPES HER WRITINGS CAN MAKE PEOPLE FEEL A LITTLE MORE AT HOME. YOU CAN FIND OTHER LITTLE BITS BY (OF) HER IN ATTIC SALT (ATTICSALTLMU.COM) AND LA MISCELLANY (LAMISCELLANY.ORG). FIND HER ON INSTAGRAM @AYANAMONET.

ALEENA SHARIF (SHE/HER) WAS BORN IN PAKISTAN AND WENT TO SCHOOL AT FASHION INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY IN NEW YORK. SHE GRADUATED WITH A BFA AND A MINOR IN ART HISTORY. AFTER GRADUATING SHE HAS EXHIBITED IN NEW YORK, LOS ANGELES, LONDON, ITALY, PAKISTAN AS WELL AS MANY VIRTUAL GALLERIES. SHE CURRENTLY CONTINUES HER PRACTICE BETWEEN CALIFORNIA AND PAKISTAN WHERE SHE HOLDS OPEN STUDIES IN HOPE TO CREATE A SAFE SPACE FOR NUDE PAINTINGS TO BE SHOWN.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

CAM REID (THEY/THEM) IS A WRITER, EDUCATOR, THEATER ARTIST, AND NOVICE NATURALIST IN PORTLAND, OREGON. MORE OF THEIR WORK CAN BE FOUND AT WWW.CAM-REID.COM.

CELESTE DEBARDELABEN (SHE/HER) IS A CARTOONIST AND CINEMATOGRAPHER BASED IN LOS ANGELES. SHE SHOT THE FEATURE FILM NARCOSIS AS WELL AS MULTIPLE NARRATIVE SHORTS, DOCUMENTARIES, AND MUSIC VIDEOS. SHE CURRENTLY RUNS THE PRE SHOW DOCUMENTARY PROGRAM AT VIOLET CROWN CINEMAS. YOU CAN FIND LINKS TO HER WORK AS WELL AS SAMPLES OF HER PHOTOGRAPHY AT WWW.CELESTEDEBARDELABEN.COM

COREY NEAR-ANSARI (XE/XEM/XYRS/ANY) IS A TRANS BUTCH LESBIAN ATTENDING LEWIS AND CLARK COLLEGE, STUDYING THEATRE TECHNOLOGY AND DESIGN, RHETORIC AND MEDIA STUDIES, AND GENDER STUDIES. XE HAS A PARTICULAR INTEREST IN STUDYING QUEER HISTORY AND THEORY, COMMUNITY BUILDING, AND THE PRACTICE OF CRAFTS. XE CAN BE FOLLOWED ON INSTAGRAM @APPLE.COREY OR THEIR WORK @APP1ECORE.ARTS

EDIE DARLING (SHE/HER) IS A MULTIMEDIA ARTIST WORKING IN LOS ANGELES. SHE ENJOYS WORKING WITH TEXTURES, ORGANIC MATERIALS, AND BODIES. ART HELPS HER CAPTURE JOY, CHILD'S PLAY, LIMINAL MEMORY, AND UNCONSCIOUS THOUGHT. SHE'S A BIG ADVOCATE OF NON-DOMINANT HAND DRAWING TO LOOSEN UP THE LINE AND DISCOVER UNCONSCIOUS THOUGHTS. GAGA DANCE HELPS, TOO. IN HER DAY JOB, SHE'S IN TRAINING TO BECOME A THERAPIST.

CLIO BARRETT IS AN ASIAN-AMERICAN WRITER PROUDLY BORN AND RAISED IN BROOKLYN, CURRENTLY ATTENDING SCHOOL IN MASSACHUSETTS. SHE GREW UP SURROUNDED BY THEATER WHICH INSPIRED HER LOVE FOR LANGUAGE. SHE WAS A 2023 RECIPIENT OF THE YOUNGARTS MERIT AWARD AND A FINALIST TO BE NYC YOUTH POET LAUREATE. SHE HAS TAKEN PART IN VARIOUS LITERARY PUBLICATIONS INCLUDING NED VIZZINI AND GIRLS WRITE NOW ANTHOLOGIES. SHE HAS BEEN ABLE TO MEET A VARIETY OF INCREDIBLE YOUNG ARTISTS AND MENTORS THROUGH HER WORK WITH URBAN WORD NYC, GIRLS WRITE NOW, AND BROOKLYN FAM. CLIO IS A NEON ORANGE ENTHUSIAST AND A BIG FAN OF STARGAZING, ROAD TRIPS, AND INDONESIAN FOOD. CLIO HAS BEEN PRACTICING USING JOY AS FUEL, USING ALL THAT BRINGS HER DELIGHT TO INSPIRE HER WRITING, EMPOWER HER CREATIVITY, AND GROUND HER IN EVERYDAY BEAUTY. SHE SUGGESTS YOU DO TOO!

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

EMMA STANDERFORD (THEY/THEM) IS A LOS ANGELES BASED PLAYWRIGHT, ACTOR, AND MODEL. A SELF PROCLAIMED "JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES," EMMA FINDS JOY IN THE ACT OF CREATING. EMMA HOLDS A BFA IN MUSICAL THEATER FROM CORNISH COLLEGE OF THE ARTS. THEIR MUSICAL *PART TIME HERO,* WRITTEN IN PARTNERSHIP WITH DAVID VOLPINI III, WAS WORKSHOPPED AND READ AT CCA IN SEATTLE, WA. EMMA'S POETRY HAS BEEN PUBLISHED IN *T4T: A COLLABORATIVE STUDY,* AND EDITIONS STUDIO'S *POEMS IN THE MAIL.*

GRANT BRUMAGE-HELLER IS A NON-BINARY OIL PAINTER/WRITER BORN AND RAISED IN DENVER, COLORADO. THEY PRESENTLY LIVE IN LONG BEACH, CA WITH THEIR BORDER COLLIE, CELINE. THEY CAN BE FOUND UNDER @JUSTKANGAROOCOURT ON INSTAGRAM FOR ALL INFORMATION REGARDING PRESENT AND FUTURE WORKS OF ART AND FICTION.

GILLIAN RULE (SHE/HER) IS A BISEXUAL (40/60) BI-COASTAL (NY/LA) BOHEMIAN (ANNOYING), WITH A 9-5 JOB (HARDWORKING). SHE IS SO HONORED AND EXCITED TO BE A PART OF FRUITSLICE'S INAUGURAL EDITION! U CAN FIND MORE ON INSTAGRAM @GILLIANRULE

HOLLY PAYNE-STRANGE (SHE/HER) IS A NOVELIST, POET AND PODCAST CREATOR. HER WRITING HAS BEEN LAUDED BY *USA TODAY, LA WEEKLY,* AND *THE NEW YORK TIMES.* ADDITIONALLY, SHE'S GIVEN TALKS ON PODCAST CREATION AT FORDHAM UNIVERSITY AND THE PLAYER'S CLUB. HER POETRY HAS BEEN PUBLISHED BY VARIOUS GROUPS INCLUDING *REDDOOR, DOOR IS A JAR MAGAZINE, CALL ME [BRACKETS],* AND *QUAIL BELL MAGAZINE.* SHE WOULD LIKE TO THANK HER WIFE FOR ALL HER SUPPORT.

HOLLY RENSHAW (SHE/HER) IS A GENDER QUEER PHOTOGRAPHER AND HIGHSCHOOL STUDENT IN PROVO, UTAH. CURRENTLY, THEY ENJOY TEASING THEIR FRIENDS, TAKING ADHD MEDICATION, AND GETTING DOUSED IN FAKE BLOOD. AS A CHILD, HOLLY WAS A CHILD ACTOR STARRING AS TINY TIM IN A PRODUCTION OF *A CHRISTMAS CAROL.* THEY CAN BE FOUND @THEPOISONEDHOLLY ON INSTAGRAM.

HILARY BUFFUM (SHE/THEY) IS A BAY AREA THEATRE ARTIST TURNED WRITER WHO GREW UP ON RAMAYTUSH OHLONE LAND, COLONIALLY KNOWN AS SAN FRANCISCO. THEY STARTED WRITING POETRY YEARS AGO IN THE CORNERS OF JOURNALS AS A WAY TO PROCESS LIFE AND DEATH AND GRIEF AND IDENTITY. IN THE LAST FEW YEARS THEY HAVE BEGUN TO SHARE THESE PIECES WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY AND NOW YOU.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

JAN EDWARDS HEMMING'S (SHE/HER) POETRY AND ESSAYS HAVE APPEARED OR ARE FORTHCOMING IN *KIND OF A HURRICANE PRESS, MANTIS, EMERGE MAGAZINE, FAIL BETTER, GINGERBREAD HOUSE LITERARY MAGAZINE, SCALAWAG, THE MACKINAC, MCSWEENEY'S INTERNET TENDENCY, THE RIO GRANDE REVIEW, LOS ANGELES REVIEW OF BOOKS* BLOG, AND *BLACK FOX LITERARY MAGAZINE;* AND HER POEMS "BIRD" AND "OVEN" WERE EACH NOMINATED FOR A PUSHCART PRIZE. SHE HOLDS AN MFA IN POETRY FROM NYU AND A BA IN ENGLISH FROM LSU, HAS BEEN AWARDED RESIDENCIES FROM VIRGINIA CENTER FOR CREATIVE ARTS AND VERMONT STUDIO CENTER, AND CO-EDITED THE SAINTS & SINNERS LITERARY FESTIVAL 2023 POETRY ANTHOLOGY. SHE LIVES IN NEW ORLEANS.

JACK CARIAD LEON (HE/HIM) IS A TRANSGENDER WRITER AND VISUAL ARTIST BASED IN BRISBANE, AUSTRALIA. A FAN OF THE AVANT-GARDE, HE COLLECTS DOLLS AND ART BOOKS OF CERTAIN GENRES. HE ALSO HAS A DEEP INTEREST IN THE HISTORY AND LORE OF FLOWERS.

JULIAN CURRENTS (THEY/THEM) IS A DISABLED TRANS ARTIST BORN AND RAISED IN KEY WEST, FLORIDA. CURRENTLY WORKING AS A POSTDOCTORAL TEACHING FELLOW AT A UNIVERSITY IN ATLANTA, THEIR RECENT WORK EXPLORES IDEAS OF EPIGENETICS, NEURODIVERGENT QUEER TRAUMA, AND COLLAPSING TIME IN RELATION TO THEIR PARENTS' POSTWAR AMERICAN CHILDHOODS.

JC ALFIER'S (THEY/THEM) MOST RECENT BOOK OF POETRY, *THE SHADOW FIELD,* WAS PUBLISHED BY LOUISIANA LITERATURE PRESS (2020). JOURNAL CREDITS INCLUDE THE *EMERSON REVIEW, FAULTLINE, NEW YORK QUARTERLY, NOTRE DAME REVIEW, PENN REVIEW, SOUTHERN POETRY REVIEW,* AND *VASSAR REVIEW.* THEY ARE ALSO A COLLAGE AND DOUBLE-EXPOSURE ARTIST.

JASON WAYNE WONG (HE/HIM) IS A GAY ACTOR AND PERFORMER BASED IN WEST HOLLYWOOD. AFTER LOSING HIS HUSBAND OF 15 YEARS, POET AND WRITER JIM NAWROCKI, TO CANCER, JASON MANAGED TO FIND A PUBLISHER FOR A COLLECTION OF JIM'S WORK, TITLED *HOUSE FIRE,* AS AN ACT OF LOVE AND LEGACY. ON THE STAGES (AND SCREENS) OF SAN FRANCISCO AND THE BAY AREA, JASON WORKED AS A PERFORMER AND DESIGNER FOR 20 YEARS. HE HAS SINCE LIVED IN VANCOUVER AND IS NOW IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA, STARTING A NEW CHAPTER OF HIS LIFE AS AN ACTOR. IN ADDITION TO APPEARING IN SHOWS LIKE THE *FLIGHT ATTENDANT, THIS IS US,* AND *I THINK YOU SHOULD LEAVE WITH TIM ROBINSON,* JASON CAN BE SEEN IN LGBTQ+ SERIES LIKE *FOR YEARS TO COME, THE DISAPPOINTMENTS,* AND *NOT SO STRAIGHT IN SILVER LAKE.* HE CAN BE FOUND @RETROGRADEJASON ON INSTAGRAM.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

JESSICA HINDS IS AN AWARD-WINNING WRITER AND CREATOR OF MEDITATIVE WRITING. SHE LIVES IN NYC WITH HER CATS AMELIA MEWHEART AND FRIDA CATLO. MEDITATIVEWRITRING.ORG

JILL YOUNG (THEY/SHE) HAS A BFA IN ACTING AND A CERTIFICATE IN CREATIVE WRITING FROM UT AUSTIN. THEY HAVE REFINED THEIR CREATIVE VOICE BY STUDYING SKETCH, IMPROV, AND CLOWNING AT THE SECOND CITY AND THE IDIOT WORKSHOP. JILL IS AN ACTIVE MEMBER OF FLUXUS-INSPIRED PERFORMANCE TROUPE THE NONSEMBLE. JILL CO-WROTE AND STARRED IN THE FEATURE *DEAR LEO* (2020) WHICH PREMIERED AT THE INSIDE OUT: TORONTO LGBTQ+ FILM FESTIVAL. THEY DEBUTED THEIR COMEDIC SOLO SHOW IN A SOLD-OUT RUN AT THE 2023 HOLLYWOOD FRINGE FESTIVAL, AND ARE BRINGING THIS SHOW TO LA SOLOFEST FEBRUARY 16TH AND EDINBURGH FRINGE FESTIVAL IN 2024. FOLLOW @JILLISYOUNG FOR UPDATES AND SHOWS!

JESS ALBA (SHE/HER) FOR MORE CREATIVE ENDEAVORS @ JESSALBA ON INSTAGRAM OR LISTEN TO HER PODCAST THIS, THAT, & EVERYTHING ELSE FOR GOOFY CHIT CHAT.

KATE E. LORE IS AN AWARD-WINNING CREATIVE WRITER, ARTIST, AND FREELANCE CREATOR. KATE IS OPENLY QUEER, WITH THE PREFERRED PRONOUNS SHE/THEY. KATE IS LEGALLY NEURODIVERGENT WITH DIAGNOSED AUTISM, AND ADHD. BORN TO A SINGLE WIDOWED MOTHER AND RAISED IN A LOW-INCOME HOUSEHOLD KATE IS THE YOUNGEST OF FOUR, THE SECOND TO GRADUATE HIGH SCHOOL, FIRST BACHELOR'S DEGREE, AND THE FIRST MFA IN THE FAMILY. KATE E. LORE HAS HAD MANY PUBLICATIONS FOR FICTION, CREATIVE NONFICTION, AND GRAPHIC NARRATIVE FEATURED IN VARIOUS LITERARY MAGAZINES INCLUDING *LONGRIDGE REVIEW, BENDING GENRES, DOOR IS A JAR,* SOON TO INCLUDE *BLACK WARRIOR REVIEW AND UNDER THE GUM TREE.* A JACK-OF-ALL-TRADES KATE SPLITS THEIR TIME BETWEEN FICTION AND NONFICTION, SCREENPLAYS, FLASH PROSE, FULL-LENGTH NOVELS, PAINTING, AND COMICS. KATE STRIVES TO APPRECIATE THE SMALL THINGS IN LIFE BUT HAS BEEN KNOWN TO THROW DOWN HARD AT AN EDM RAVE IF THE PLACE IS WELL-LIT.

KELSEY ROSE ROOTENBERG (SHE/HER) IS A QUEER ACTRESS AND WRITER FROM STUDIO CITY, CALIFORNIA. HER FAVORITE FOOD IS TRAIL MIX.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

LINNEA HEINY (SHE/HER) IS CURRENTLY A SOPHOMORE IN HIGH SCHOOL, AND HAS BEEN WRITING SINCE LITERACY. HER FAVORITE GENRES ARE HORROR AND MYSTERY, ALTHOUGH SHE HAS A SOFT SPOT FOR POETRY. SHE PLANS TO GRADUATE IN 2026 AND GO TO COLLEGE FOR JOURNALISM.

LEXI MCDONALD (THEY/SHE) IS A QUEER POET FROM CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA WHO WRITES TO MAKE PEACE WITH THEIR MEMORIES AND EXPLORE THE THREADS THAT CONNECT US TO EACH OTHER. SHE IS AN MFA CANDIDATE IN POETRY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE, KNOXVILLE AND SERVES AS ASSISTANT POETRY EDITOR FOR UT'S LITERARY JOURNAL, *GRIST.* LEXI'S WORK APPEARS IN *RIVERCRAFT, THE SANCTUARY,* AND *ESSAY LIT* MAGAZINES, AMONG OTHERS. ADDITIONALLY, THEY WERE A FINALIST FOR THE 2022 ERIK KIRKLAND PRIZE FOR CREATIVE NONFICTION.

MARISCA PICHETTE (SHE/THEY) IS A QUEER AUTHOR BASED IN MASSACHUSETTS, ON POCUMTUCK AND ABENAKI LAND. MORE OF HER WORK APPEARS IN *DOOR IS A JAR, ROOM MAGAZINE, FLASH FICTION ONLINE, NECESSARY FICTION, PLENITUDE MAGAZINE,* AND OTHERS. SHE IS THE FLASH WINNER OF THE 2022 F(R)ICTION SPRING LITERARY CONTEST AND HAS BEEN NOMINATED FOR THE BEST OF THE NET, PUSHCART, UTOPIA, AND DWARF STARS AWARDS. THEIR DEBUT POETRY COLLECTION, *RIVERS IN YOUR SKIN, SIRENS IN YOUR HAIR,* IS OUT NOW FROM ANDROID PRESS. FIND THEM ON TWITTER AS @MARISCAPICHETTE, INSTAGRAM AS @MARISCA_WRITE, AND BLUESKY AS @MARISCA.BSKY.SOCIAL.

MATTHAN SLITH (HE/THEY) IS A NONBINARY MASCULINE INDIVIDUAL HAPPILY LIVING WITH THEIR NONBINARY MASCULINE PARTNER. BY DAY THEY WORK AS A COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH COUNSELOR WHO SPECIALIZES IN WORKING WITH QUEER AND NEURODIVERGENT POPULATIONS. THEY HAVE A PASSION FOR WRITING AND POETRY, ESPECIALLY IN BREATHING LIFE INTO THE WORLDS AND CHARACTERS IN THEIR HEAD.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

MAREN DETLEFS (THEY/THEM) IS A WRITER, ARTIST, STUDENT, AND LOVER OF ALL THINGS LITERARY. THEIR GOAL IS TO WRITE NOVELS THAT BRING LGBTQ+ CHARACTERS AND VOICES TO THE FOREFRONT OF FANTASY AND SCI-FI. THEY HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED IN *LOOKOUT SANTA CRUZ,* WERE A GUEST ON "THE NEXT BEST-SELLER" PODCAST AND RECEIVED SCHOLASTIC ART AND WRITING AWARDS IN NOVEL WRITING AND POETRY. THEY ARE CURRENTLY PURSUING A CREATIVE WRITING BFA AT EMERSON COLLEGE IN BOSTON, MA.

MEGAN SWENSON (SHE/HER) WAS RAISED IN CHANDLER, ARIZONA AND CURRENTLY LIVES IN KAMLOOPS, BRITISH COLUMBIA WITH HER HUSBAND AND THEIR TWO ORANGE TABBIES, LEO AND MANGO. AS A BISEXUAL WOMAN, SOBER PERSON, AND LEO'S EMOTIONAL SUPPORT HUMAN, MEGAN'S INTERESTS IN FICTION INCLUDE QUEERNESS, ADDICTION & RECOVERY, FAMILY NARRATIVES, AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA, AND SHE OFTEN LIKES TO FEATURE FELINE CHARACTERS IN HER STORIES. (SHE'S CURRENTLY WORKING ON A NOVEL WITH AN ETERNAL BEING INCARNATED AS A CALICO CAT.) SHE STUDIED CREATIVE WRITING AND ANTHROPOLOGY AT THE UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO BOULDER AND GOT HER MFA IN FICTION FROM NEW YORK UNIVERSITY IN 2018.

MICHELLE PLOTKIN (SHE/HER) IS AN ARTIST, PSYCHOTHERAPIST, AND ART THERAPIST, TRYING TO FIND HER WAY BACK TO THE STUDIO. SHE USES HER ART PRACTICE AS A WAY TO DIGEST AND REFLECT ON THERAPEUTIC CONTENT, EXPLORE CLINICAL THEMES, CRITIQUE AND SOMETIMES POKE FUN AT OVERSIMPLIFIED WAYS OF UNDERSTANDING AND DIAGNOSING THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE. MICHELLE'S PROCESS INVOLVES ABSTRACTING IMAGERY THROUGH A MULTI-LAYERED PROCESS, WITH THE INTENTION OF CREATING SPACE FOR MANY MEANINGS AND REALITIES TO CO-EXIST AT ONCE. MICHELLE HAS ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED IN EXPLORING NUANCE AND AESTHETIC AMBIGUITY AS A MEANS OF CHALLENGING THE HUMAN DESIRE FOR CONTROL AND INCLINATION TOWARDS ESSENTIALISM. SHE HOPES TO USE ART TO CONFUSE AND SURPRISE VIEWERS, TO RAISE QUESTIONS ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ART AND MEANING MAKING, TO DISCOVER NEW PARTS OF SELF, AND TO EXPLORE THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MIND, BODY, AND AESTHETIC.

MILO PINA (THEY/THEM) IS PASSIONATE ABOUT VIDEO GAMES AND HOPES TO WORK FOR RIOT SOMEDAY!

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

HELLO MY NAME IS MINDY RENSHAW. ENCOURAGED AND SUPPORTED BY MY DAUGHTERS, SISTERS, AND FATHER WHO ARE EACH BRILLIANT AND INSPIRING ARTISTS, I'M CURRENTLY A YOUTUBE TUTORIAL WATERCOLOR STUDENT. LIVING NEAR SLC, UTAH, I'M PASSIONATE ABOUT MY FAMILY, MY DUOLINGO STREAK, AND DECONSTRUCTING RELIGIOUS INDOCTRINATION. I CAN'T RESIST HUNTING THROUGH THRIFT STORE TREASURES OR A SPIRITED PICKLEBALL MATCH. I BELIEVE IN ART, LIFE LONG LEARNING, PODCASTS, AND THERAPY. I HOPE TO IMPROVE AS AN ARTIST, CONTINUE TO LEARN FROM EVERYONE I MEET, AND BE A GOOD FRIEND TO ALL.

NICKY WITTKOPF (THEY/SHE) IS A SLAYER, COP HATER, AND GAY LOVER FROM LA, CA. SHE LOVES TO BULLY HER CUSTOMERS (CHILDREY/CHLOE) AND FLIRT WITH THE BESTIES. IG: NICKYWTT

RAVEN BENNETT-BURNS (SHE/HER) IS A COMIC ARTIST LIVING IN OXNARD, CA. AFTER GRADUATING FROM CSUF IN 2020, SHE BEGAN PUBLISHING ZINES AND WRITING COMICS ABOUT LESBIAN IDENTITY AND USING FICTION AS A WAY TO PROCESS DIFFICULT SUBJECTS. SHE ALSO EDITS *QUEER SIGNAL,* AN LGBTQ NEWSLETTER FOR THE VENTURA COUNTY AREA.

RIZWAN AKHTAR'S DEBUT COLLECTION OF POEMS *LAHORE, I AM COMING* (2017) IS PUBLISHED BY PUNJAB UNIVERSITY PRESS. HE HAS PUBLISHED POEMS IN WELL-ESTABLISHED POETRY MAGAZINES IN THE UK, THE US, INDIA, CANADA, AND NEW ZEALAND. HE WAS A PART OF THE WORKSHOP ON POETRY WITH DEREK WALCOTT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX IN 2010.

ROSIE STEINER (THEY/SHE) IS A POET BASED IN MASSACHUSETTS LOOKING TO CARVE A PLACE FOR SENTIMENTALITY AND KINDNESS. PASSIONATE ABOUT SELF-EXPRESSION IN POETRY AND VISUAL ARTS, THEY TACKLE BOTH WORK AND PLAY WITH CREATIVITY. IN THEIR ATTEMPT TO USE THE RIGHT LABELS, THEY'VE LEARNED TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE COMPLEXITY OF A LIFE THAT FINDS WAYS TO EXIST OUTSIDE STANDARD EXPECTATIONS. THEIR NEW GOAL IS TO LIVE FLUIDLY AND BE TRUE TO THEIR NEEDS. THOUGH IT'S BEEN YEARS SINCE THEY'VE MADE A PLACE FOR THEMSELVES IN THE QUEER COMMUNITY, THEIR JOURNEY HAS BARELY BEGUN, AND THEY ARE LOOKING TOWARDS A HOPEFUL FUTURE. OUTSIDE OF WRITING, ROSIE LIKES TO RE-CONSUME CHILDHOOD MEDIA AND REVISIT THE STORIES THAT MADE THEM WHO THEY ARE TODAY WITH A NEW LENS—MARRYING THE NOSTALGIA OF THEIR CHILDHOOD WITH THE FREEDOM OF GROWING UP.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

HI! MY NAME IS SOPHIE HALL (THEY/THEM) I LOVE ART AND THEATER AND I LOVE BEING A LESBIAN! I HOPE YOU ENJOY. @ SOPHLIBBY

RONNA MAGY (SHE/HER) IS A POET AND MEMOIRIST WHO GREW UP IN DETROIT AND NOW CALLS LOS ANGELES HOME. HER POEMS HAVE APPEARED OR ARE FORTHCOMING IN: *RISE UP REVIEW, THE LOS ANGELES PRESS, WILD CRONE WISDOM, POETRY SUPER HIGHWAY, STONE POETRY QUARTERLY, PERSIMMON TREE, WRITING IN A WOMAN'S VOICE,* AND *WRITERS RESIST.* IN 2023 RONNA STUDIED POETRY AT THE NAPA VALLEY WRITERS CONFERENCE. DURING THE SAME YEAR, SHE COORDINATED READINGS OF OLDER QUEER WOMEN POETS FOR BOTH THE CIRCA QUEER HISTORIES AND OUTWRITE FESTIVALS. SHE'S A RETIRED TEXTBOOK WRITER AND INSTRUCTOR OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE.

ROSIE D'ERCOLE (SHE/HER) HAS WORKED IN CREATIVE INDUSTRIES FOR OVER TEN YEARS, SHE IS AN DEDICATED WRITER WHO USES HER POETRY PRIMARILY TO EXPRESS PRECISE MOMENTS IN TIME. HER WORK HAS MOST RECENTLY APPEARED IN BOTH *CURIO CABINET* AND *PARTIALLY SHY* AND SHE IS CURRENTLY EDITING HER FIRST ANTHOLOGY *'THE PINK ROOM'.* FIND HER ON INSTAGRAM @ROSIE_ISABELLA_JEAN_

SARA CARPENTER (SHE/HER) IS A WRITER AND INDEPENDENT FILMMAKER LIVING IN LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA. SHE HAS NEVER HELD A CUP OF COFFEE WITHOUT SPILLING SOME. DESPITE HER SHORTCOMINGS, SHE REMAINS OPTIMISTIC AND AVERAGES FIVE CUPS A DAY.

SARA CHILDREY (THEY/THEM) IS A QUEER NON-BINARY PERFORMER AND WRITER IN LOS ANGELES. RIGHT NOW, THEY LOVE PUTTING BOWS IN THEIR HAIR, BLACK SWEATPANTS, AND CINNAMON ON CAPPUCCINOS. CHILDREY HAS PREVIOUSLY SELF-PUBLISHED TWO POETRY ZINES: *CIGARETTE SOUP* AND *POEMS ABOUT SARA,* AND WRITTEN THE SHORT FILM, *CHOREOGRAPHING CAMILLE.* THEIR WORK IS REFLECTIVE OF THEIR QUEERNESS, JOURNEY WITH MENTAL HEALTH, AND BEING OBSESSED WITH THEIR FRIENDS. SHOUT OUT CHLOE FOR BEING THEIR MUSE AND ALSO BEST BOSS EVER. THEY CAN BE FOUND ON INSTAGRAM @ SARACHILDREY.

TAYLOR MICHAEL SIMMONS (HE/HIM) IS A LATE-TWENTY-SOMETHING FILMMAKER AND BARISTA WHO LIKES LAYING DOWN IN THE SHOWER AND LONG WALKS ON THE BEACH.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

SUSANNE SALEHI (SHE/THEY) IS A QUEER PRE-PUBLISHED WRITER OF IRANIAN DESCENT AND FORMER MEMPHIAN RESIDING IN THE ATLANTA SUBURBS WITH THEIR PARTNER AND TWO CATS. SHE'S A TAURUS, STICKER COLLECTOR, PUZZLE FIEND, AND ALL AROUND COZY CREATURE WHO SPENDS HER FREE TIME READING, CROSS STITCHING, AND GARDENING. THEIR DO-FOR-DOLLARS WORK IS IN THE NONPROFIT FIELD AND THEY'RE AN MFA STUDENT AT EMERSON COLLEGE, BUSY WRITING THE EPIC SAPPHIC HEROES THEY'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO SEE.

TRUXTON IVORY (THEY/THEM) IS AN ACTOR, WRITER AND MUSICIAN CURRENTLY BASED IN SEATTLE, WASHINGTON. IN THEIR FREETIME, THEY ENJOY PONDERING HOW GOD MANIFESTS THROUGH ACTS OF KINDNESS, COLLECTING CD'S AND OTHER FORMS OF PHYSICAL MEDIA (A CURRENT INTEREST) AND ALSO JUICING CITRUS. ASK THEM ABOUT AARON. THEY ARE VERY GRATEFUL TO BE A PART OF THE FIRST PUBLICATION OF THE HOTTEST QUEER MAGAZINE OF THE 21ST CENTURY!
IG: @TIGEREYETRUXTON

WILLA COLLEARY (SHE/HER) IS A WRITER AND THEATER ARTIST FROM LOS ANGELES, CURRENTLY LIVING IN CHICAGO. SHE IS A CALIFORNIA ARTS SCHOLAR AND THE RECIPIENT OF THE SECOND ANNUAL ENOUGH: PLAYS TO END GUN VIOLENCE AWARD. BETWEEN HER CLASSES COLLEARY WRITES AND DEVISES ORIGINAL THEATER, REPS IN HER STUDENT GOVERNMENT, ORGANIZES WITH THE SUNRISE MOVEMENT, AND SKULKS AROUND BREAKFAST ESTABLISHMENTS. SHE USES ABSURDISM AND RHYTHM TO WRITE HER PLAYS, WHICH ARE USUALLY ABOUT SOMETHING VIOLENT. IN HER POETRY, SHE LIKES TO WRITE ABOUT PLACES.

ZENIA DEHAVEN (THEY/THEM) IS AN MFA STUDENT IN THE POPULAR FICTION WRITING AND PUBLISHING PROGRAM AT EMERSON COLLEGE. THEY PRIMARILY WRITE FANTASY WITH THE GOAL TO INCORPORATE DIVERSE CHARACTERS FROM HISTORICALLY UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS. WHEN THEY'RE NOT WRITING, THEY ENJOY GROUP EXERCISE CLASSES, DRAWING, AND PLAYING VIDEO GAMES. THEY LIVE IN THE WASHINGTON, DC AREA WITH THEIR FAMILY AND TWO DOGS.

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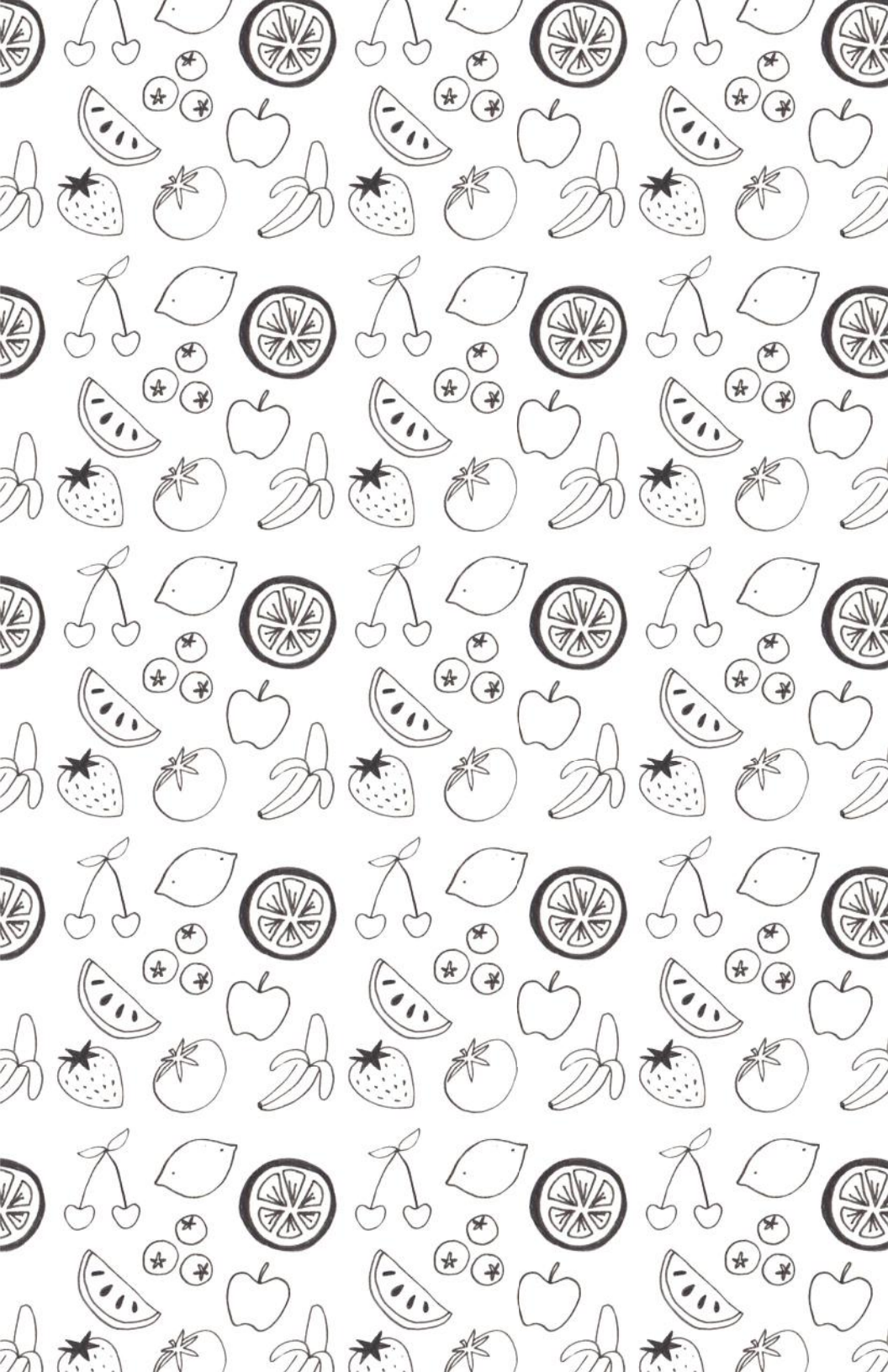


SOCIAL MEDIA, PUBLIC RELATIONS, LAYOUT & DESIGN

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WEBSITE DESIGN & LOGISTICS



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