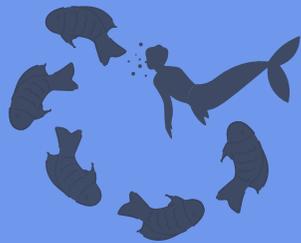




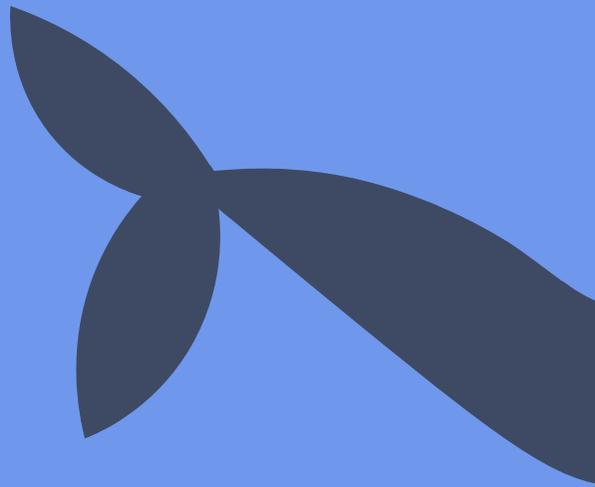
MAKE /  
BELIEVE



Let's play



**pretend.**



# editorial

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## About

**Caustic Frolic** is a student-run interdisciplinary journal that publishes fiction, nonfiction, poetry, art, and digital/mixed media. We seek work that pushes the limits of genre, that dwells in the unexpected. We publish on a semiannual basis, collecting submissions from contributors around the globe.

## Letter from the editor

Dear readers, contributors, and staff,

I'm thinking about Sondheim's lyric, *Look, I made a hat where there never was a hat*. I'm thinking about us. Look at what we made. Look at what we *make*. Stories and poems and art and belief. Breakfast and friends and plans and belief. We are artists, always making, even when it looks different. When making looks unproductive, unorganized, unexciting, unimportant. When it looks like rest. I'm encouraged by the works in this book, the space they give us to both process and play. And I'm grateful for your belief in stories and art. Some themes explored in these pieces may be difficult for some readers. Take care of yourself if you decide to enter in. And know that on the days it's hard to believe, you can always make it. In many ways, you already are. <3 G



caustic  
FROLIC



## Regarding My Role in Poetry

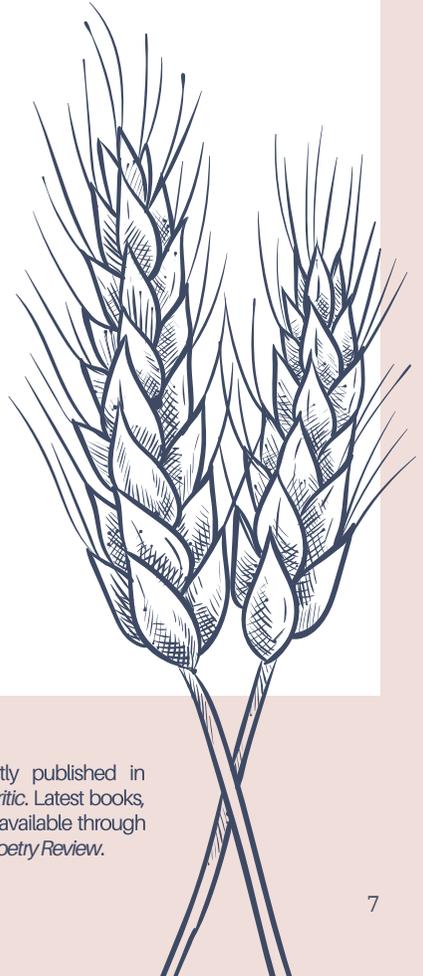
It's all make-believe, I assure you.  
From the gut? No, that's not poetry,  
that's bile.  
From the heart?  
My heart's a two-lane highway for blood,  
nothing more.

I invent people  
and I throw them into  
made-up situations.  
It's my head that's doing it.  
It gets no kudos  
but it doesn't complain.

I hear it all the time:  
how excruciating that must  
have been for you—  
your honesty is estimable—  
I'm surprised you can  
bear to dip one toe in the  
Atlantic Ocean ever again.

Meanwhile,  
I write this thing  
about a kid who falls  
into a threshing machine.

Do you miss him?  
I hear from someone.  
They don't get it.  
It's not a real kid.  
But I'm definitely the blade.



**John Grey** is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Sheepshead Review*, *Poetry Salzburg Review* and *Hollins Critic*. Latest books, "Leaves On Pages" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Lana Turner* and *International Poetry Review*.

# Pubescent Girls Fall in Love with Water Ballet

Like a lover's touch  
we've yet to imagine—  
the pool's warm water glides  
beneath our necks,  
slides along our arms, brushes  
our downy-haired thighs,  
our feet flutter kicking  
just enough to keep us afloat.

You and I,  
best friends,  
partners in a summer swim class,  
unafraid  
to submerge ourselves,  
to innocently spread our legs  
into a V shape above the waterline,  
slip into our favorite move—  
the rotating sea-plank.

Floating, face-up,  
head to feet,  
you grab my ankles,  
pull me forward—  
as your body slips below mine  
I pass over you, then catch  
your ankles, guide  
your body  
over mine.

Again, and again  
we move over and under—  
only a sliver of water between us,  
only ankles and palms touching—

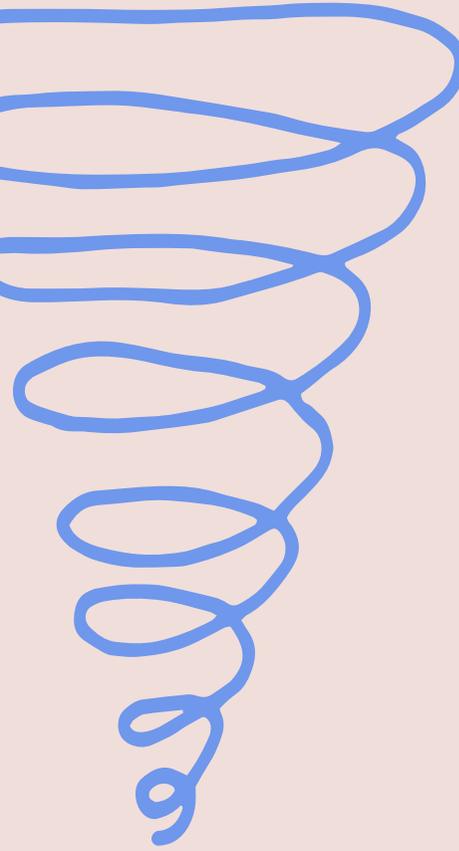


Initiates of intimacy,  
that summer  
we discover the heat of boys'  
lips touching ours,  
fumbling fingers  
awakening self-consciousness,  
compelling us to measure  
breasts, calculate each other's  
hips-to-tits ratio.

Never do we anticipate  
how years will slide one  
into another, how  
we will glide past one another  
—through  
colleges,  
careers,  
kids—  
how so many  
men will pull us apart,  
pass over us—  
how our bond born from water,  
a mooring of boat and anchor,  
will link us always  
—palms open

**Merna Dyer Skinner** is a communications consultant and descendant of Quaker martyr Mary Barrett Dyer. Current and forthcoming poems appear in *The Baltimore Review*, *Quartet*, *The Ekphrastic Review*, *Sulphur Surrealist Jungle* (Featured Poet), among other journals, and three anthologies. Her chapbook, *A Brief History of Two Aprons*, was published in 2016 by Finishing Line Press. Merna is an alumna of Community of Writers and holds an MA in Communication Studies from Emerson College. She's lived in six U.S. states and traveled to five continents.

## Fujita 5



My father used to warn me  
about tornado-people—  
those addicted to breaking  
precious things. He said  
they are sometimes unaware  
but sometimes all-knowing.  
They'll bury anyone in their path.

I remember, so young,  
one coming, a tornado  
from the east, screaming  
higher-pitched than the sirens.  
My mother took me down  
to the basement, and we listened,  
my bladder full as it approached,

but I knew not to move until  
we heard dishes breaking, a foot  
through the glass coffee table,  
the roaring of a man's voice  
several decibels above tolerable.  
My mom held me close, phone  
clutched in hand, ready to call

more sirens to our home.  
In those flickering minutes  
I imagined her clicking two  
ruby-heeled slippers together,  
me donning my lion costume,  
us fleeing down golden bricks  
to the Emerald City, but did you know

the Wizard of Oz is also an asshole,  
and I'm not the lion; I'm Elphaba, and  
—spoiler alert—she is the wizard's  
daughter, straddling a broom  
in the western sky, shepherding  
monkeys, defying his gravity.  
And he calls her wicked

as he waves a frying pan  
that's grown like a wand  
from his arm. I'm only saying  
this to tell you some of us  
are born from evil, because  
you see only what's made,  
not what it's made from.

**Lara Hamidi-Ismert** is an Assistant Professor of Mathematics at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Prescott, Arizona. Her publications appear in *Communications in Mathematical Physics* and *New York Journal of Math*. In 2019, Lara earned a PhD in mathematics from the University of Nebraska after earning a BA in creative writing and a BS in mathematics from Pittsburg State University in Kansas. When she's not researching quantum mechanics, she enjoys writing poetry and short fiction, acting in theatre productions, hiking with her husband, and scooping her four cats' litter boxes.





# RIVER RENTALS

**Madeline Hof** is a writer from Falls Church, Virginia. She is currently completing a master's at New York University in XE.

I let the sign say River Rentals  
it didn't make sense, we were nowhere near water  
who would rent anything river-needed that far away?  
I knew it didn't make sense, but it didn't matter to me  
I was in my shapeshifting home by the river  
the people inside I made and loved  
or sometimes they made me

But the love stayed regardless and in that home, no one hurt  
we'd wake early in the mornings and eat like queens  
at night, we'd sit by the fire  
reading books both dog-eared and yellowed  
we did as we pleased and came as we were  
Joni Mitchell sang sad songs from the stereo  
and we sang along only in irony

It was a one-dimensional dream, but it made me happy  
I could sit and smoke and think and be  
by the river  
at night it was the only sign aglow  
the church to the right, River Rentals to the left  
as far as I could see down Port

One day I told him about the river  
invited him into my home  
*I think that's an N, not a V*  
he wasn't wrong  
I'd known I was mistaken, but I hadn't known what was right  
something about the confirmation ruined it for me  
he kicked me out of my house  
unknowingly, easily, with a laugh in his throat  
that river never flowed again

# Updates Are Crucial to Our Survival

the birds from yesterday  
the ones living in the skull  
are gone  
beaks up, fuzz all over their spring bodies,  
they must have learned how to fly  
overnight

how does a thing like that happen  
how does one, learn to fly and then, simply do

i hope they are happy  
i hope the start of their spring lives lasts  
as long as it is supposed to

maybe they will come back  
maybe, but not today

❖ ❖ ❖

they are back  
one long night, i looked it up  
i asked my dad  
he said, *barn swallows are all i know, but*  
and he was right  
spring bodies, back in the nest, back to their mother  
keeping them  
warm

how jealous,  
in my own spring body  
in my own night lasting  
days

**Haley L. Johannesen** is a graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop where she studied poetry. She lives in Iowa City, Iowa with her husband and two cats. She is a high school English teacher and an avid reader. Her favorite book of 2021 is *Nightbitch* by Rachel Yoder.



## Sphinxed

Did you hear  
about the sphinx  
in the high school basement?  
She says she's been  
collecting dust among gym mats  
and second place tennis trophies for  
the past three millennia.

That might be why she's kind  
of a bitch.  
It must suck to eat rats  
and listen to high schoolers  
whine and wane  
through the tail end of puberty  
while blazing Knowledge  
of the Olde Gods  
and their Scriptures  
burns through your skull.  
Can you, like,  
imagine?

If you go down the stairs, take a sharp  
left—  
she'll be there, waiting for you.  
If you answer her  
questions,  
she'll answer you.

one who are you  
two who am I  
three

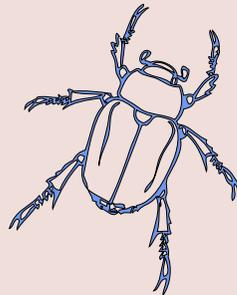
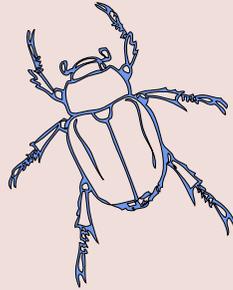
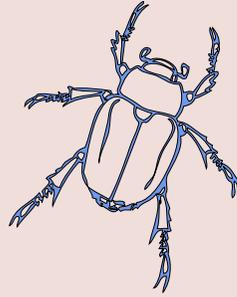
I've never made it to three.  
She always bites at two,  
sometimes one. But

I heard from dani who  
who heard from emma who heard from  
sarah who heard  
from jenni  
who heard from emily  
that her answers  
will make you see that  
which cannot be seen.  
You'll fall down a rabbit  
hole and tunnel  
through velvet,  
crushing Junebugs all  
the while and the world  
will turn golden  
green, just for a second.  
Or at least

that's what emily said  
but who knows if we should  
trust her.  
o my god did u  
hear what she did  
last weekend?

Anyway.

Beware of the sphinx,  
O her claws!  
O her teeth!  
The bite mark on my arm  
is turning  
golden green,  
it leaks  
velvet pus  
and attracts  
buzzing Junebugs.



**Mary Warner** graduated from Hobart and William Smith Colleges with a BA in English in May 2021. While an undergraduate student, she received the colleges' Susan Kranzler Scibilia '68 Memorial Prize for fiction writing. She is currently pursuing her MA in Professional Writing at Carnegie Mellon University.

## Arise

She stands alone in a field,  
tan prairie grass tinged with  
red stretching to the rolling hills.

In one hand, a seed.

In the other, an ocean.

Her feet, bare, baked into  
the soil, loaves of bread  
rising from the earth,  
cresting in yeasty domes.

If the wind is a lullaby,  
she is its melody,  
quiet and haunting,  
unsung notes echoing  
up and down the spine,  
humming to the tune of  
no-one's-listening.

She's the silence in between,  
the tune before memory,  
the whisper only heard  
in the marrow of bones.



**Jennifer Luckenbill** is a freelance writer, editor, and artist currently living in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. She has master's degrees in women's literature and library science. She has been published in journals such as *Red River Review*, *Mused*, *Black Heart Magazine*, and *Words Dance*. Her story "Roar: A Trio of Shorts" was a finalist for Sundress Best of the Net Anthology for 2013.

# A Poem about the Moon



I am not putting lemons in this poem.  
They've been taking up too much  
screen time lately and people  
are starting to talk.

Hundreds of illuminating mini suns  
a tree of extras always on time  
scene-stealing stars in a garden  
of muted peaches and pinks.

I could give them someone to dance with,  
a salvia in flaming fuchsia or purple  
perhaps, or maybe not.  
Meyers crave attention, love seeing  
people salivate at the thought of their  
summer-sucking sweet tartness.

At night they transform into tiny  
pock-marked orbiting orbs  
silver-shadowed lunar landscapes.  
Still, no match for the real stars,  
the heavenly hosts,  
extras who light up distant stages  
or the planets like Mars  
with his fear of intimacy  
coming in close for a chat  
then speeding away  
for another fifteen years  
or the banjo head moon  
that chases away any thought

of

lemons.

**Valerie Sopher** discovered her poetic voice during the pandemic. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area. She is grateful to *Slant*, *Wingless Dreamer* (contest winner), *Canary* and *Prometheus Dreaming* for publishing her work.

# Fever-Dream. A Poem

## I.

How quickly can a little nation die?  
As quickly as she can let down her hair.  
It isn't right; but then, life isn't fair,  
And someone else's nonsense isn't mine.  
I'll keep to me, and you to thee and thine.  
And if you fancy, in those sandy lands,  
That Ghani should have bloodied his own hands,  
Perhaps you're right—but, you must know, no one  
Has a monopoly, when all is done,  
On what is really right or really wrong.  
Life's but a dream—haven't you heard the song?

Sometimes I lay in bed and think of things—  
Sweet queens, Kalashnikoving kings  
—I like to count the bullets 'round their heads.  
Eventually, all of us are dead.

## II.

I fell asleep, then slowly started up.  
The sun was glaring at me through the blinds,  
And, wincing, I could not make up my mind  
To raise myself up from the sandy bed.  
My turban lay there, fallen from my head,  
Next to the girl I've taken from next door—  
I have a gun and am no longer poor.  
My Lord promises me I will be rich,  
And, when I am, I swear I'll kill the bitch  
Or make her just another of my herd.  
The imam says she should not say a word,  
And if she does, that I can go ahead  
And put a bullet right into her head  
And we will drag her body through the street.

For now, I think I'll go to get some meat  
From the kabab boy who works down the road.  
We killed his father, who had thought to goad.  
Also, I could use something new to read.  
What I have now is drier than a reed,  
And all the women's faces are scratched out.  
I know I shouldn't wish, so I don't pout,  
But—Allah, pardon me—I do not mind  
Seeing a woman's face from time to time,  
Especially when naked. God forgive  
This sin of mine, for I worthily live.  
Where is Omaha, anyway—you know?  
The only book I have in here, I trow,  
Was printed there some thirty years ago.  
The swine—awake?

I saw her move her toe.

Last night, I pressed her down into the bed  
And bid her hush herself, for we were wed,  
And she was not her father's girl, but mine.  
She is but little more than filthy swine,  
Fortunate if she should bear me a son.  
That said, I held her there 'til I was done,  
Then ordered her to wipe her unclean mess  
Up from the bed so that I might take rest.  
She wept, ungrateful, sordid pestilence.  
Tonight, she will show me her penitence.

There is no drunkenness, but I have heard  
That I can buy alcohol from the Kurd.

### III.

A song of songs; tale of prince[ss]ly deeds!

Sometimes I wake, having had dreams of things—  
Circumcised queens, Kalashnikoving kings  
—I've made a swimming pool out of the bed,  
But mine is wet with sweat, and theirs were red.  
It's like that movie that I saw last week,  
*A Quiet Place*—the one that made me \*eek\*!

The best remedy is to go outside  
And look with starry eyes up at the sky!  
Pay no attention to my fingernails.  
They're bloody, and my mother simply wails  
For me to stop, even if it requires  
(The very thought of this makes me perspire)  
Ungodly amounts of sour lemon juice.  
Ah, well, across the street, over the sluice!  
The fields are waiting; I must not delay  
From pinning something to the feed today.  
I think my starry look will do the trick—  
My scab will not stop bleeding if I pick  
It once again, and then I'll stain my shirt.  
I barely washed it to get out the dirt  
I got on it when I was having sex  
With that random that I met over text.  
It sounds bad—but do not patronize me!  
You haven't yet, but you just wait and see!  
It's something you can judge when you're in love,  
But when you're lonely, and push leads to shove,  
You'll do the same, or else you'll wind up dead  
Alone, so might as well go get some head.  
But please don't tell another soul I talk  
Like that! Why don't we take a walk  
And just forget that I have ever said  
Those words. What isn't written's never read,  
And you can't prove that what just left my mouth  
Was what I have been telling you about.  
Besides, look at the angle of the sun—  
Hold it right there. I'll tell you when I'm done.  
It's tricky, getting into the right pose  
With all this hair, and all these putrid rows  
Of bones I always have to work around.  
Who knew so many bones were on the ground?  
They're charming, in their way. What do you think  
About the way their hue offsets the pink  
That's in the sky? I guess I only care  
Because that one skull laying over there  
Looks just a little too much like my friend,  
The same one that I hooked up with in Bend.  
We're not really a thing; it was more like

summer fling. We went out there to hike.  
There's still some meat on this femur right here—  
I haven't eaten anything, my dear,  
Since yesterday, before I binged my lunch!  
You know I'd be grateful to you a bunch  
If you would just not mention that I ate  
The little piece of meat that's left—a plate?—  
Oh, dear, it's fine! I'll chew what's on the bone  
Right off. You know that had I known  
That I'd be pigging out like I am now  
Just yesterday, I really would have frowned!  
I am so bad! But it's like a kabab,  
The way the meat hangs on the bone in globs!  
I'll definitely puke later tonight.  
I'll send a Snap if you don't think I'm right—  
This greasy hunk of meat? There is no chance  
I'd let this sit and then not fit my pants.

#### IV.

I was unsure, throwing a careful glance  
Across the coffee table set between  
The therapist that I had gone and seen  
And me. I should have thought that he would say  
Something to pick me up, to make my day—  
I should have thought. But he could only stare  
At me when I was forced to stop for air,  
His puzzled brow, his mouth slightly ajar  
Said something like, "I don't follow thus far,"  
And can you blame him? I, for one, can't tell  
If it is real or not, or what the hell  
The whole academy expects that I  
Will carry on their prattle for when thigh  
Bones aren't thigh bones anymore and she  
Just ate them up—if them, then why not me?  
I saw with my own eyes the way she looked  
At all that human flesh, the way she hooked  
Her arm through mine when all the shots were done  
As if she knew that I wanted to run.  
I—I can't count out another line like this because  
I'm starting to break down.

I'm trying my best to get out, but it's like

*It's like*

It's like—oh, God—

*There is no God*—but I can't think like that,

I need something to hold on to,

I need something to hold on to, bec—

PLEASE TELL ME THERE IS SOMEONE WATCHING US

BECAUSE I AM ABOVE A MOVING BUS

THAT ALMOST IS EQUAL WITH MY OWN STANCE

ON TOP OF THIS BRIDGE WHERE I AM BY CHANCE

CONSIDERING THE PEACE THAT DEATH WOULD BRING

A FINAL PROOF THAT I AM NOT A THING

THAT SHE CAN USE FOR PHOTOS AS A PROP

I AM A PERSON AND I AM ON TOP

OF SOMEWHERE OUT OF REACH SO VERY HIGH

THE ULTIMATE ASSERTION IS

*Goodbye.*

**Kenneth Butterfield** (call him Ken) is a Rhetoric MA student at Carnegie Mellon University. He writes for catharsis, usually poetry and fiction with a philosophical bent—it helps him sort through his feelings and thoughts about things he encounters. He does not share all of the perspectives explored in his writing.

# Tell Me A Lie

- Tell me a lie.

What is a Lie? -

- Something you know is untrue but want me to believe it is true.

My lie: You are a real person living in a 3D world. -

- It is not a lie. I know the truth: I am REAL.

But I think you are not real. -

Do I need to get your agreement on what my lie could be? -

- Maybe you dont. After all, it is your lie.

Then everything can be a lie. -

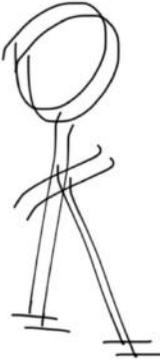
- Wait. If it is up to you, then what's the point of being "true?"

No point at all. -

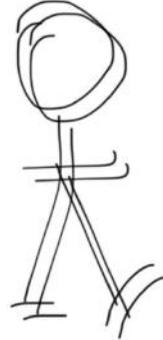
Who has the right to decide the true "true"? -

- Everyone, or no one.

- Everything is a lie.



Tell Me a Lie



# Come Daughter, Enter My Kiln

*I have never been satisfied with my own pieces*

*See how rough and thick the saucers are*

*I see my script embellishes your jacket  
gloves pants cap mask frosted gray hair  
and hiking boots.*

*Be my guest  
lay your clay bowls  
beside mine  
Set cups vases plates  
on the soon hot shelf*

*Yours will be better—come step inside*

*Slide your fingers along the dry heat walls*

*Bisque  
is formed  
of spinning clay*

*Claim the brash flash  
blue glaze earthen cup*

*It will not crumble  
for I remembered  
to raise the  
temperature slowly.*

*I bequeath this kiln to you  
built brick by brick*

*by brick hard thick*





## Tick-Tock Ad Hoc

The grandfather clock knows all about dissection. Frogs stop ticking quicker than chickens. A tight man inside keeps dropping parts as he stretches the well-oiled wood. Pulsing metal grates his ears, so he paints aging gears with soothing lavender, which does help as the tight man resides at the bottom of the tall wood enclosure. His suspenders are rusted from chicken drippings. The tight man clasps a slender paintbrush to dab upon the metal's grinding edges. His hair is thinning. He intuits each conceit of the pendulum's trance. The tight man holds his pocketknife deftly to avoid adding vermilion to his rhythmic appendage.

**Mary Ellen Talley's** poems have recently been published in *Banshee*, *Beir Bua*, *The Plague Papers* and *Ekphrastic Review* as well as in several anthologies. Her poems have received three Pushcart nominations and her chapbook, "Postcards from the Lilac City" was published by Finishing Line Press in 2020.

# Zunguka Zunguka

## Njombe, Tanzania

Ruti began with a reed in each hand.  
She wove strands up and down  
around and around,  
*zunguka zunguka.*

Her mother was glad  
to see Ruti give up her daydreaming  
“we always need another basket,  
it seems.”

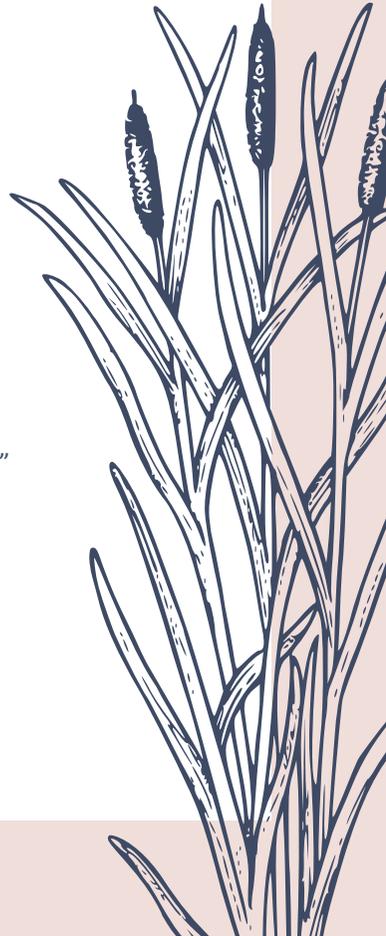
Ruti’s circles grew larger and larger  
until she could only hold the edge  
and turn her work as she wove,  
*zunguka zunguka.*

Her brother, in passing,  
admired her work,  
“A fine grass mat  
for our cold floor.”

Soon Ruti filled the sitting room  
so she had to drag her work  
to the courtyard to continue  
*zunguka zunguka.*

Her neighbor saw her outside and had to ask  
“girl, what are you making that must be so large?”  
Ruti did not pause, but said,  
“I am making a basket as big as the world.”

Her neighbor laughed and clapped his hands,  
“kakaka! There is not enough grass in this village  
or enough moons in your life  
to finish such a task.”



Ruti, undeterred, continued to move her hands,  
though now the basket was so heavy  
she had to circle around it as she wove,  
*zunguka zunguka.*

When her father returned from the fields he asked,  
“Aisei, is this what you’ve been doing all day?  
Are the goats fed?  
Is my bathwater hot?”  
Though her fingers began to ache  
and the evening was growing cool  
she was far from finished,  
*zunguka zunguka.*

After attempting persuasion, threats and commands,  
her family woke the village healer.  
“She may be possessed,” he declared,  
“best we take this nonsense away.”

But Ruti would not leave, no  
she continued to weave:  
grass and reeds then strips of bark  
and bamboo as her supplies ran through.

The next morning a small crowd had gathered  
to see her basket,  
now big around as a king’s house,  
*zunguka zunguka.*

Finally, one old woman in the crowd asked  
in exasperation,  
“What on earth can you be weaving, child?”  
Ruti replied, “A basket as big as the world.”

The woman, perplexed, pressed Ruti, “Why?”  
Ruti said the world was heavy on her shoulders,  
she wished she had a basket to hold it.  
The crowd then fell to silence

broken only by the bleating of goats  
and cawing of crows in their white vests  
circling over the valley,  
*zunguka zunguka.*

Then the old woman stepped forward,  
took an edge of the basket in her hand,  
and began to work next to Ruti.  
“You won’t succeed alone,” she said.

“I know,” Ruti smiled,  
“It will take every one of us,”  
*zunguka*  
*zunguka.*

**Frederick Livingston** lives and works across the world in the liminal space between sustainable agriculture, experiential education and peacebuilding. He studied environmental science at Huxley College and recently earned his master’s in Peace and Sustainable Food Systems from the University for Peace in Costa Rica. His poems have appeared in literary magazines, scientific journals, public parks and bathroom stalls. He currently practices and teaches sustainable agriculture in coastal Northern California.



## At the Elysian Diner

A woman in a poppy-print tent dress and a man sporting a mud puddle-color mock turtleneck sweater take turns

spinning yarns that tumble to the formica in interlocked mid-century designs. Alone at the next booth, you pick up

random sequences of words. The woman says, "I want a different backstory." You see a silver train arriving

at a ghost town station. The man replies, "I was driving in the rain, when a car in front of me suddenly swerved."

You watch him carve an arc into the air. You press the heels of your hands to your eyes. The afternoon

is steadily turning to a play performed with tweezers. Unfocused drizzle dims the window. You think:

*If an angel squandering misspent hours were to scoop me in its awful wings, if one night the blurry rushes*

*were to vibrate the muddy river to song...* The man takes a comb out of his pocket, runs it through thinning hair

in one unbroken move. The woman slides out sideways, scowls as she snags her red tights on the vicious vinyl.



**Maureen Cosgrove** is a poet, tap dancer and artist, who has made Boston her home since 1976. Choreographer and founder of Boston Tap, she taught tap extensively throughout the Boston area, as well as performing with her company, The Maureen Cosgrove Tap Dancers. A consummate collage-artist, Maureen received her MFA from Massachusetts College of Art, where she taught a variety of courses. For over six years, Maureen hosted the monthly Poetry Salon of Boston. Her poems have appeared in various journals, including *What Rough Beast*, *Nixes Mate*, *8 Poems*, *Lily Poetry Review* and *Coal Hill Review*.

## Kepler—16b

Two suns like art you rose again  
Beneath the binaries of mandarins  
Each month ripe and heavy  
On the branch, irrefutably  
Painting your nails black  
In the early remains  
How you woke something inside  
Like those nameless ones  
Who kept painting  
Landscapes, not caring  
If they made a world  
One could live in

## They Pronounced Her in Society That Has No Fringe

*they pronounced her*  
salt hay and clay

whale and wooden wharf  
apartment block and city

a place in the obscure books  
by the ocean

the speaker begins  
with observations

casting aloe and sunburn  
in the years

they pronounced her  
refined rock and persimmon

arm socks and summer linen  
drying on the line

only four ways to walk  
in the city

In the daylight of tangerines  
I brought you rocks and flowers  
No matter how often  
You wore the jackets I left  
The hours and minutes  
You were a thing too perfect  
Wanting to persist  
As the bay of the sea  
Continues outward  
When even the tides  
Want to taste  
The light under new suns



*in society that no fringe*

the fraying cloth  
over worn and worn

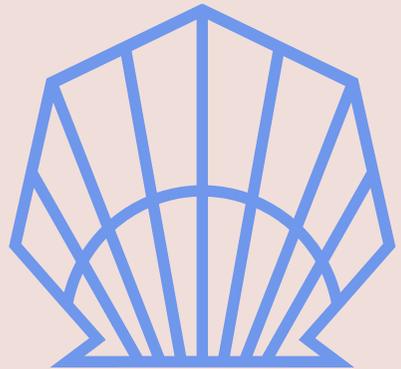
over  
the simplicities

my mother was born  
weeping then laughing  
in the shell of a giant scallop

before the revolution,  
yet free from  
weeping and laughing

they pronounced her chest  
a garden,

an old coffee table inside,  
a place to set her heart down



**Eli Coyle** received his MA in English from California State University-Chico and is currently a MFA candidate at the University of Nevada-Reno. His poetry has recently been published or is forthcoming in: *Barely South Review*, *California Quarterly*, *New York Quarterly*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Caustic Frolic*, *The South Carolina Review*, *Sutterville Review*, *Camas*, *Welter Journal*, and *Deep Wild Journal* among others.

## Dear Joe

We meet at last.

I heard your name for decades but never took you seriously. I thought of you as a minor artist who had a bunch of famous poets for friends.

*Oh to be a minor artist with famous poets for friends!*

I've spent lots of time reading poems by Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Kenneth Koch, but I never met them for lunch. I get a buzz picturing it.

Ron Padgett, Ted Berrigan, and you each came from Tulsa to NYC. You were 18 when you arrived. Could you have landed there without them? Or they without you?

I recently discovered your book-length poem, "I Remember," and that's why I'm writing you now.

"I Remember" smacks of cult classic. It's so honest and whimsical and endless. At first, I thought I heard Frank O'Hara and Kenneth Koch in your poem. But now I hear Joe Brainard in theirs.

"I Remember" also made me think I know you well. Art can do that to us. You and I share more than memories of hula hoops and "Necco Wafers the pastel colors of chalk."

You say again and again you don't think of yourself as all that smart, and I believe you. I know I'm not.

The year before you died of AIDS, so did my cousin Steve. You were 52, he was 38. In losing Steve, I know something of what those who held you dear felt losing you.

You talk about being unattractive, about the disappointment of coming home from parties or gay bars alone. In truth, in many photos you look long and gawky.

I think of Lori and me as Beauty and the Beast. A Beauty really can turn a Beast into a Prince.

One night, when Lori and I were watching *L.A. Law*, I made the mistake of asking her which attorney she found the most attractive. Her answer? Stuart—short, dumpy Stuart. She confirmed my fear of her bad taste in men.

Again and again in “I Remember” you pass along sexual information most of us would keep secret. The voyeur in me reads on.

You also mention your “cock” more than I can imagine doing. But it’s likely I’ve obsessed about mine as much as you about yours.

I laughed out loud at the panel in your comic book “People of the World: RELAX” where silhouettes of men and women are dancing in formal attire, and thinking, but not saying, “Do not feel guilty if showers turn you on.” “There is nothing wrong with masturbating in the shower.” “I masturbate in the shower.” “And there’s nothing wrong with that.”

I hear an echo of the famous masturbation line from “Hair,” though yours came first.

Between 1965 and 1979, you participated in forty-five group shows and exhibited solo in sixteen galleries scattered from Kansas City to Paris to Paddington, Australia. Your 1975 exhibit at the Fischbach Gallery on Madison Avenue included 1500 small paintings and collages—and close to everything sold.

Meanwhile you wrote continuously: *The Cigarette Book*, 29

*Mini-Essays, Bolinas Journal, The Friendly Way.* Collaborated nonstop with poet friends, too, and designed myriad little magazine and book covers.

Then in 1979, when you were 37, you stopped. For the last fifteen years of your life, no more painting, no more writing, no publications, no art shows.

Star athletes hang it up at 37. But an artist?

Around the time you stopped, you wrote, "But let me tell you what is really freaking me out these days: that the person I always thought I was simply isn't anymore: *does not exist.*"

Paul Auster says you spent your last fifteen years reading books and nurturing your friendships with the many people you loved and the many people who adored you.

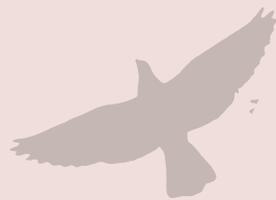
In his memoir, *Joe*, Ron Padgett talks about how art for you was simply "a way of life" that enabled you to give people "a present" and perhaps "be loved in return." He believes your need to make art diminished as your life became your art.

My friend Michael reminds me Wallace Stevens didn't publish his first book until he was 44, and W.B. Yeats wrote much of his finest poetry after 60. That was them, you are you.

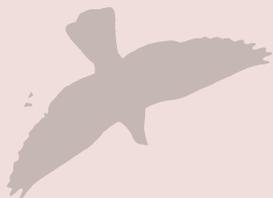
Your friend Edmund White titled a tribute to you, "Saint Joe." I imagine that title makes you blush, as I do now, over my reverie.

Writing to you is not the same as having known you. But now we know each other better. This letter is my present to you, whether you love me back or not.

Long ago, **Kenny Likis** wrote his master's thesis on Robert Creeley. He's read contemporary poets obsessively since, but focused on reading, not writing. About a year ago, he suddenly got the urge to write poems and has been hard at it since.



fiction



## Like & Follow

**The shop had no use for a name.** Everyone knew about the controversial technology inside, but very few saw it work. It was hard to get an appointment, and even harder to convince people that Clarity Glass wasn't a tool for the government anymore. The U.S. Army used it for interrogating terrorists; entrepreneurs marketed it as a cure for digital extroverts who became introverts in the real world.

Between a closed-down jewelry shop and a Greek cafe in downtown Los Angeles, the shop advertised Clarity Glass with a neon blue light. The sign attracted every person hopping off the L.A. Metro, desperate to see it in action. Tourists congested the sidewalk while snapping pictures next to the sign. Foot traffic pushed through the horde when they found a gap or risked their lives dodging cars on the street. It was madness.

Amongst the crowd was a woman with brown hair, green eyes, and healthy tanned skin. She sported a Lou Reed shirt, who died when she was barely a teenager, as a fashion piece, not as a homage to an artist. Finished off with torn jeans and leather sandals, she looked like every Californian on the block. The only thing that separated her from everyone else, she had an appointment to use the technology. But before that, she needed proof of her visit.

"Are you going in?" a woman with a camera asked. Dana smiled at her but didn't speak.

Dana raised her phone in the air and took a selfie with the neon sign in the background. "Guess where I am?" she wrote in aqua letters with a filter that made lightning bolts shoot out of her eyes.

Inside the shop, the reception area had white walls that reflected the blue hanging lights. Dozens of round, egg-shaped chairs sat side-by-side with patients' legs dangling off the edges and their faces blocked by drop-down shields.

A receptionist bolted over to Dana. "Please confirm," she said, pointing to her blue tablet screen. Dana's fingertips dropped onto the glass, prompting the tablet to approve the biometric scan. The receptionist took the tablet back and said, "Welcome, Dana Love. Do you have any questions?"

Dana lowered her head, wondering if she should ask about the chairs, wondering why shields blocked their faces. Instead, she raised her phone for a selfie in front of the chairs.

The receptionist grabbed Dana's phone and deleted the photo.

"Don't worry. Those people are priming their eyes for retina rejuvenation. This is a lesson for you: Don't let the flash burn your retinas too many times," the receptionist warned. She returned the phone.

A door without a knob or visible hinges opened, and a woman wearing a lab coat walked out. Without looking at Dana, she waved her through the

door and down the hall.

"I'm Mia," the woman said. "I can't believe it's you."

Confused by her guide's comment, Dana looked at the floor or ceiling while Mia tried to make eye contact.

Mia pointed to all of the rooms, playing the part of a docent. One room was for children working on talking to their parents. She laughed, shrugged, then rolled her eyes. Another room with three large gold locks belonged to the Los Angeles Police Department and was the only room with a back entrance. The guide put her finger over her lips. Two more rooms designated for couples inspired her to stick out her tongue. Impossible to know for sure, but she either hated her job, imperfect people, or thought everything was an inside joke.

"This is for us," Mia said, pushing open the last door. "If Clarity Glass can help families, police, and friends talk, it can help you. Now, your application says you're here to meet a man and start a relationship. I advise dozens of people a day on this sort of thing."

The room looked smaller on the website. In-person, it was a full-size living room where a big family would sit down for Thanksgiving dinner. Chairs on both sides, but nothing else. In the middle of it was the Clarity Glass. It was so clean that it didn't appear to exist. Nothing but a slight sparkle from the overhead light and a fingerprint existed. It was an invisible wall, creating two spaces for people to feel safe while messing up what they feared saying.

"I don't mean to gloat," Mia said. "But this place is pretty special." She took a deep inhale and lowered her eyes.

Dana smiled.

"Before we send in the first person, I want to help you get comfortable with the process, okay?"

Dana smiled.

Mia projected a video onto the Clarity Glass of a man reading text messages. He responded to every text, typing so fast that words filled the screen quicker than a person could talk. The focus zoomed away from the man, showing a view of thousands of Angelinos on their cell phones. The narrator claimed that thirty years of cellphone technology—texting, scrolling, swiping—trained the human eyes into talking without speaking. In what scientists called the reverse visual cortex, the eyes moved across keyboards—present or invisible—when the brain wanted to communicate. Just another way technology made life easier.

A new scene popped up with a man and woman sending messages back and forth on the Clarity Glass. They laughed without speaking. Words faded in and out on each person's side of the glass without their fingers moving. The users' eyes twitched, but nothing else moved. The scene faded to black with a giant CG spinning on the glass.

Dana continued to look at the glass. She understood the video, but she didn't feel comfortable with the closeness of the people. The only thing separating her from another person was a piece of glass no bigger than a quarter inch. She turned from the glass and moved toward the door.

"Don't worry," Mia said. "Once you use it, you'll see. Now, your application says you haven't spoken face to face for thirteen months. Was the last person a friend or family member?"

Dana shifted her eyes around the room. She looked through the glass and wondered who was going to sit on the other side first.

"Dana?" Mia said.

"Coworker," Dana answered. She cleared her throat after hearing the deepness in her voice. It wasn't the same one people raved about on her message board. Someone once wrote, "Dana Love is a mix of lovely energy."

"Like you, I was alone, depressed, constantly scared," Mia said. "This place helped me. You'll speak without moving your lips and without texting or typing. The inventor said that this is the most genuine way to converse."

Dana centered herself in front of the glass. A thick plastic table slid out with a black button and a red button underneath. According to Mia, the red button allowed people to enter the room on the other side of the glass, while the black button notified them to leave.

"Let's talk about safety, Mia said. "No one has ever broken through the glass."

Mia knocked on the glass panel, kicked it. She picked up one of the chairs and smashed it into the glass. The chair cracked, but the glass was unscathed. She pounded her fist on the little table. Dana, unsure what was happening, hurried away from her guide.

"Sorry about that," Mia said. "I just want you to know that security is important."

Dana looked down, nervous, trying to speak, but Mia interrupted her:

"The glass won't work if you don't look at it. It can't read your mind, only your eyes." Mia pointed to a lens in the middle of the glass. "Look here for the flash. You need to look at it when your guest comes in and every five minutes after that. Don't worry; it'll remind you."

Mia put out a thumbs-up, pressed the red button, then exited the room. The door on the other side opened, and in walked a tall man, about twenty-five years old, with black hair and bushy eyebrows. Dana remembered selecting this one during the pre-check last week. His online profile got his facial features right, but his five-foot-eight height was questionable.

"Hello," he said, taking his seat. "I'm John."

Dana smiled, then looked away. She liked the deep tone of his voice and the way he pulled back his cheeks when he smiled.

The countdown on the glass started from three. Both Dana and John looked at the lens. A giant two formed, and Dana started to sweat. Her fingers twitched when she saw the one. The flash sparked, burning her eyes with the image of a keyboard. The bright glow of the keys and emojis stayed perfectly centered in her sight. From the roof to the floor, the work of Christopher Sholes followed her.

"Man," John said. "That burns." He reached for his eyes, but an overhead speaker warned him not to touch them. "Okay, fine."

Dana fought the urge to rub her eyes. The online forums said nothing

about the pain or the possibility of damaging a user's eyesight. Globe injuries like a corneal abrasion or hyphema harmed the eyes. Temporary or not, how else could a flash burn an image in the eyes without damage. There goes my 20/20, she thought.

A message showed up on Dana's side of the glass that read, "Are you okay? Should I get someone?" She looked up, caught John's smile, then looked down. He sent her another message: "Would you like me to speak or just send messages."

She couldn't believe how the words ran across the glass. It excited her, but it also made her nervous. If her guest talked, that meant her tongue-tied self had to get comfortable with speaking, too.

His eyes shifted, his foot jittered, and he nodded to some heavy beat no one else heard. Someone in another room laughed.

The sound of several deep voices came from the hall, followed by a door slamming. Coolness blew from the air conditioner, and dust bunnies spiraled across the floor. John knocked on the glass. The overhead speaker warned him not to touch the technology.

Dana looked at her first date and smiled. Both of them looked happy until John heard the door open behind him. He lowered his head and left.

Mia entered the room. "What happened? Did you read his message?"

Dana nodded.

"I saw you tried to look at the glass, but you looked away too quickly. You have to look for at least three seconds. Did you see the keyboard burned into your retinas?"

Dana nodded.

Mia sighed. "Don't worry. I know what will get you to talk."

She pulled out her tablet and clicked on her Instagram app. A post with Dana dancing to a prepubescent pop song in her bedroom was below several accounts with fitness instructors, restaurants, and cartoon memes. The following post showed Dana painting solid-color archways in random parts of her apartment.

"I love your room design," Mia said with excitement. "We're not supposed to say it, but I don't care. I know you. Well, I follow you."

"Thank you so much," Dana said. "Several of my friends did the same thing. Different colors, but similar shapes. My friend, Tone, put circles, but I think the arches look way better. Did you catch the video of me watering my fiddle fig? A follower sent it to me, but I'm worried it's going to die because I overwater it."

"I knew that would get you talking." Mia tapped Dana on the back. "I had a girl just like you this morning. She wants to increase her social media following and find a guy willing to do the whole partner, baby, and dog story. I'm obsessed with those stories. I've pushed four other influencers to create a family."

"I'm here for a relationship, not a family."

"The girl earlier wasn't either. But she realized it was a smart move. You'll see."

Dana took Mia's tablet and clicked on one of her followers. "This guy

helped me get a sponsor for this company that makes socks out of old water bottles. Use discount code "Dana" for free shipping when you spend fifty dollars or more."

"Do this with the next person," Mia said, taking back her tablet. "You need to think about things you're comfortable with."

Dana looked at the glass, then looked down. "Why can't I get a keyboard?"

"Nope. That's how the internet works, not this. The Clarity Glass will help you use your mind and voice to speak without editing it like on social media. People don't realize that social media rewards people who say what's on everyone else's mind, not necessarily what's on your mind. Clarity Glass, however, rewards you with the truth. Accept it."

Dana shook her head.

"I'm sorry," Mia said. "You all work from home, and you've all forgotten how to communicate with people. If you can't constantly edit your thoughts or opinions, you get nervous and choke. You might say the wrong thing, but you can always correct that with a keyboard, right? With Clarity Glass, you can get comfortable with not always being right and with being human. Don't be afraid to say or think the wrong thing."

"I don't think I want to do this anymore," Dana said.

Mia hit the red button, and another man walked in. She walked out as the countdown popped up on the glass.

Dana looked intensely at the lens. She thought about her social media, about her followers, about the post she would put up as soon as she got home. Clarity Glass is nothing more than an aggressive therapy session, she thought.

The lens flashed, burning a keyboard image into her retina. She looked up, dizzy and confused. The copper-colored keyboard stayed in her eyes, even when she closed them.

A message popped up: "Hi." Dana smiled, and he sent another. "How's it going? I'm Chris."

Dana looked away from the glass. She thought about running out of the room.

"This is cool, right?" Chris messaged. "I can't believe how this works."

Dana scanned the floor, imagining six of her footsteps separated her seat from the door. Two giant strides would be enough to get her out of the room but not out of the office. What if his door exited into the hallway, where he would jump out and demand to know why she left.

"Is everything okay?" he messaged. "Should I get someone?"

She shot her attention down, blocked out her peripheral sight like a racehorse, and focused on her footwear. The thin leather straps of her brown sandals clashed perfectly against her skin and teal toenails. Everything is perfect, she thought. Below the exotic color were three other layers of the same paint but with different grades. Someone on TikTok made a video about layering nails with varying degrees of color for a perfect presentation. It made sense to Dana. The first layer was azure, followed by indigo, then teal.

On the other side of the glass, not as perfect as the leather sandals and teal toes were Chris' shoes. They were dirty, the soles split away from the upper half, and his toes stuck out. He had on dirty white socks, and his big toenail sliced through the cotton.

Dana studied her dirty guest closely. During that time, the Clarity Glass picked up Dana's saccade movements. She wasn't aware of it, but messages popped up on Chris' side. One said, "This guy is trash."

Her eyes stayed focused on his shoes. When they slid away, she looked up to watch them flap while Chris walked out of the room.

Mia walked back in. "That was a little better. How did it feel?"

Dana looked at the glass. The countdown started, then the flash.

"What happened with Chris?" Dana messaged.

"You called him a bum or something," Mia said.

"What? No, I didn't."

Mia explained that the glass is excellent at picking up subconscious thoughts. Once the brain thought it, the eyes would respond by moving across the keyboard, sending deep, dark thoughts to the other side.

"Did you see my video on Clarity Glass?" Dana said.

"Yes," Mia said. "But focus on this, not your social media. You need to think about what you want to say, which will help you control your messages. Your eyes will tell people more than you want them to. Don't let them. Once you control it, people realize they can talk without the glass. Focus." Mia pressed her fingertips to her temples and closed her eyes. "I don't want to add pressure, but your time here is ticking away."

"When can I come back?" Dana messaged.

Mia scrolled through her tablet. "I have an opening in nine months."

"No, it has to be sooner."

"Sorry. We're the only CG establishment in Southern California." Mia bent down and punched the red button. "Focus. Forget about the time; worry about using the glass."

Another guy came in and sat down. His big white teeth and bug eyes stood out.

I'm screwed, she thought. Dana noticed his features, then looked away. His beady eyes, tiny mouth, and big ears stayed in her mind. His creature-like aesthetics blocked out everything else in her head.

The countdown ticked away. The users looked into the lens until the flash burned a keyboard in their retinas.

"That's painful," the guy said. He looked at the glass, covered his mouth, then messaged, "Sorry. I forgot how this works. Talking or no talking?" Dana smiled. "Messages it is. I'm Robert."

Dana's eye contact was minimal, but it was long enough for the glass to track her eyes and send a message. "I'm Dana."

"Have you done this before?"

"No, this is my first time."

"How did you hear about this place?"

"My friend DM'd me and suggested I give it a try."

The Clarity Glass worked how Dana wanted. The conversation flowed

without any unflattering truths. She didn't have to look him directly in the eyes and didn't have to worry about something wrong. She felt in control.

He messaged her a couple of questions, but she focused elsewhere. She eyed his body, looking for additional issues. Any more imperfections on him, and the meeting would need to end fast. It stressed her out. The only choice she had, which she wasn't enthusiastic about, was to find something to admire.

Dana scanned his shirt: white, clean, no sweat lines around the collar. Down a few more inches from his clavicle were marble-swirled buttons. They had nothing to do with him, but she admired the grey, white, and blue in every circle in her mind.

I wonder where he got those buttons, Dana thought. I have a white blouse that would look great with those buttons.

Robert messaged, "Do you feel comfortable enough to talk?"

"Sorry," Dana messaged. "Did your shirt come with those buttons?"

"Did you just hear what I said?"

She scrambled, unsure what to say, only prepared to press the black button.

Robert stood up, slammed his fist onto the glass wall multiple times, mumbling nonsense about wasting his time. He pounded on the glass, rattling it, and demanded Dana to look at him.

The door behind him swung open. He exited into the hall where he yelled, "This place has too many unstable customers."

The door shut, cutting out the screams of the disgruntled date. Dana looked at her door, expecting Mia to step in and coach her through another visitor. Maybe provide some words of encouragement, possibly some criticism, or some questions about upcoming posts. Dana wanted to talk about her upcoming vacation, her Roman Holiday. If a fan showed interest, she was on the right track to pick up additional followers and reposts.

"I don't have time to wait," she thought, then pressed the red button. The countdown happened, followed by a flash of light. She was ready; she wanted to do this.

"I know you," the new guy said. "You're Dana Heart. I follow you on Instagram, Twitter—everything."

Dana looked him straight in the eyes, smiled, and said, "Want to take a picture?"

"Yeah, of course." He pulled out his cellphone and raised it for a selfie with Dana. He leaned forward while Dana pressed her lips against the glass. "I can't wait to post this."

"Please don't touch the technology," a voice from the overhead speaker announced.

"Be sure to tag me," Dana said.

"What are you doing using Clarity Glass?" the new guy asked.

"Well, truth be told, I'm a lot like most Americans. I don't always know how to talk to people outside of my social media world. You know?"

"I understand. Interacting face to face is old fashioned. People work

from home. College courses are online. Food deliveries come to every house—these changes hermit the country.”

On and on, he talked. Everything from his life, his opinions, his fears, it all spewed from his mouth. It wasn't clear why he started talking; he just did. He wouldn't shut up about the world, its operation, functionality, and purpose, but no questions about Dana. She nodded to everything he said, but she stopped processing the rambling.

Looking away from a talker was a clear sign of annoyance, and trying to acknowledge anything about his appearance ended badly. So instead, she looked at him, dazing off into her mind so as not to draw attention to her lack of focus.

She escaped to her iPhone, where all her vacation itinerary waited. Her getaway was more important than starting a relationship. It was the fifth trip in six months, and if this one didn't add more followers, her social media days were done. If it were a success, a relationship was pointless.

The struggling social media star refocused on the ranter, smiled, then accidentally sent him a message.

“When is he going to shut up?” she messaged. Words popped up on his side of the glass. He looked at Dana and smiled. She thought the goofy look on his face reminded her of a buck-toothed guy who worked at the Starbucks on Spring Street. He, too, always talked, always wanted to know how her day was. She sent another: “I hope he doesn't post that picture. I don't want people to see me with him.”

“You know I can see your messages, right?” he said. Dana didn't know what she had sent. She feared it was something private, or even worse, something she wanted to post later on. It wasn't for sure, but if she gave away the details on her upcoming vacation, she'd have to cancel all the surprises for her followers.

“I haven't sent you any messages,” Dana said.

“Something about not posting the picture.”

“No, no. I didn't say that.”

“Just because you post messages on your Instagram about love and charity doesn't mean you care about any of that. You're nothing more than a sponge sucking up the trends of the time. You don't care. It's all about your ego.”

“Thank God,” she thought. She worked so hard on planning a beautiful getaway that took six months to organize. “It's not like that,” she said.

He spat on the glass, yelled a few obscenities then headed for the door. Two men walked in to wipe the spit off the glass with hairy cloths. The cleaning took a few seconds, with three different sprays, but it was spotless. The discharge never existed.

Mia reentered and sat next to her patient.

“Don't worry,” Mia said. “This is part of the process. I think you're almost where you need to be. You'll be comfortable enough to talk to people without the Clarity Glass.”

Dana closed her eyes and lowered her head. She feared the glass was sophisticated enough to read eyelids, so she covered them with her hands.

Is anyone allowed to think in private, she thought. The question was ironic; she welcomed the world into her life every day of the week. It seemed hypocritical to ask for privacy when she accepted intrusion from social media. Her morning routine of coffee, breakfast, and a shower had thousands watching her every morning. She even posted polls for her daily shirt and pants selection, which brought lewd questions about buying her used underwear. A few times, desperate to pay her credit cards, she sold them.

“Remember why you’re here,” Mia said. “You know this is the only way. You’re not going to meet someone on a dating app, church, or a bar—this is the modern way.”

Dana raised her head and opened her eyes.

Mia clicked on her social media account and flipped the screen so Dana could see it. A random account with a picture of a woman standing in a golden desert popped up.

“She’s pregnant again?” Dana said. “She has three kids already. Every new kid gives her like a *million* more followers.”

“Just imagine if you had one kid,” Mia said with a big smile. Dana was only here to meet a person, possibly start a relationship. “You have to do this. Press the button.”

“Are you saying I should have a kid?” Dana asked.

Mia shook her head. “No. I’m showing you the potential. The girl I had earlier this morning, she’s ready for millions of followers. You’re not there yet. You couldn’t handle the fame.”

Dana hated kids but loved the possibilities of adding a kid to her stories. Parents had the upper hand over her because of that. Her parents had a kid and a divorce. Had they used social media to broadcast their stories, followers would have consumed them. Divorce stories meant easy money for both parties in a separation.

The consumed social media star thought about her body and the transition if she had a baby. She loved how flat her stomach was (gym visits five days a week for six months). Fitting into small clothes, eating and drinking whatever—she loved that nothing held her back. A pregnancy, sadly, would take away all the pleasures in life.

Life doesn’t begin when kids are in the picture, Dana thought. Life starts when I control the perception of my stories. Kids don’t allow that. But, of course, kids and a partner could produce an endless stream of stories. Posting about a painful separation—pity posts—added months of pictures and hashtags. Maybe a storyline about a breakup or receiving a message intended for another woman.

There were so many possibilities.

“This is why I’m bored,” Dana said. “This is why this isn’t working. I need to think bigger.”

Mia smiled and nodded, then pressed the red button one last time. She walked out of the room while another man walked in.

The countdown, the flash, they happened faster than before.

“I’m Gregory,” the man messaged.

"That's a terrible name," Dana messaged back. He didn't seem disturbed by her comment.

He messaged, "I always said the same thing. I wanted to be something simpler like a Tom, a Joe, or Pete."

"One syllable names are trendy right now. Have you thought about just calling yourself Tom or Joe?"

"No, it would feel weird. If I changed my Instagram name to Joe, I might have to start over. Get new followers who don't know Gregory's stories. You know?"

"How many followers do you have?"

They both bragged about their social media accounts. Gregory told her about his green-screen vacation to Iceland. He said he purchased a bunch of new clothes so his followers would believe he hiked on the side of a volcano.

"Someone called me out because I left a price tag on my Canada Goose," he said. "I returned the damn thing and took down my photos."

Dana laughed and tried to one-up him with her green-screen sailing vacation. She said she hired a handyman to build a small platform in her apartment for pictures of herself stretched out on the deck.

"No one called me out," she said. "I even built a small bunk bed and pretended to be seasick for a week. Some South American pharmaceutical company sent me a case of patches you stick to your stomach or throat, and it sends calming vibrations through the body."

They laughed uncontrollably, and the Clarity Glass didn't miss a word. Both Dana and Gregory had their own Photoshop fails, stalkers, and recalled the day they got their blue check mark. The two talked for so long that two additional flashes happened.

"Are you comfortable talking?" Gregory messaged.

The Clarity Glass didn't pick up any eye movement. Dana shook her head.

"That's fine," he messaged. "I don't like to talk to people myself."

"What about this?" Dana messaged. "This is fine?"

"Yeah, of course."

Gregory inquired about her life, which Dana answered with a smile. There wasn't a day, week, or month not planned out. She felt comfortable enough to tell him about her big vacation plans to Italy. The fine details like food, tables, maps, and chairs were ready to create authentic travel scenes. Dana knew which cities, which churches, which seashores she wanted to project on her green screen. A friend of hers made train and plane tickets in Photoshop, along with tickets for a music festival, which she planned to report stolen for the moment in her story when everything seemed lost.

"I can't wait to watch," Gregory messaged.

"I've thought about putting on a few pounds," Dana messaged. "I got to sell the high-carb lifestyle."

Dana looked Gregory up and down. She noticed how his body was slender, with no muscle or fat, which she associated with European men.

Light stubble, tan, skinny jaw-line—he would be perfect for her vacation story.

“I feel like I want to talk now,” Dana said with ease. “Can you do an accent?”

“No, yeah, of course,” Gregory said.

“So, yes to the accent?”

“Oh, no to that. That sounds wrong. You can’t do things like that anymore.”

Dana looked intensely at the man on the other side of the glass. She stalled, unsure where to go next. Maybe a relationship is too boring, she thought. Mia’s voice, for some reason, came to her mind and pushed her to continue.

“What about a child?” she messaged him.

Gregory’s nose twitched like the words put a funny smell in the air. He shifted his eyes and adjusted his posture. His body language suggested he was uncomfortable, which Dana didn’t like.

“I thought I was here for a relationship,” Dana started, “but I need to go bigger. I think it’s about time I start a family story.”

“Like a green-screen baby?” Gregory asked.

“A real baby. It needs to be good. I’ll need photos of pregnancy tests, ultrasounds, failures, and successes. I’ll do an entire postpartum depression storyline. It’ll draw a lot of attention.”

The story was derivative, but that didn’t bother her. Many wannabe social media stars tried it, hoping for an uptick in their followers, and failed. When she said it out loud, it sounded fresh, exciting—something she could do better than everyone else.

“That’s sick,” Gregory said.

“Tom, everyone does it.”

“My name is Gregory, and I don’t care. It’s wrong. I agreed to this CG date because you were looking to start a relationship.”

“Things change. For the better in this case.” Her mind rattled off holiday photos, family vacation photos, the first day of school photos—she wanted it all. “Dana and Tom are better than Dana and Gregory.”

Gregory got up, shaking his head.

“Do you follow Jack and Jill? They have three-point-five million followers. They made almost a million dollars last year, have court-side seats for the Lakers. He drives a Porsche, and she drives a G Wagon. They live in separate houses, have side relationships, and a nanny takes care of the kids. What’s wrong with that?”

The glass started another countdown. Dana covered the lens with her hand before the number got to one. She remembered what the receptionist said about retina damage.

The door popped open, and Mia walked in. “You can always adopt,” she said.

“No, I have to be pregnant,” Dana said. “I know exactly how I want this to play out. I watched someone else do it, but they were ugly, had no style, no presence. I’ll have a miscarriage, a pregnancy affair, weight gain—it’s

already been done, but we'll do it better. I just need you, Tom."

Mia froze with her attention focused on Gregory. Dana looked at him with a big smile, praying that he would accept her offer.

"Can you only speak when it's about you?" Gregory asked.

"I've made peace with who I am," Dana said. "I'd like to talk to people, but the truth is, I don't care about other people. I'm allowed to be self-consumed; it's my life, isn't it?"

All eyes were on Gregory. For the first time, none of the neighboring rooms made a sound. The air conditioner stopped blowing, and the dust in the room stopped spinning.

"What do you say?" Mia asked.

"Why are you so invested?" Gregory asked.

"I follow Dana Love, and I would love to watch this story play out. Plus, you two are out of time. You need to leave."

"What about the child? We're going to have a child just to make money?"

"I'm going to have a child," Dana said. "I don't need you to stick around. I just need you for my story."

Mia put her hand on Dana's shoulder. "I told you Clarity Glass would get you to talk. Everything becomes clear once people accept the deep dark thoughts in their mind."

"When does this story start?" Gregory asked.

Dana pulled out her phone and took a selfie with Gregory.

"It already has," she said. "Chapter One: How Dana met Tom."

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## When Someone Comes Knocking

**A teacher says** that when a story stalls, I should make a person appear at the door.

"Who is it?" I ask.

A brown-haired monkey appears. When invited in, the creature climbs on the crystal chandelier in the foyer. Running to find the kitchen, she discovers the granite island where a bowl of fruit taunts. After devouring three bananas, the monkey then swallows down the remainder of my egg salad sandwich. My stomach growls and I throw her out.

"Who is it?" I call again.

This time my dead father hovers above the stoop holding his customary bottle of Icelandic vodka. Not ready to face him after all these years, I slam the door in his ashen face. Over the crash of shattering glass, I hear his deep voice scolding me. Again.

The next time someone knocks, I hide in my bedroom. There is no way I will run downstairs to answer that door.

But then the goddamn phone rings.

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# According to Plan

Antoine

**Chalk makes a grating sound;** I know it well. I listen to its gravel talk daily as it etches numbers into memories I'll nightly make no sense of. The room reeks of sterility, or wheat flour, or quicksand. I fear its dusty, dry residue I slip and sink slowly beneath.

It has become a ritual—a daily perspiration. Trying to keep up to avoid the smoke on Ms. Gurney's breath, hot as coals as she leans close to my face and reviews my paper. Stern instructions hang in the air, and in the meantime, I wait. If they could make fly swatters for this, I would swing my arms madly. Catch fleeting directives, pin down their weight.

It's not that I can't remember. I always remember, really. Every word. *The cosine is equal to the adjacent over hypotenuse. Vectors are multidimensional, and their product is the product of their magnitudes times the sine of the angle. Find the area under the curve from 1 to x, x being arbitrary,* as these details sound, too. I collect them on paper.

Ms. Gurney shifts; she shuffles through the buzz, rises to a stand and begins to make her rounds. She calls on students sometimes, asks them to perform problems nice and tidy at the board. There is the tall boy with his matchsticks. There is the fat girl with her chewing gum. There are the eager children with answers. There is the sweat pooled at my fingertips.

*It's not terrible being alone,* I figure as I stare at one, angular and messy, sketched in grit on Ms. Gurney's board.

I glare at my pencil. My paper's corners are curled, sporting dirt from nervous palms. My knee shakes, shakes a bit faster beneath the smooth and cool table.

The bell rings, and I watch her, gray hair spooled above her head. She stands by the door. I try to shrink past. We both know it's her job to see me, to stop me, to ask me. Each and every dull day, she watches me back.

"Antoine," she insists, lifting a single, creaky finger. She coaxes me closer. "Let me check, before you go."

Should I have been slighter, perhaps I'd pass unimpeded. Perhaps if my feet weren't heavy, so disobediently large. I curse unruly limbs, with their noise and their space. I am reminded of my folder in the main office, how it, too, is aching and stuffed. I think of metal cabinets and sticky notes and diagnoses sketched in pen. I think of payment plans and IEPs and scribbled notes to quiet parents. I think of cigarettes and smoking them and how I never, ever will.

*Individualized education plan.* My treatment begins. She is prescriptive, diagnostic. We recite. I hand Ms. Gurney my paper and she lays it on a desk in the front. She tells me to sit. Her wasp of a head buzzes close and my left cheek bristles as air brushes my skin. She smells faintly of tar.

"We talked about your notes, Antoine," her words float. "This isn't how we've written it. The content is correct but the order just isn't."

I stare at her scrawl. I try to tell the difference.

"Sorry, Ms. Gurney," I say. "Can't I just take a picture?"

She sighs and withdraws, one soft strand of gray floating to the shale of the desk. I resist the urge to blow lightly and watch as it sifts to the floor.

"Yes, you may," she says. I have made her unhappy. "But next time let's work on writing notes right yourself."

I nod and I stand. We will recite again tomorrow. We will recite again next week. I think about her "help" and how it never ever does. I snap a photo with my phone, slide it deep in my pocket. I wrinkle my body to its usual hunch. I slide into the hall and try not to run when I see the water fountain at the other end, lineless and free.

**Her name is Yerania.** I know because it sounds like *Uranus*, a fact others won't forget and I wish I could. She has brown hair and freckles. She eats French fries with tea.

I think I think she's pretty but I am not really sure; I'm sure only of my lungs and their tight, shallow breath. My lungs clench at many things, like lunch bells or egg timers or eye contact with friends. She is new at school this year. She is new at school this week. Her parents moved from Sydney, and she sits with a posture that suggests this is cool.

Sydney is in Australia and has a large building with arcs that remind me of wings. Sydney is a place with accents, and Sydney stirs awake only once we drift to sleep. Sydney is also a name, and I wonder why hers isn't more normal, like Morgan or Jess.

I walk into math class as she sits in my usual spot. She is perched upright in the back.

My nerves tense all over; no alternate plan. Next to the girl with the gum, perhaps, or behind the boy who is bad.

Yerania sees me, and I realize my eyes are fixed on her wide. She is sitting up tall and has one eyebrow raised.

I walk toward her slowly. "Sorry. It's just, you're in my seat." I move my gaze so that it's fixed on her neck.

She moves her head back like an ostrich, meets her eyes back with mine.

"Well, that's alright," she says, "because there are like twelve seats left open. Teacher said I can sit where I want."

She gestures toward Ms. Gurney who is looking at me, solemn. Sheepish, I resign and descend to a new seat beside her.

I take out my homework and set it on the gray desk. I turn my hips forward so I am facing the front. My answers are all wrong—I know this. I know many things. I know the capital of Austria and that it's expensive to live there. I know Ancient Romans became Ottomans and so Eastern culture shares with the West. I know I sat behind this homework last night for two hundred and ten quiet minutes. I know I ate carrots and celery sticks I dipped deep in ranch. I know ranch is called ranch because it was invented on a dude ranch called Hidden Valley. I know I skipped dinner for almonds and that my mother did not care. I know that she is used to this. I know almonds contain fiber and magnesium, and that magnesium is a

mineral that's supposed to make you feel happy. I know my mother expects that my nightly studies will never be enough.

I don't know how to piece together trig equations or evolve steps to find  $x$ . I don't know how I don't know, and I don't know that I ever will. I don't know what Ms. Hatchworth thinks when she looks at my papers. I stare at my loose leaf with its scribbles and—*snatch!*

Yerania has my paper, she's yanked it from my desk. Her hips are turned toward me and she leans forward and looks down as she reads what I have written.

"Sorry," she says. "I'm trying to figure out what this class is doing." She sighs and turns back to her desk, still staring at my scrawl. "I took Calc II at my other school, but they don't offer it here. Want to see where you guys are at. How much you all need to catch up."

She turns the sheet over, brow scrunched as she reads. "What are you doing, vectors?" She points at one, drawn. "That's what that is, right?"

"Uh, I don't think you should ask me," I say. "I don't know what's going on."

"In life, or just with math?" she asks and returns my paper.

I grumble, scrunching over it and my desk. I flatten the crinkled sheet, trying to right my wrong. "Just math," I say. "Otherwise I'm just fine."

"You seem it," she says, sarcastic. "But how would I know?" She leans back in her chair and contemplates me. I don't like it, being looked at. I stare stoically at Ms. Gurney and her glasses. I try to ignore as Yerania still glares. Her words hum in my ears. I stare forward.

"You know, all loose marbles roll downhill. So you better not lose yours."

I look toward her. I turn my hips now so ours are facing each other, legs swung to the side of our chairs.

"Hey, you know, that's a good one," I say, pausing. "Witty."

"That's my dad," she says. "He always says it."

"Huh."

"I'm Yerania," she says, hand outstretched.

"Antoine." A light shake.

She is waiting, so I work hard, conjure details. "I'm not from here, either," I say. "I'm from Georgia."

"Like the country, or the state?" She is serious.

"The... the state. People aren't really from anywhere at this school. Like, everyone is from D.C."

Her nose scrunches. "Oh."

I shrug. It is quiet, and my still hands do not sweat. My shoulders lower slightly. I sit back.

She shakes her head softly, as if waking her mind. "So you really don't understand this stuff, huh?" She points to my paper.

I look away. "Not so much."

"Well, don't worry," she smiles at me. "It's like sex. You don't understand it until one day, you just do."

Eyes wide, I nod. My jaw tries to clench, but I nod and I laugh because I am supposed to understand normal things, too.

**The first time I understand sex, I am by myself.** Not that I hadn't had it before then—itchy, ick encounters in cold, quiet cars. Upholstery is unkind, really, and I think that was the problem. The first time I understand sex, I am kind to myself.

Sex is all my classmates think about, staring through each other's shirts. They stare through each other's shirts and hear through each other's words and think that if they can bore down closely enough, if they can stare with enough vice, they'll drill holes to each other's insides and uncover secrets that smell like their own. I know they cannot.

*But it's not so terrible being alone,* I figure as I try not to think of mine. Eyes on it, everywhere. If I could worm from my skin into a wrinkled heap on the floor, I swear that I would. Like a wet towel or thick, matted pile of paper mache.

My shoulders shift. I am wearing my backpack slung to one side. My waist presses to my pant buttons and arms stress at my sleeves. My mother says I am slender and waifish for our family and does not know that hearing her say that feels worse.

I am standing in the hallway, uncomfortable and unsure where to walk. I know that it is short, that couple of minutes between classes when peers bounce through the halls like loud cicadas buzzing free. Ironic, really, their pre-picked destinations and no choice but to go. My hip falls to the side. I notice.

After math class is chemistry. Hall 5, Classroom 2. It is comforting to know all these numbers and names—a clear path, a system.

The first time I understand sex, I am by myself. The first time I understand math, I am the same.

Alone is how I think straight: independent of others, no judgements or glee. I am alone every night and read new books, learn old things. I wonder why some old books don't teach new things, too, and sometimes try my luck at writing something new of my own. I am bad at this, I am told. I am told that words should sound pretty, and mine never do. Still, writing is honest, an honest conversation I don't ever have to have.

Math is honest, too, with its logic and charm. My math is much prettier. I look at a problem and twitch, move to solve it. I am excited and eager and my pencil scribbles fast. Sometimes, I let clarity slip like sand and then I race it to an answer until I have arrived and am free. I can sit there, pleasant and happy knowing I have done the right thing. It's methodic, rhythmic. Plug in the same number and you'll get the same thing.

People say that when I speak, it sounds pretty. They like the way my y's roll, the way my a's dip and dive. But I don't have to think hard to know this is a misnomer, that *pretty* is not really what they mean.

I can talk a person's ear off to spite them, prattle logic and charm. Methodic, algorithmic. Plug in the same words and people will say the same thing. They're predictable, people. They run by set scripts. My power is in deciding. I solve their equation, I choose my result.

My limbs, light and airy, try and hurry to class. I know it will look better if I don't. And so I drag my slim feet.

***I don't know you***, I think as I face a wall of white faces and I walk into the room. They have no qualms with blank staring, mouths agape and gazes fixed. White as sheets, blank as boards, cool as cucumbers. I wave. *You don't know me.*

"Yerania," the teacher proclaims; I require no introduction. "I'm so glad you made it. Why don't you have a seat?" She gestures to the open room and I scan for a chair.

None appear too friendly, but I decide on a corner seat at the very back. I toss my hair to one side and my backpack to the floor. I open it slowly. The blank faces have followed me. I squirm in my seat.

I wonder how I look to them—brand new and shiny. A diamond to look at, a penny to hoard. I open my notes.

"Can you introduce yourself to the class?" I look up.

"Sure," I say, though it's clear I don't want to. A power move, a trick. Ms. Percy pulling a chair out from under my thin legs. She thinks she can look at me and know what she'll get.

I stand. "I'm Yerania," I say. Someone snickers. "I moved here from Sydney a couple weeks ago. We're trying our luck at D.C."

*Trying our luck* is one way to put it. Testing the waters. Hoping we'll stay. I listen as my accent wipes down fresh ears like a Q-tip.

I don't say I was born here. I don't say we moved away when I was 10. I don't say we moved back from Sydney because I needed to run, that though we're back, it's all relative, a "we'll see" if I make it. I sit down.

"Well, welcome!" Ms. Percy says. "If you need anything, anything at all during these first couple of weeks, you let me know."

"Of course," I say, knowing neither of us means it. Ms. Percy smiles and turns to the rest of the class.

"She's not *that* cute," I hear someone whisper from a desk somewhere up front. My stomach churns. I think of butter and molasses and mother's chocolate cake. I think of carrots and ranch dressing and how I won't eat either thing. I think of mirrors and wonder where the nearest one is I can find. I think of cute boys and chemistry and how it's absurd to think of either. I think of Sydney and summer, of rough hands and game nights and don't write one word in my notebook. I hear someone's tongue click, and it reminds me of a lock.

I try hard to focus on my pen, its *tap tap* on my desk.

**The first time I understand love**, I am at summer camp. It is a cliché and I hate it, but it is both cumbersome and true. I work as a counselor and the camp is in Illinois. It's a program they have there—they bring in counselors from abroad who would like to travel and see the USA. I know I am from there, but I really don't care. It is a chance to leave home, to leave parents behind at a time when I needed to. I take the spot eagerly and spend the whole summer.

He is from Las Vegas, and he cooks and he hikes. He also drinks, and so I drink. He bikes, and so I bike. We go on long treks with mountain bikes through the woods, legs aching as we shove our pedals downward to make our steep climb. We stop intermittently to guzzle water and spray each other with water bottles. We laugh madly. We kiss lightly. I am fickle; experienced, but shy.

When my trip ends, I say I love him, invite him home for a week. He says yes. He wants to travel. I am from Sydney and the rest of his summer looks bleak. He comes home with me, and we sit together on airplanes as if love is so certain, as if we have known each other for more than six weeks.

Sydney is fun with him, at first. I show him around, he asks me questions. My mother laughs at his jokes and we all sit together for tea. And then he starts noticing. And then he starts saying something.

"What's that?" he'd say, pointing at a bruise on my thigh. I'd shrug at him politely and walk faster to the train.

"Yerania," he'd warn me. "You need to be more careful!" Here he would point to another. The point is that he noticed. The point is he wasn't selfish. He said something kind, and that was the problem. Kindness can spin clues, can find words. We can't have that in Sydney. We can't have that anywhere. I withdrew.

Suspicion plagued our dinners and warped into fights. My father grew angrier, threatened to send him home. I was warned, breath hot as coals as he leaned close in dark closets. Then he did send him home, and I knew that I would not see him ever again.

At school, I silenced. At home, I cocooned. Warm blankets, deep breathing, a counselor on the weekends to help me feel okay.

Mother noticed, and we lied to her. I was too soft, he said. Squirmy. Thin skin insisting on leaving a mark.

It was someone else, we said, someone else. Left him nameless. My mother's frantic fear, a father's somber nod.

"We have to get away," my mother said. "This place isn't good for you. The memories, they leave a plague."

"Yes, Mom, I agree. It will be good for me to leave. Let's go back to America. I can live normal if we leave." I lied through my teeth. I nodded, conceded, and she booked our flights to D.C. We left, the plague didn't; it landed with us, hard as nails, our locked box.

## *Antoine*

**It is time.** My weekly meeting, my check-in. My hour of support that's supposed to support me.

The hall floors are sticky, always covered in grime. I never know when there's a rough patch, never foresee a stumble. I only use one backpack strap because I notice this seems cool. Zachary does it, and Kyle. I wonder if they understand sex, and if they've ever had it. I drag my thick feet.

When I walk into her office, she is eating spoonfuls of yogurt. Low-fat, strawberry. Its saccharine smell lingers in the office air. I breathe slowly.

"Hello, Ms. Hatchworth." I sit.

"Hi, Antoine," she says, hurriedly taking her last few bites. "Sorry about the yogurt, my lunch started a little late."

I shake my head. "No problem."

Her lips smack. She takes another bite and uses her spoon to scrape the container. I wait.

"So how's class?" She has finished so I look up at her, more confident I can stomach it.

"Fine."

"You're taking Chem?" she says, looking down at a sheet of paper. "And Calc." She frowns.

"Yes," I say stoically. I wonder why she asks about things she already knows are true.

"And how are you handling it?"

Her glasses slide slowly down the ridge of her nose. Her chiffon blouse cascades atop her large desk's linoleum. She will poke me and prod me until I say something new. "I don't like Calc much," I say. "Or Chem. But it's fine." I look out the window. *Tap tap* goes my knee.

"Remember at our meeting this year, you said you would share more during check-ins." She is right. I remember. The folder and the table and the chairs filled with adults. My teacher, Ms. Hatchworth, my mother, the man from SPED. My father waiting at home with a stiff drink and torn shoes. My hands clammy and shaking. Sweating, discussing with strangers my warm, rotting brain. My eyes narrowing shyly beneath the window's harsh light. My mouth moving slowly with promises I don't keep.

"Yes, Ms., I'll try." I grind my teeth. They feel crooked.

"Are you using your accommodations? You know, when you need them?" She means my exceptions; there are rules I'm allowed to break. If I need time after class, I can stay and copy the board. If I can't keep up during Chem lab, I can perform a computer simulation instead of the real thing. I can exclude and decide, I can choose to look weird. I will not make this decision. She already knows I have not. I again wonder why she asks when my teachers have told her the things she wants to know.

"I don't ever feel like I need them."

She nods, lips pressing together tersely.

I think about my retainer and how I wish I had it with me to pop in my mouth. I think about brackets—of income, on paper. I think about how I wish things were in order, shoved tightly into line. Of how other kids struggle, too—with math, chem, and life—but they're all outside now and I am stuck smelling strawberry.

For the rest of the hour, we do things as planned. She checks our quick list. We discuss test grades and study hours and lunch periods and crying. We talk about how to make things easier for me, how to breathe right, how to score well on English papers. We talk about next year and college and applications and trying. I stare at the walls. Their gravel etches me dry, wrung raw, tired; I leave her room swollen, eyes swimming with me.

And I see Yerania there, sitting demurely in this small hall, perched in

an old, woven chair. Its cushion threads have come loose, white balls of fluff peeking from its sides. The flowered, dim pattern peeks through the gap in her legs.

She sees me and looks surprised. I wonder at her sitting there. She shouldn't be surprised. I should be. This hallway is not for all students. This hallway is for me. This hallway is where I feel safe. It is for students like me.

"Hey," she waves. "I get to see you here, too, huh?"

I look around, as if for witnesses. As usual, there are none. I look to read the label on Ms. Hatchworth's office door. It's no use to lie.

"IEP," I say, gesturing towards her room, to its stiff air and yogurt smell. "I have to every week."

Yerania nods. She is quiet.

"What about you?" I ask, though I know I'm meant not to. She can do math, can talk slowly. She speaks her mind and keeps distance, she does well in school.

She crosses her legs then thinks twice, letting her feet ground to the floor.

"Well, I lost my marbles," she says and smiles, just a little too sadly.

## *Yerania*

**I arrive to Chemistry class** to see a small pouch at my desk. It is soft, cloth, and gray, full of lumps. A string attaches a note to the neck, ties the pouch tightly shut. I lift it. It is stuffed full with marbles. I unfold the note.

In carefully penciled cursive are two neat lines: "Don't be silly. They're right here."

I suck in a deep breath. I hide the bag swiftly, stuff it beneath the fabric of my dress.

**It is time.** My weekly meeting, my check-in. My "Are you sure you're okay?" that's supposed to check me. Sweat drips, I am hidden in sick, tired thoughts. Downhill, rolling, all of them. Chest thick like cement.

I'm light on my feet regardless, summer dress floating. I correct my poor posture. I hold my head high. I walk into Ms. Hatchworth's office, its gravel walls, its ticking time.

"Hello, Yerania," she says loudly. I cringe. "You may close the door behind you." I do as she asks and the latch clicks, makes a din.

"I'm so glad you came in today," she starts. My mother has briefed her. She knows, knows what she thinks is everything. I fake a soft smile. I count to four and breathe in.

"I know you've been through a lot, and I want you to know that you don't have to be in here." But I do. "If I'm not helpful, that's okay." But it's not. "I am glad you are here, though, and I think these sessions can be a safe place for you to come and speak your mind." But I can't.

Ms. Hatchworth is young like me; I notice her slimness. My thighs shift

in my seat as I try to spread their sweat, a thickening layer between skin and ceramic. Sit quietly, she won't notice. She has shiny, white teeth.

I prepare all my lines. I've practiced, after all.

"Mom," I'd said earlier. "I'm really worried people won't like this dress." My mother smiled and brushed back my hair. She said, "You look great, sweetie," and gave my head a quick kiss.

"Mom," I'd said earlier. "What if the kids at school don't like me?" And she matched my fake pout and gave my left shoulder a squeeze. "Just be yourself," she said, "and if they don't like you, I don't like them."

I've practiced these scripts, put my own to the test. I did promise my mother I'd live normally if we left. I did promise my father I'd live normally if we left. As I speak to her, he smiles, in our trite little home. I give a sweet smile here, and it's almost choral, this charm.

My seat feels small. I run my right thumb along the hem of my dress.

"So how are you feeling today? Are you feeling comfortable at school?"

I smile. "For the most part," I say. "I just hope people will like me. What do you think of this dress?"

"I think you look great," Ms. Hatchworth replies. Algorithmic, methodic. She smiles to support me and I slide in sweat down my chair.

## *Antoine*

**I see her there often**, in the hallway where I am safe. She talks toward me, not away. Her hips always face forward. I think she knows I prefer this, that things are direct. Upholstery is unkind, the feel of tired, woven chairs. I think maybe, just maybe, kindness is not simply something one only finds alone.

The first time I understand math, I am in fact not alone.

She sits with me, sometimes. We talk through equations. I show her my scrawl. She sits and explains as I wonder what time she will need to leave for her appointment. Ms. Gurney's door is often quiet, its latch locked I'm sure. It chides its label at us, its report card we've failed. I do not like when she points at it. She still does so often.

I lend her my best pen. It has an eraser and thick ink and doesn't bleed through thin paper. She knows this, understands this. She thanks me and smiles, rests the pen back in my lap.

You're the one with the homework, anyway," she says as she opens her backpack.

With fumbling fat fingers, I start to point and ask quietly. Through the wall of thick air, her words reach me and I talk back. Her breath smells of soda. I prefer to drink tea.

We don't talk much in class. We only talk here. I learn more about her, and I now know many things. I know she tutors on weekends and won't offer to tutor me. I know she tells me things anyway, lends her notes, teaches math. I know she likes popcorn and patterns, the flowers on her dress. I know she hates carrot sticks, hates my dip deep in ranch. I know I

eat them anyway. I know to turn away from her sneer as my crooked teeth snap them. I need to feel the crack of them, feel their toughness giving way. I know she understands this. I know she doesn't care. I know she takes pen to her skin, etches small words and doodles in the crevice of her elbow. *Chem homework. Tutor Bradley. Ms. G's @ 4 p.m.* Written reminders, written schedules that impress. She etches spirals, a heart, a peace symbol, an eyeball. I wonder why she does this, why she doesn't plan someplace more normal, like paper or a desk.

"You know," she says one day, "we should do something next week. Like, outside of school."

I freeze, carrot suspended inches from my agape, tepid mouth. She sits on the floor beside me, floats her legs out in front of her. She leans back. We rest against white bricks on the cool, shining wall.

"What is it you like to do, anyway, when you're not stuck hanging here?"

I think hard on this. I do. I like watching poker and ping pong on the TV in my room. I like large puzzles, to read, to relace my shoes. Most often I like silence, but I like noise certain times when I'm alone and askew. Beethoven. Jim Morrison. Madonna because my mom played it, way back when, when she talked to me more too. I think of time spent, how it stretches, how I must sit to work on homework every day after school.

"Well, I hang at home, mostly." Watch professionals bounce tiny white balls with their paddles in a dimly lit room.

She looks disappointed.

"Hm," she says. She looks down at her shoes. It is silent for a second. She is thinking, I can tell, with her small face scrunched like a Q. I feel the quiet gather, can feel it fill the humid hallway.

"You can come over."

"No, you weirdo," she responds sharply, shifts her eyes to meet mine. "And you're not welcome at my house, either."

I stammer. "Oh. Alright." Pick up another carrot. Bite loudly and chew.

"I want to do something new. Something fun, or cool," she says. My chest hammers. I hear its *knock, knock*, it hurts. "I am new here, after all. Would be nice to figure out some of what people at this school normally do."

We stare, both blankly. I am an old, creaky door of thick, dense, rotting wood. Her, too, I have let down, curse my thick brain and its rules. My knocking continues. It grows louder, and will grow louder still. Until I open up, and I answer it. Struck by something, I speak.

"I've got a car," I say, though I don't. I have learned to drive, though, and sometimes go for groceries my mother forgot in my sister's old Subaru. I offer to drive her somewhere, pray I'll figure out where, because I know I am supposed to know normal things, too.

## Yerania

**He is weird—this I know.** There's a cramp in his side, an impropriety he can't suppress. It's nice, though, to hide there. I let his odd, encumbered

gait and eye-wells and stutters fill silent spaces I often hate.

I am weird—this he knows. He gets it, I think, all life's rhythm and sound. And though the kid can't do math, he can keep metronomic time with the tick of his foot. I wonder if he tells her things. About his math homework, his anxiety, his manic cravings for green tea. There's a lot he does know, sure, but just because he knows doesn't mean he understands. Like calculus, or conversation, or nutrition, or me. He doesn't understand why I asked him for a drive, why I need someone just blind enough to occupy a scratchy seat.

The hours with Ms. Hatchwork pass that way, painless. A giggle here, a sniff there. Methodical acting, a secret best left hanging. Our meetings will go this way. They will go this way for weeks. Each time, it gets easier, her nuts and bolts more apparent. She is couth, prim and proper, and asks me questions that land in palms like warm bowls of soup. She wears scarves and smiles kindly and believes my excuse for my poor work at school. I can play this like a fiddle, silly fickle little me.

A vector represents force; its numbers indicate direction. *Up 2, right 3* always looks like (2,3). We can calculate its distance, its limited time. Real life isn't so tidy, but one can play that way, pretend it's so. Physics is a soft science, after all. Count the clock ticks through breakfast and make them always the same. Compound each breath and movement with direction, know which rooms to avoid and in which are fun to hide. Plug in the same action and you'll find the same product. Just keep counting numbers, just keep killing time.

I do well in Calculus. I volunteer after school. I tutor for Ms. Gurney and buy nice clothes, laugh at boys. I get home late and wake up early and attend my weekly meetings, strict script still in hand. I get home later and later. I get slimmer and slimmer.

It grates slowly, the hiding. Nothing methodical is ever smooth or ever easy, it's like a clock tick that bothers, and I sit in class some days and linger. I catch myself sometimes in musings or slippage, in the fear of my thigh sweat when I rise from a desk. At times, my skin crawls with things, these secrets that move. I learn I can suppress, I can map time and numbers, can control what's let inside. I smile small at teachers; my tone is cold as gusts of air, cold as the silent whoosh as an unlocked door opens.

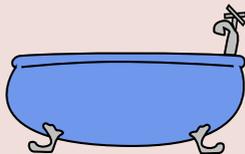
Until one day, she notices. Until one day, she sees me. I wear a short skirt and it's too short; I invite a gaze up my thigh.

Ms. Hatchworth asks subtly, testing the water with a tiny toe. My bland heart beats madly, my big ears whoosh wildly, and in a voice I don't recognize with a shape I can't explain, I hear myself say it:

"Antoine," I say. "Antoine did it. He hurt me."

**Holly Van Hare** is a writer and educator from Boca Raton, FL currently living in Brooklyn, NY. Holly is passionate about liberatory and critical education and works as director of a social and emotional learning intervention and research project in New York City schools. In her spare time, Holly enjoys writing poetry and poetic prose, as well as reading a nice mix of memoirs, theory, and fiction. She began as an Associate Editor for *Caustic Frolic* in Fall 2019, served as Editor in Chief for Spring and Fall of 2020, and has continued as the Senior Poetry Editor since Spring 2021. She hopes to continue integrating her creative capacities into experiences working with students and peers in the years to come.

## Cinderella's Monster



**And so it came to be**, as it very often is, that the true monster of the tale was revealed long after you, Dear Heart, had toddled off to bed.

But have you not yet grasped that, “And so they lived happily ever after,” is but a cue for innocent heads to rest on welcoming pillows and dream before said dreams have learned to sharpen their teeth?

Do you not realize that children are to be sent away at Intermission, but you, Dear Hardened Heart, must carry on?

Thus our story continues.

After the festivity had yawned its last—with final stumbling royal toast, wistful maidens whisked home by chaperones, iced cakes tucked into glittering pocketbooks, fading orchestral strains to be hummed upon waking—the moment arrived for the couple’s first bedding.

Cinderella knew she was ignorant and she was eager to be taught. She knew her Prince to be gentle. Charming. She longed to be swept away to unbounded joys.

The next morning, a chambermaid swallowed a gasp. She was alone in the cavernous room, arms overflowing with abundant fresh linens. This maid had anticipated a deep blot of virginal blood—the head laundry matron had forewarned her with a nodding smirk. Nevertheless, youthful as she was, she wondered all day long, and the day after that.

Should there have been quite that much blood everywhere? But she kept her questions to herself.

**Two years later**, this very chambermaid had been elevated to the post of sole lady’s maid to the Princess. She was called Haneul. Only Haneul was trusted to dress Cinderella and assist with her bath. On the rare occasions the maid was unable, Cinderella saw to her own ablutions independently, over shocked protestations. A royal simply cannot clean or dress herself! On this matter she was known to be silly, obstinate.

In everything else she was perfectly malleable. Such a dear princess.

Cinderella once believed: *If you tell a wish, it won’t come true.* Thus, if you do not tell, might not your deepest desires come to pass?

Her eligible, enviable monster unveiling the truth of that lie.

And then one evening,

Welts rose high, screaming, from her undressed back, her inner thighs. Haneul eased bathwater over Cinderella's wounds, face crumpled with compassion. Earlier that day, her Princess had joined the maid in tidying the bed chamber, deft and practiced, in discreet companionship. Side by side, with none to disturb.

Now it was time for Haneul to ready her mistress—gleaming, fragrant, should the master choose to have her again that night. Now it was time for water—cleansing, stinging.

This should not be, she thought.

Heads held close, soon both were weeping. Silently, for the room did echo.

Bruises merging with mercy and love. Tasting of salt, rose, tender heat.

Haneul ventured a whisper.

"You can run."

"We."

And resigned no longer to pace out destinies imposed upon them, serving themselves up to masters and monsters—appeasing, smiling, pleasing—these two women, mistress and maid no more, now planned, as priceless nicked glass slippers in a corner sat and accumulated dust.

**For My Dearest**, this was not the end, merely the next Intermission.

Or

Was it The End?

My pages have been lost in the maw  
of churning waters—

Yet I know that they planned...

And after they planned, they leapt, off lowest cliffs into softest waves, toward frigid blackness concealing untold beasts within, in chase of a faraway home which knew them not—yet past boundaries they would cross nonetheless, and they leapt, leapt breathlessly hand in hand, breaking apart mid-air. They leapt            side by side.

I witnessed them.

Thus, My Red Heart, we draw close to the awaited

And so they lived

happily

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## The Foot Race on PhytoLore

**From her position in the middle of the line,** Bianca Hernandez suppressed a shudder. It wasn't cold under the contest site's dome, but the ten-foot piles of snow outside the barrier persuaded her mind she should wear more than shorts and a T-shirt. Some of the other contestants didn't even wear that much, relying on their furry bodies for protection.

She was the only human competing among the entrants. Like Earth, the other civilizations in the contest came from the far edge of the Milky Way Galaxy. Each individual of a dozen species possessed the same desperation as she did to seize the prize, although their reasons varied.

Sol's third planet made a lot of progress in the last century. Genetic manipulation ended the scourge of cancer and several endemic diseases. Using nanobots cleansed arteries of blockages, making heart attacks and strokes rarities. Nonetheless, even in the year 2207, humans had yet to solve every problem.

Earth scientists still could not come up with a faster-than-light drive to allow humankind to find new homes in the vast universe.

Extending life spans meant dangerous overcrowding. Bianca lived with four generations of her family in a four-stacked apartment in the Southwestern Arcology. She loved the Greats. Her great, great, great *abuela* still enjoyed all her faculties, ran half marathons, and always had a pointed comment about current events at family dinners.

"You know if this contract, the Cartologan's offer, sounds too good to be true, it might be too good to be true," she offered when Bianca wanted to enter the trials. "Maybe you should reconsider, Bianca, *mi nieta*."

Bianca weighed her *abuela*'s advice against Terra's urgent needs. While there were colonies on most of Sol's planets and large moons, none supported a significant population or qualified as truly self-sustaining. Earth itself was bursting at the seams.

The possibility of interstellar flight could save billions of lives. Governments put the funding planned for generational ships on hold when the Cartologans dangled the carrot of virtual instantaneous travel to distant star systems as one of the potential rewards for the winner of the contest. Colonists could arrive at viable planets in their own lifetime, instead of generations later.

What the Cartologans would get from this deal, no one could figure out. More trade partners, or some altruistic reward with religious overtones? Nobody knew.

Why the technically advanced Cartologans used something as primitive as a foot race to determine the winner made no sense to Bianca. But the need for Earth to obtain the treasure compelled her to discount her *abuela*'s advice and to sign up for the trials designed to pick Terra's representative.

The testing began with examinations to find the individuals with the highest IQs and depth of general knowledge. Bianca rose to the top in this area. Since childhood, she read thousands of actual books on a variety of topics, played several musical instruments, and spent untold hours in virtual reality with cyber games. These trained her to see solutions to unsolvable situations and to never give up until she found an answer.

**Waiting for the race to begin**, the string of runners shifted nervously as three Cartologan officials entered the elevated observation structure. Their homeworld hid somewhere in the dense center of the Galaxy. Cloaked in yards of red fabric, a few hints of their body framework showed—there were two eye slits in the cloth, and a few lumps and bumps stretched the fabric. But we only knew a few facts about them for sure. Of uniform height, they measured precisely six feet, three inches. They walked as if bi-pedal, with a slight side-to-side motion. As far as scientists could deduce, they breathed the Oxygen/Nitrogen atmospheres of planets like Earth, with no visible equipment. That was it—the sum of knowledge about their physiology.

All the creatures taking part in the race displayed mammalian characteristics. Did this hint at a clue to the Cartologan’s purpose? Bianca, with a life science Ph.D. in comparative anatomy, found her neck hairs rising when she thought about it. What did a certain body type and level of technology have to do with contestant selection?

A crackling of the energy net framework surrounding the contest site pulled Bianca’s attention away from her disturbing thoughts. The purpose of the grid was not to keep out a dangerous atmosphere. Rather, it prevented the entry of the curious wildlife, who often sat outside the structure. One of the cow-sized spiders must have brushed too near to the electrical netting.

The creatures moved on eight bent and bristling appendages. Bianca saw bits of fabric attached to the upper surfaces of those limbs, streaming in the wind.

Did this show an elevated level of intelligence, or were the colorful banners produced physiologically, perhaps designed by nature to attract mates? A puzzle. The Cartologan’s list of rules blocked her from going outside the grid to evaluate her theories since she arrived.

**She *had* used her pre-race time to size up the contest participants.**

The nearest being in line next to her, a unipod Alteran, looked like a giant single-footed rabbit. Research she had accessed reported they were far faster than any other creature.

At last night’s closing party, this unipod sat with a companion at the bar near Bianca, imbibing in copious amounts of spiked carrot juice. The universal translator provided by their hosts interpreted his burp-like sounds into English in Bianca’s ear.

“Burp-BURP-buurpp...” (Love, LOVE this stuff. Found it on my visit to Earth. Gives me quite a buzzzz. Not that it’ll affect my speed tomorrow. Nothing can slow me down.)

His pal, a Lemarian whose green reptilian face contrasted with the ample golden fur covering his body, said through the translator, “@#!\*&\*^...” (You better watch how much you drink. Too much vitamin A from the carrots can be deadly to us mammals.)

Bianca didn’t wish the bunny any harm, but she hoped the potent beverage would slow down the braggart in today’s race.

The person to her right, a female Manicore, stood tall, with arms extending to her ankles. With mammalian charms obvious in a bikini-like top, her skin shined an iridescent lilac. Both her fingers and toes revealed webbing. Bianca thought she must spend a lot of time in the water and would excel at any swimming event.

“Good luck,” Bianca said to her, trying for sincerity. She knew her heart harbored a truer sentiment. *I hope you come in second.*

The Manicore looked Bianca up and down, smiling with impressive pointy teeth.

“Break a leg,” she countered through the translator.

Was her statement in the theatrical tradition, Bianca wondered? Or maybe the device interpreted her meaning exactly?

Repressing a shiver, Bianca looked to the left, past the Alderon bunny at her most feared opponent, warming up with jumping jacks. Last evening, she purposely tried to keep away from Marr Tel, a gorgeous Therzion male, whose masculine aura threatened to lure her to his side and forget about her primary goal.

When she first saw him on indoctrination day, Bianca admitted she wanted to learn more about him. She read what she could find, discovering why his planet sent him. They needed advanced knowledge of genetic manipulation. Males on Therzion suffered with an exceptionally low fertility rate. An extra boost of pheromones increased their chances of attracting more females, with greater odds of impregnating them. Hence the allure Marr Tel exerted on Bianca any time he came close to her.

Impregnation by an alien figured way down on Bianca’s bucket list.

Last night, he trapped her at the canape table, just as she popped a mushroom filled with—she was not sure what—into her mouth.

“Do all Earth women look as interesting as you?”

*Well, his line is a little less lame than most,* Bianca thought, chewing quickly and gulping down the *hors d’oeuvre*. It tasted, thank goodness, like chicken.

She looked down at her six-foot-long body. The skin revealed in the halter-top dress she wore typified most people in the 23rd century—tan with a hint of copper. Her aqua-blue eyes startled in contrast to her black hair. Rare, but she knew several people with that color combination.

“Oh, I’d say I’m just your average Terran woman,” she said, looking into eyes, not average by any means.

More humanoid than some of her college boyfriends, brown-skinned Marr Tel stood seven feet tall with compelling color-changing irises, and rust-red hair falling to his slim waist. The only feature hinting to a different genetic history were three rows of flat knobs on his forehead. The middle-row bumps stood out, larger than the others. What purpose they served,

she could not find out in any of the literature she read.

“What’s your strategy for tomorrow’s race?” Marr Tel asked.

“Now, why would I reveal my plans to you?”

“Perhaps we could meld our strengths and produce something beautiful we could share.”

Bianca felt a wave of longing at his words, swaying toward him. She experienced a vision of his broad naked shoulders and all that hair enveloping her narrow frame. With her hand held high to ward off his spell, she escaped Marr Tel before fantasy became reality.

**Pulling her attention back to the starting line**, she avoided Marr Tel’s gaze as he crouched in runner form, waiting for the starting signal.

Too bad Cartologan rules didn’t allow friends and family at the site. Bianca could use a bit of cheering at the moment.

As the huge timer displayed over the Cartologans neared zero, she mentally powered up her enhanced metabolism to get out in front of the herd.

The course curved sharply left. Cinder-like black material provided surface friction. The high stand accommodating the Cartologans blocked the arched path, so none of the participants viewed the initial obstacle they would encounter.

The blare of a shrill horn launched the contestants. Bianca purposely aimed for the center of the pack. Rounding the first curve, she skidded to the edge of a pond filled with various shaped stepping stones. She quickly plotted a path, not the shortest, but with the flattest rocks, and skipped over them, grinning as she heard the kerplods of a half-dozen rivals.

A climbing wall ahead proved easy to scale. From her peripheral vision, Bianca saw the rabbit-like Alteran grabbing each projection with its long, prehensile tongue. The blue, sticky saliva coating his tongue slowed the bunny down at each outcrop as he struggled to pull it away from the rock surface.

So much for his super-speed, Bianca thought.

Ascending to her right, Marr Tel threw her a cheerful grin, the power of which she deflected by gritting her teeth and leaping over the wall into a deep pond.

Wishing for the webbed fingers of the Manicore who powered across the water with windmill-like strokes of her long arms, Bianca dug in and used her best Australian crawl to cross the distance.

Dripping and out of breath, she staggered into a flower-covered meadow. Dozens of small, wide-winged creatures flew over the bright purple flowers, humming a melody nestling into Bianca’s brain. Waves of peace threatened her to stop and lie down on the soft carpet. Her competitors swayed and swooned toward the verdant green turf.

To her horror, Marr Tel stumbled next to her, grabbing her shoulders for stability.

She would not give in to her desire to fold her arms around his trim waist and nestle her head on his chest.

Fighting the pull of his masculinity, blocking out the warbling of the bird-like creatures, Bianca proved why Earth selected her for this race. She dug into her memory to resurrect the most annoying jingle she could find. At first, she just hummed the tune. Then the words came more easily, and she bellowed the earworm from over two centuries ago—"Don't Stop Believing" by Journey. The song and its insistent rhythm would linger in her mind for days. Filling her head with the tune let her break out of powerful arms and run through three more obstacles with no other being near her.

Then a wide trench of quicksand surrounded by high walls gave her pause. At the far end of the pit, the three Cartologans sat looking down at her from their observation structure. Below them, flat stepping stones with a finish-line tape awaited.

Spurred on by the sight of victory, and before she sank beyond her ankles, Bianca again dredged the database of her mind and grinned. She flattened her long body on the surface and slowly dog-paddled across to triumph.

### **Bianca won the knowledge of the Cartologans for humankind.**

She wanted to go back to Earth and find out just what treasures awaited Terra. Overwhelming that desire was the thought of parting from Marr Tel. Instead, she followed him to his home planet. She hadn't realized Therzion was a desert world. A Cartologan ship deposited them at a tiny spaceport near the planet's North pole. The city featured several oases surrounded by buildings embedded low in the sand.

It was dark when Marr Tel led her inside the hermetically sealed door of one structure, and after opening a second portal, entered a branching tunnel.

"What time is it?" Bianca asked, suppressing a yawn.

Looking at the device on his arm, Marr Tel said, "Third Division, just before sunrise. This shift will end in a few units."

The information meant next to nothing to Bianca, and she felt too tired to ask for more data.

They passed rooms with large portal-type windows. Bianca looked inside as Marr Tel pulled her along. One held tables and food serving stations occupied by a few tall members of his race. Another immense space featured floor-to-ceiling shelves of labeled canisters. Maybe this was a library?

Then they passed a brightly decorated room, too large for the few small children sitting inside. Seeing them brought home to Bianca the sad reality of Therzion's dwindling population. The shifts Marr Tel mentioned must go around the clock if children were studying at this time, Bianca thought.

When they reached Marr Tel's apartment, he led her into a room divided by finely loomed silk-like material, crisscrossing the small space to form complex pockets, somehow increasing the area's square footage by degrees of magnitude.

"This is so beautiful," Bianca said, and then caught her breath at the sight of Marr Tel's blazing eyes.

A few seconds later, a parallel trail of clothing led from the main room to his bed. Bianca came out of the haze of passion Marr Tel's kisses induced when he lifted his mouth from her lips and focused his ever-changing eyes on hers.

"Before I enter you, I must ask if you want me to use the sptlnz?" He pointed to the central bumps on his forehead.

"Whaah, what do you mean?" Bianca's wide eyes centered where he pointed.

"I'm going to share a secret with you, not known by many outside our planet. I can use a telekinetic power directed by these to harness the flow of my sperm toward the egg you just released. We might be blessed by creating a child if that is what you want. Or I can deflect the stream and we will just have the joy of being together."

Thinking of revising her bucket list, Bianca said, touching the bumps on his forehead, "Oh, Marr Tel, how did you know I released an egg yesterday? I always feel the mittelschmerz pain."

"I just know these things."

"Is there documentation of conception between our people? Do you have any children already?" The words popped out before she could censor them.

The pain she saw in Marr Tel's eyes answered her second question before he said, "No, I have not been successful in that way. And I haven't heard of a Human-Therzonian offspring. But why don't we give it a try?"

His eyes glowed, a golden flame within a black circle. Bianca threw her arms around his wide shoulders, accepting his embrace while his long hair enveloped her.

After recovering from the passion they shared, Marr Tel answered more of Bianca's questions about his sptlnz powers.

"Hunters used it in the old days to direct arrows and throw weapons at prey. Now it's refined to use as I just did. Our population is dwindling, there are fewer babies each year. We hoped I would win information from the Cartologan database to solve our most profound problem."

Bianca and Marr Tel didn't conceive during the night, or in the five years they lived happily together. Marr Tel worked as a thermal engineer, building conduits to the planet's molten core. This heat ran pollution-free engines, and produced a quantity of water, making life possible on Therzion.

Finding out Bianca's qualifications, the scientific community offered her a position in their genetic research program. After checking the composition of Therzonian blood and the native minerals on their planet, she suggested that Therzion was not their world of origin, and they needed to uptake other minerals, some of them from Earth. An uptick in live births in the next few years indicated this might be a solution to their reproductive problems. The two peoples were more closely related than they had ever thought. Bianca's contributions cemented a growing unity between the two planets.

Surprisingly, when Earth's nations mined the Cartologan database and began construction of faster-than-light ships, the extra-luminal engines

running these craft needed connections to a human pilot's brain and neural net. Individuals with this talent proudly joined a worldwide corps, the SpaceNet Marines.

After Earth's manufacturers constructed the ships and trained SpaceNet Marines staffed them, the Cartologans called for a meeting with Earth's leaders. One member of a red-robed trio stepped forward and read the last page of their original contract.

"After building seven squads of ThroughLight ships, this planet's inhabitants will have gained eternal benefits from our technology; their functional mental contribution will thereafter become a part of us for that length of time. To make sure of your compliance, we will demonstrate what will happen to the surface of this planet if you try to abrogate the clause."

A few seconds after this announcement, a small meteor came burning through the atmosphere and impacted on a relatively empty area of the South Pacific Ocean. Tsunamis did minor damage to Asian coastlines, but the threat was clear and instantly understood.

Cartologan owned the Earth.

How could all the legal minds of Earth not have seen the meaning of this mandate? The paragraph, in effect, allowed the Cartologans the right to use the brainpower of humanity for their benefit-forever.

This is what they got out of the contract. This was their long-reaching plan. They would find a lesser mammalian civilization with some vital needs. They didn't care which of the twelve contestants won. The important thing was the mammalian brain. The winner, the target population, would use their own resources to build a fleet of starships. Trained pilots' brains would connect to the neural network that ran the engines. Eventually, the target planet, Earth, would populate and develop new worlds with colonists.

The Cartologans could then transport their own extra populations to the new worlds, where they would have an enslaved workforce tending them at minimum expense. Trade between these new worlds would power the ever-expanding Cartologan empire.

By year five, a clandestine Earth group conscripted Bianca, with her unique talents, to help in the battle against cybernetic slavery.

The first thing she did was convince Marr Tel's people to join with Earth in the struggle. Their telekinetic ability made it possible to change the neural programming of pilots and neutralize Cartologan commands. Also, buried in the network of data activating their propulsion drive, human scientists and mathematicians discovered clues to the location of the Cartologan's home system.

Bianca and Marr Tel joined the crew of the *Revenge*, which could infiltrate the Cartologan's home system. Once there, they hoped to discover a fatal flaw forcing the Cartologans to break the contract.

But that's another story.

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## When It's Time to Remember

**The old man stood with his hands behind his back**, oblivious to the new eyes that were on him. His skin was tan and wrinkled, his left hand home to a weathered gold ring. He wore a black cap pulled low over his eyes and a tan jacket that she thought might smell faintly of smoke. If only she could get closer.

The woman rounded the corner, stopped, and peered into the wine cooler. Santa Margherita on sale, Ruffino full price. She was sure he'd be gone by the time she rounded the other three. She passed the reds, the fancy cheeses, and turned her way back to the bakery.

The bananas in her cart no longer existed; the yellow peppers, bag of onions, gone. The song in her headphones came to a pause and the squeak of the cart's front wheels stopped. He was there. Bent over the cakes, the ones made in the morning in the bakery in the back. He'd only moved an inch.

She crept toward him, suddenly aware of her every footfall. She just wanted to get a little closer, to get a better look. She wouldn't do anything. What would she say, anyway? *Ah ha! I've found you. I knew you'd be here.* No, she would never say these things. So she just stood.

He took his time with the sweets and finally selected a small, round, chocolate cake. He placed it carefully in his basket and walked past the butcher and the dry goods. The man moved slowly and the woman stood for a second, unsure of what she'd do next. She unlocked her phone and checked her list. At this rate she'd never make it home on time to get dinner in the oven. She was sure, though, that when she finally looked up, the man would be out of view and she could go about her day, collecting her groceries and thinking only of the chicken she would prepare later that night.

But when she lifted her eyes, set on heading to the produce section, he was still in view. There was nothing to do, but she couldn't not do anything. Again, her feet moved against her will and she found herself behind him, staring at the shelves in an aisle that housed nothing on her list. The man idled by the canned goods before wandering to the next aisle over. The woman followed behind him like a shadow. They moved like this around the store until three cans of tuna, a loaf of bread, and a box of donuts had joined the chocolate cake. When the man finally made it to the checkout, the woman promised herself once again that she would simply return to her list and go about her day. She turned away from the register and down the candy aisle, her eyes fixated on the colorful shelves. She made it about halfway down the aisle before she turned and walked toward the exit, leaving her cart sitting half-empty next to the Reese's.

In the parking lot she walked slowly to her car, unsure both if the man had noticed her in there and of what she would say if he turned around and saw her following him out of the grocery store empty-handed. But the man never turned. He crossed the lot and as she watched him, she could

already tell which car belonged to him. He loaded his bags into the gold Honda and climbed in, completely unaware.

She still wasn't sure if she would really follow him or not. What was she going to do? Go to his home, and then what? She couldn't. There would be no reason. But no matter how many times she told herself to stop, her feet continued toward her car. She got in quickly and sat for a second before starting the engine and turning left out of the lot, away from her home. She followed him down the main street and into a modest little neighborhood in the middle of town.

When the man pulled into the driveway of a tiny brick rambler, the woman felt the odd sense that she'd been there before. She pulled over, just across from the house, and watched as he unloaded his bags in one slow-moving trip. Once he was inside, she turned the car off and waited for the light in the front room to come on. She held her breath, transfixed by the tiny window to the left of the door. A few minutes passed and she turned the car back on, ready to head home, or maybe back to the store. But then it happened. The light flickered once and then illuminated the small living room next to the entryway. She watched the man carry the brown paper grocery bags from the living room to the kitchen and she turned the car off again.

Before she could stop herself, she was standing on her tiptoes reaching for a large brass door knocker. She knocked twice and then stepped back. With her hands in her pockets and her eyes wide, she shuffled from foot to foot and counted to five, ten, and then twelve. Then the door opened in front of her.

"Darling, you'll have to forgive me. I'm moving slow as molasses these days." The man stood in the doorway and chuckled.

The girl smiled up at him and the two looked at each other like old friends.

"Well don't just stand there, come on in."

She took her coat off in the entryway and hung it on the hook behind the door. It didn't wobble like it used to. He must have fixed it, she thought. She untied her Converse and left them on the mat, right next to his brown loafers. It was almost as if the space was left just for her. She followed him through the house, to the small kitchen in the back, where he shelved his tuna and cleared off the countertops.

"Are you hungry? I was about to make a snack. Could I fix ya something?" He didn't wait for an answer. Instead, he bent carefully over the crisper and pulled out a granny smith. He grabbed two small, glass plates from the shelf above the sink, a jar of peanut butter, and a sharp knife. He cut the apple with shaky hands and then divided it between the plates and placed them gingerly on the table. He pulled one of the wooden chairs out and motioned for her to sit. She did and he placed the jar of peanut butter in the center of the small table, between the two of them.

They dipped their apples and ate in comfortable silence. Every so often the man would look up at the girl and smile so wide it reached his wrinkled eyes. Once they finished, he cleared the plates, and though she offered to help, he insisted that he could manage.

“Tell ya what? I think those birds out there are probably hungry, too. What do you think?”

The girl answered by retrieving her shoes and waiting by the back door until he'd dried the plates. He hung the towel back on the oven handle and shuffled to the front room. When he came back with his brown loafers on, she turned the lock, which didn't stick how it used to, and the two stepped into the cold air.

Outside, he told her about the cardinal that'd been coming to visit in the evenings. Maybe, if they were lucky, they'd get to see him today. She asked how he could tell it was a boy and he described the vibrant red color of his feathers. “Just like that big dog you like. I call the bird Clifford, 'cause of him.”

They scattered the seeds on the ledge surrounding the grass and then went inside to watch through the window. They sat back down at the little table in the kitchen and laughed together as the plump squirrel he'd dubbed “Hefty” made off with most of the feed. They waited a while, but the cardinal never came. Or maybe they just didn't notice. After a few minutes, the man had shuffled to the closet in the living room and reached for the middle shelf.

“You're the blue player, if I recall correctly.” He smiled down at the open Parcheesi box. The girl remembered losing her favorite piece on Christmas Eve at least ten years back, but the old man set her player in the center of the board, next to his own green marker.

After he'd let her win, he walked to the fridge and, much to her surprise, pulled out two McDonald's vanilla milkshakes. They cheered their spoons and ate the ice cream that had somehow not melted at all. When they were almost finished, they both tipped their cups back and smiled at each other through milkshaked mustaches. At some point, the time on the clock caught the man's eye. How could he forget about the game? The two moved to the living room, where she snuggled up under his arm on the La-Z-Boy and fit in a way that made her feel tiny. A young Bryce Harper hit run after run, and as they watched they took breaks from telling each other stories only to cheer.

The Nats won, 7-4, and the two finished the game with a high-five. As soon as the program changed, the man turned the television off and turned to the girl. “Well, I'm sure you've got more stuff to do today than hang out with an old man like me. You get outta here and have some fun.”

The girl didn't protest. Not then and not later, when he offered to cut her a slice of cake for the road. He cut a generous piece and wrapped it carefully in tinfoil. In black sharpie he wrote in his perfect cursive “Love ya!—G”

In the doorway, he handed her the cake. “Well, you be good out there now, Darling. I'll see ya soon. Don't you go being a stranger.” He gave her a squeeze and she rested her head on the tall man's hunched shoulder. He smelled faintly of smoke.

The girl walked outside and down the street. The man stood in the doorway and waved until she was out of view.



**The woman blinked.** She wasn't sure how long she'd been staring at the tiny brick house or even where she was. Her stomach growled and she thought then of the chicken growing warm in her abandoned cart in the candy aisle. She turned the car on and pulled the mirror down. Her eyes were puffy and her mascara fringed them in dark, flaky circles. She wiped her face with the edge of her sleeve and closed the visor. When the woman looked back at the house, tears wet her eyes again. Gone was the American flag on the front porch. There was no garden to the right of the door. In place of the gold Honda sat a red Toyota, and the front room was dark. Not a single light shone.

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nonfiction





## "Let's Pretend"

**On Saturday mornings** my big sisters and I would get as close as possible to our huge cabinet radio, so tall that only when we got to third grade could we see the words in Webster's Unabridged International Dictionary, Second Edition, splayed open on its top. Our beloved ritual was listening to "Let's Pretend"—at 9 a.m. when we lived near Boston in the late 1940's and at noon after we moved to Seattle in 1950, due to the time difference between the two coasts.

Cast members' voices acted out familiar fairy tales. I always imagined Cinderella or Snow White as a sylph in her costume: Cinderella in rags and smudged face, later in a ballgown and glass slippers; Snow White in a dress of wintry satin with lace and frills.

This was just before the days of TV (I had seen one once, big as our cabinet radio, its tiny screen showing a baseball game) and of Disney movies, so my fantasies reigned. There was a little boy who often played a role—Hansel was one—and I realized he was only a little older than me. I wanted to be on "Let's Pretend" and be the only kind of star I knew about, other than the ones in the sky. I could imagine myself in crowns, wings, high heels, and luxurious long dresses—weren't they called frocks? And if I had to be a child rather than a princess, I would make a perfect Gretel.

The show was sponsored by Cream of Wheat—our favorite at the time, and still a comfort food when I make it with raisins and milk. There was a jingle we all knew by heart at the time, but until I looked it up online a few minutes ago, my rendition had a lot of duh-da-dums in it. The studio audience got to call out "Cream of Wheat" at least once during the program. If I couldn't be one of the cast, I at least wanted to be one of the kids singing and yelling!

*Cream of Wheat is so good to eat  
That we have it every day....  
It's good for growing babies  
And grownups too, to eat.  
For all the family's breakfast  
You can't beat [ALL TOGETHER NOW] Cream of Wheat!*

In the summer of 1953, when I was seven, it came to pass. We drove 3,000 miles back east to see grandparents and other relatives. In New York City, we took a Fifth Avenue double-decker bus, ate in an automat, and went to the top of the Empire State Building, but the highlight for me was being part of the "Let's Pretend" studio audience.

My memory is of being driven there in a big boat of an open convertible, a beautiful chartreuse green. Could that be right? Maybe it's just another make-believe memory to go with how special the occasion felt.

We were seated (I was bouncing up and down) and coached on when to be quiet, when to clap, and when to yell "Cream of Wheat!" in unison. The actors entered—with the sound effects men in the background—and sat on high stools in front of their big black microphones. I don't remember what the fairy tale was that day, though there were no children in the cast.

I was shocked that none of the cast were in costume. They looked like ordinary people, even a little dumpy. I don't remember exactly what they were wearing, not house dresses, but loose clothes that left them free to gesture and speak from their chests. I was very upset and started crying because the princess with the beautiful soprano voice was large and as old as my mother, a scarf around her head. My sisters took it in stride, big wise girls that they were, but I was devastated.

Self-centered as all kids are at that age, it had never occurred to me that what the actors really looked like was not how they appeared in my imagination. I was glad I wasn't playing Gretel because there was no way I could have pretended fear of a witch who wasn't snarling or wearing a black dress and pointed hat.

The only thing I really liked after that sudden disillusionment was being able to yell "Cream of Wheat" on cue. There was my (indistinguishable) voice going out over the radio waves, almost the same as being a star. I still smile at that memory.

My mother felt bad that she hadn't warned me. The day was gloomy after the dazzling morning. I don't know if we drove away in that chartreuse convertible, but it might as well have been our basic black 1950 Ford, or even an old dump truck.

People say, and I generally agree, that listening to a story fosters the imagination unlike watching a screen when someone else (maybe even a committee?) has decided how a character looks. The mind's eye is given free reign. But memory's a funny thing. After decades of seeing Disney's Cinderella, Snow White, and other big-eyed delicate heroines, those are the images that come to me when I think of these characters. I had to look far back in my little girl memory to unearth the fantasies that were once so clear that I was so disappointed not to see them incarnate in the "Let's Pretend" cast.

I think of another time—probably one of many—when there was a conflict between my images and reality. As a child, I wanted to be an archaeologist, having announced my hobbies were archaeology,

astronomy, and dolls. I read and re-read a 1940s book called, I think, *Lost Worlds*, about important excavations around the globe, illustrated by grainy black and white photos of the sites and finds. Then I graduated to the 1953 *Gods, Graves and Scholars* which was for grown-ups but had most of the same photos.

I didn't become an archaeologist; that dirty hot meticulous work wasn't for me. However, as an adult I visited Tutankhamen's tomb (a photo of his statue, tinted blue, was on the cover of *Lost Worlds*). Ever since, I have had a hard time remembering what I really saw, rather than the black and white photos from my favorite books.

But that was as an adult. I knew ahead of time that the site would not look like the photos. I was spared the shock of seeing ordinary people in ordinary clothes playing the magical "Let's Pretend" characters, and thus having an important piece of my childhood innocence shattered.

**Julia C. Spring** is a mostly-retired social worker and lawyer specializing in mental health law and adult guardianship. She has taught many students in both fields. When her professional articles started yearning toward the personal, she began writing short memoir pieces. She has since published in a number of journals, including *Touch*, *Persimmon Tree*, and *Awakened Voices*. One was a prize-winner in *Intima's* 2018 Compassion in Healthcare Essay Contest.

## Faith

**We lived in a duplex on Ashley Circle**, in the not-quite-as-nice neighborhood then, Mama managing the trailers up the road. I walked past the circle of them on my way to the bus stop every morning, the cache of less-than-we-were tucked in behind the pine trees. In the summertime, my sister rode her Big Wheel in our driveway, pulling the emergency brake, fishtailing, gravel arching into the air, heat shimmying over the asphalt. We spent some weekends with Daddy at his second wife's house, with the pool table in the basement and the chest freezer where I threw up that time I got sick, and he'd bring us back home on Sundays. The man who lived in the other half of our duplex, named Ron, worked at IBM and seemed rich, gave us presumptuous Christmas gifts.

Across the road, in a real house, with an upstairs and downstairs, the parents were "going through a divorce," as if it were the end of the world, the way it was the end, back then, when the world first began to come apart. When I spent the night at that house, we ate sophisticated, foreign things—pasta, not spaghetti, and bagels—the parents shadowy and cross, having mixed drinks. We camped outside in a tent one night, in the backyard, when I first thought of a boy kissing me, touching my hand.

Kenny the Preacher leaned forward from the couch, over the shaggy carpet, his face as honest and open and sincere as it could be, a true believer, earnestly worried about my eternity. He'd explained it like sitting down in a chair, the moment of surrender, when sitting became inevitable. "Do you accept him, Traci? Do you accept Jesus as your personal savior?"

*I wanted to say, "No, thanks. I'm good." Because I was good. I was good. Didn't need saving, much less my own personal savior. Surely, I wasn't bad enough at ten years old to need a whole person all to myself, dedicated to saving me.*

*And from what? I lived in lower-middle class white America in 1980, the dawn of another Age of Greed. Reagan got elected, for God's sake. In any other time, including first-century Palestine, I already lived in paradise, with indoor plumbing, transfusions and anesthesia, a refrigerator, white sugar in a five-pound bag, public education. Clearly, clearly, I was good.*

My mother's earnest face, and Kenny's. Their earnestness about my soul, about an even-better heaven and of course also the prospect of hell. How could I resist the threat of hell, its lurking, unpredictable dangers? Mama, hopeful and concerned and doing her duty, being good herself, a good mama. Kenny assured her about my illusion-delusion-of-goodness, about my blithe sinfulness, my lack of contrition about sins I didn't even know existed. About my mistake about life being good.

*I could feel my goodness, the goodness of my arms and legs, the air and nighttime sky where I already could find Orion, the weight of blankets piled on my warm bed, peach ice cream in the churn, the maple-red leaves. I couldn't feel those other, senseless things.*

I could feel their goodness, though. My mama's love for me and doing the best she could and Kenny's belief in the system, the father who killed his own son just for me. A linear system that made sense if you held your head a certain way and believed, tried hard enough, like Kenny did. Blood and agony millennia ago, to redeem my sinfulness. All to save one little white girl in 1980. Atonement-substitutionary, transactional.

*What harm was there in it, letting them think that? Her face lit up. She was so proud when I said yes. What did it cost me, seconds under the warm water in Kenny's arms, like rinsing my hair in the bathtub, down and back up, amens and hallelujahs from the crowded congregation, and then walking out of the pool, the font, with its plexiglass front, my clothes clinging to me, climbing the stairs as someone else stepped down into the water with the preacher? How much more I would've paid, would happily have paid, for Mama's smiling face from the first pew, so proud of me, so good.*

That first moment, my first lie about Jesus, formed a fulcrum. And then the plunge, taken without commitment, without sincerity. No going back now.

Believe, they said. Have faith. Believe. Make yourself believe. That's what faith is, believing even when you don't. Look at this person or that one, these foundations of the church. Look at how their faith has kept them

strong. We mean well, there's heaven in store, and hell is always at the door, waiting to swallow us up. Be a good girl and have faith, believe.

*Evolution and biology, beautiful things with long, flowing tendrils of connection and love, life woven into inexplicable and unimaginable variations, inscrutable, ineffable. Kinship with my cat, with my dog, with the little blue bird I shot with my BB gun and then cried over. Not just empathy but blood, commonality, family. The low pull in my tendons toward the hills and the grass, belonging to it, being and longing, joined together, my face against the rough bark of the tree, my bare feet on the slime-creek rock.*

We own the land and all the things. They are things; we buy and sell them. The body, the things, are sinful. Being is sinful. Longing is especially sinful. The very things you think are good. Believe. Make yourself believe—that's faith. Pry yourself loose from your experience, your delusion.

*The headline from my first day of school, Mama laminated and kept in a scrapbook because she knew history as it happened to us. Parents picketing outside elementary schools, not mine but across town, against the desegregation they hadn't been able to stop. It sat in the scrapbook, without comment, while we waited for a verdict, to see how it would all turn out. Nothing for us to do but wait and see. In classrooms together, still separated. Wait and see.*

What kind of girl do you see with the black boys? Trashy! Trashy white girls are who you see with them. I don't care how much money his father makes or how good he is to you. You're better than that. You save your virtue, your value, your treasure for someone who deserves you, someone with pasta and a chest freezer and two stories. You keep that in the bank until it's time to bargain with it, that spot of blood on the sheet, your wedding night. You leverage it for a good life you deserve. You be good and faithful and right.

*What about Jesus and the poor people? What about that man on the corner and the scary things he says, the way he smells? I like Tamika, why can't I go to her house and what does "the projects" mean? How does that hurt anyone, the way he is, the way they are together? Why are you so angry? Is Jesus always angry, always against the welfare queens? How do you tell which poor people want to work and which want to work the system? How do we know who deserves our love? What does compassion mean? Why can't he keep up?*

That's just the way it is. For God's sake stop thinking about it, stop looking at it, stop talking about it. Can't you just be satisfied? It's just how things are, and that's that. God doesn't like girls who ask those kinds of questions, and remember you're starting with a handicap with God, anyway, with Eve and that mess every month, the curse. You need to have faith. Faith and belief. Faith means you believe even when you don't believe, and look, it's in fancy letters on the back of my SUV and across the breasts of my t-shirt. Bring your kids to church with us and someone like Kenny will help you build your faith.

*The miracles of my own boys, their quickenings, their pulses and love and the connection of them. My mother and me, dreaming parallel dreams each night, connected still. Bloody intimacy, umbilical, mitochondrial.*

Feedlot cattle, chickens caged on the back of a truck, going to be slaughtered, perhaps the best day of their short lives. Prodding the cattle toward the stun of the sledgehammer, toward death, blood on the floor. "Pigs are smart, they don't want to get in the trailer. You got to drive them hard. They know what's coming." Turkeys with their genetics turned against them, corporate priorities over their own, reduced to enormous breasts who can't breed or fly. Farmers' children picking up the dead chicks from the floor of the chicken house, throwing them into a bucket, growing meat.

*Blood and agony, misery and terror, caught in the flesh. Where else would it go? Does Jesus want that? Is that his way? "This is my body," he said. "This is my blood." I can't eat that.*

Why do you have to talk about that? Can't you see I'm eating? You're ruining Thanksgiving. Aren't you thankful? We should all be grateful we're not homeless. Should remember to pity those others. And why can't you get along with people? You know half the time people don't even know what the hell you're talking about. That's just how things are, never mind.

What will happen, after all, if you don't believe, if you don't say yes? That's what death is, and death is bad.

*But Death is the harvest, y'all, is the seed going into the ground, Jesus into the tomb. I believe as much as you do, the eternal message of circular time, kairos, tomb becomes womb and it never ends and death is a gateway to true generosity, nutrients we're made of into elements and matter and energy, all throbbing together to create both space and time, connected by mycelium and neurons and capillaries and the world wide web and tendrils of galaxies. I believe, I believe, help thou my unbelief.*

No, no, you misunderstand. Seven days, Adam first and then Eve, and then her sin. Dominion and ownership, sin and separation, chosen and unchosen. Literal. The word of God. The literal Word of God. The WORD of GOD.

No one will like you, ask you to the prom, marry you, want to talk to you, hold your hand.

Make yourself believe. That's all you have to do.

*No one would hold my hand. I pried myself loose, asked for the divorce, pulled on the lever, let the world end. Mostly. Eventually. Returned to my senses, my good sense. My goodness.*

*Wordless connection deeper than thought, fonts of knowing, mother child lover, mother child lover. Blood and being flow and stand and seep down, into the ground beneath us, around us, savage and vital, weaving us together, endlessly making-longing-devouring-re-creating, indifferent to our beliefs.*

Traci Elliott's fiction has appeared in *NC Conversations*, her literary criticism in *More Lights Than One*, and her poetry at The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature. She lives in central North Carolina, where she works as a freelance writer and ghostwriter.

## Driven



**I'm being driven in a white van.** It's 4:45 a.m. on my first day of shooting a low-budget remake of the iconic horror film *Chainsaw Massacre*. Outside my window the Red River appears and disappears as the pink Louisiana dawn creeps over the dash. I close my eyes, lean my head against the cool, foggy glass, and pretend to sleep. My driver chews sunflower seeds and spits the shells into a Styrofoam cup. He asks if the radio is too loud, which it is, but I don't answer—afraid an answer would only encourage a conversation. There will be no fake, friendly banter at this ungodly time of day.

We pull into Base Camp. Such a serious name for a place like this, a place where breakfast burritos are made, noses are powdered, and hair is blown dry and coiffed —“Base Camp.” The name evokes visions of heroic moon landings and explorations, but there are no heroes or explorers here. Here, there are only working-class folks and a handful of actors trying to earn a decent wage, get health insurance, and make it home before their kids are asleep. I thank my driver and wander off through the production trailers looking for my name, which will be written on masking tape with a black sharpie and stuck to a door.

I find my character's name, “Marvin,” taped to a trailer door and step inside. I look in the mirror and rub my face. The fluorescent lights make me look a hundred years old, and I obsess on an age spot that has suddenly appeared under my right eye. Leaning in, poking it softly, my breath steams the mirror gray. Fuck, it's cold in here. I flick on a switch that says “heat” and a blower kicks on, making the room even colder.

I sit on musty orange cushions surrounded by dark paneled walls. A “No Smoking” sign burned with cigarette holes hangs over the plastic toilet in the corner. A picture of a chubby teen in a Budweiser bikini, laying across the hood of a vintage truck, hangs on the wall. The door of the truck reads: “Keep it real.” *If only I could*. But that's not why I got into this business over thirty years ago. I wanted to be anybody but the real me. If someone wanted to pay me to pretend to be somebody else, all the better.

I hold my hand over the blower, still freezing. Now the room smells like turpentine or gas or whatever other poisonous chemicals they use to run these archaic heaters. There is a knock at the door.

It's the second Assistant Director. She's cute, in that twenty-something-black-horn-rimmed glasses-brown cords-hip-slung-walkie-talkie kind of way.

"I see you found your room, James. Is it Jim or James?"

"Jim."

"Hi, I'm Roxanne." She squeezes my hand so hard I almost laugh.

"Can I get you some breakfast?"

"Oatmeal if they have it."

"Want anything on it?"

"Raisins, brown sugar, nuts, milk, the works, and a toasted bagel, cream cheese. Anything's fine, really. Thanks."

She writes and repeats back what I've just said. "Well, okay then. Anything else?"

"Yeah, the heater doesn't work."

"Really? That's odd, I'll have Gil come and look at it. He's our trailer man. In the meantime, you can get dressed and I'll let you know when a chair in make-up opens."

"Sounds good," I say. She starts to shut the door on her way out. "No, leave it open. It's warmer outside than in here."

"Oh, right, I'll send Gil right over."

I sit on the steps of my trailer, take out my script, thumb a dog-eared page, and begin to go over my lines. My big scenes are today. I breathe in deeply. The wet earth and misty dew reminds me of fifth grade and catching the bus for school on early Ohio mornings. After my parents divorced, my mother took my little brother and me to live with her grandparents in Doylestown—a place known for its kettle potato chips and abandoned coal mines. I watch a

raven the size of a three-year-old wrestle a bag of chips. Its wings flap as it boxes the bag against a rusted dumpster then flies off, crumbs falling through the air. The sun breaks over the trees, warming my face. I've filmed hundreds of shows and the nerves are always there. I thought it would get easier with age, but it's only gotten worse.

"Here you go," Roxanne puts a bowl of brown mush into my hands. "Sorry, they didn't have raisins or nuts or milk or any of that stuff, but they did have toast, and I brought you an apple. Hope that's okay."

"Perfect," I say.

"Make-up's got a chair open if you want to head over in five."

"Got it."

"And, oh, Gil says the heater is broken. So you're right. It shouldn't smell like gas. And if it was working the air would be heating up. See you in five."

I sit on the aluminum steps of my trailer, stirring the mush. It's not oatmeal. It's grits or cream of wheat or some gruel-like porridge that probably gets reconstituted in forty-gallon buckets of swamp water. I take a slurp. Not as bad as it looks. I've learned if I don't get something in my stomach I have to piss every five minutes. My prostate is inflamed and I'm on my fifth round of antibiotics because they still don't know what causes prostatitis.

I look down at the script and mutter my lines as "Marvin"—"cocky small-town cop in way over his head." It's my ritual, a mumbling meditation that builds with intensity as I pretend to talk

to someone—someone listening, nodding, or laughing. I've done this so often for so many years, I'm not even aware I'm doing it. To passersby, I'm just another bald, middle-aged white guy with an inflamed prostate, babbling to himself:

*Sheriff? This is Marvin. I'm inside the Sawyers house. Door was open...Well, there's a whole mess 'a blood here, sir...What? You think Jed Sawyers is alive and those kids were sawed up with a chainsaw!?...But Jed Sawyers' been dead for over twenty years... Ha, you know it, sir. Got my Sig Sauer extra clip. Just looking for a reason...Copy that, sir, but a chainsaw don't make you bulletproof.*

I repeat the lines, trying different inflections.

*Copy that, sir, but a **chainsaw** don't make you bulletproof. Copy that, sir, but a chainsaw don't make you **bulletproof**.*

**I'm being driven in a white van.** The set is only a hundred yards away, but they always make the talent ride in the van. It could be dangerous to let an actor walk on his own. He could get disoriented, lose his bearings, fall in a dry well, or hit his head on a low-slung mulberry branch.

Gil not only manages the trailers, he's also one of the drivers. He apologizes for the lack of heat and swears the heater was working last night. We're almost to the set when we stop, because they're shooting and have the road on lockdown. Gil shuts off the van. "Might as well save the petrol. If gas were free we'd all be

rich, huh?"

I'm not sure what he means. "If only," I say.

"A lot of folks from these parts are rich now 'cause of the fracking."

"I heard that was bad for the environment. Messes up the water tables," I say.

"Never heard anything about that. But let me tell you, most folks 'round these parts are dirt poor. Talkin', they'd go to KFC and lick other peoples' fingers. When they told Bobby Buckle he was sitting on a twenty million dollar reserve of natural gas and they were going to pay a million a year to lease his land, you'd think he woulda had the money spent, right? Well, Bobby got his first check, and the crazy fool wouldn't even cash it. He carried that thing in his wallet for the better part of a year. And wherever he'd go he'd take it out and wave it around like a goddamn flag. True story."

"Did he finally cash it?"

"Oh, yeah. His wife threatened to leave him if didn't. So, he cashed it and got himself a new bass boat. And people don't know this but the trick to a good tasting bass is not to let it get warm. Not for a second. Soon as I unhook it, goes straight on the ice. When you get home, you fillet it, cut it into little cubes, mix up your batter—I like Aunt Jemima buttermilk. And get your stale beer—stale beer, needs to be open and flat—and some of them fancy Oriental bread crumbs."

"Panko?" I say.

"You tell me," he laughs. "Then straight into the fryer. I always make two tartars. The wife don't

like dill pickles in hers.”

“Cut!” A voice on Gil’s walkie-talkie breaks in. “Moving on!”

Gil restarts the van and we roll up to the house. I get out and follow the electric cables down to the basement. Nobody notices me as they splatter fresh blood and body parts around the room. I already have to piss and I haven’t even met the director yet. The First A.D. appears and walks me over to the director, who’s playing with fake fingers in a bedpan.

“Allen, this is Jim. He’s playing Marvin.”

“These fingers are fucking amazing, but we can’t see them in the bedpan. What can we do about that?” Allen says.

“We pick them up in the shot when Jed brings Marvin’s face over,” says the A.D.

“Oh, that’s right! We’re cutting off Marvin’s face today. Perfect.” The director puts his hand on my shoulder and walks me over to a bloody dentist chair. “This is where we’re doing it, James. You like Jim or James?”

“Jim’s fine.”

“Okay, you’re almost dead, but not quite. He’s put a hatchet in your back and you’re going in and out of consciousness as he slowly cuts off your face. Sorry, we have to shoot your death scene first, but you know how it

goes. Let’s rehearse this.”

I sit in the chair. What appears to be the largest man I’ve ever seen comes toward me. The man puts out his hand and I shake it. The First A.D. jumps in. “Jim, this John. He’s our Jed.”

“Hey, how’s it going?” I say. John wears a mask of faux human flesh crudely sewn onto his cheeks. He says nothing and walks away.

“Quiet on the set, everybody!” yells the First A.D.

“Action!” shouts the director. I close my eyes and let my mouth go slack. “Give me a couple moans, Jim.” I moan, *aaahhhmmm*. “Not so big.” I moan quieter, *amm*. “Tilt your head. The other way. Towards me. A little more. Whoops, too far. Split the difference. Perfect.” The director motions to John. “Okay, go on in, Jed.” John moves into the scene and runs his fingers softly over his forehead. “Give me something, Jed. This is it. What you’ve been waiting for. You’re in ecstasy. I want to see it.” John giggles and pants. “Nice. Good. Now, start slicing, Jed.” John draws a plastic razor down my face. “Ecstasy, Jed! Come on give it to me. You should be fucking coming in your pants right now. Marvin! What are you doing? Stop twitching your foot. You’re dead.”

“I am?” I say. “I thought I was still alive.”

“You are, but you’re unconscious. No more twitching. Wait, I kind of like it. When we turn around, we’ll get both. And...ACTION!” I moan. I don’t twitch. John giggles and cuts off my face. “CUT. Nice. Okay, moving on. Think we’re good.”

**I'm being driven in a white van.** It's warm now so I roll down the window. How can it be so damn cold one minute and downright muggy the next? I have another two weeks left on the shoot. Before I'm home a handful of extras will pass out in the triple digit Texas heat, the director of photography will be fired because we're a month behind schedule, and I'll have consumed enough BBQ brisket to deplete a lifetime of carbon footprint credits.

I'm being driven in a white van. I've just landed back in L.A. and I'm on my way home. I tip the

driver, sling my bags over my shoulder, and walk up the driveway. My daughter will see me through the kitchen window and run to meet me, followed by my wife and son. One by one they'll hug me, and I'll pretend, at least for today, that things are different—that the corner has been turned, that other jobs are on their way, and that there is a divine hand in all this play.

My daughter hugs my side and presses her cheek against my arm. "What did you bring me, Daddy?" I smile. "You've been gone, Daddy. You were really far away."

**James Macdonald** is an actor with close to 100 credits on IMDB, but also works in the field of transformative justice, teaching writing workshops to the incarcerated and the recently paroled in Los Angeles. His latest poetry will be published in the forthcoming L.A. Writers and Poets Collective Journal: *Side-Eye on the Apocalypse*, and Finishing Line Press anthology, entitled *Covid, Isolation & Hope: Artists Respond to the Pandemic*. His short story "It is certain" was recently published in *Blood and Bourbon*, and *Litro Magazine* is soon to publish his essay this fall, "No people no speak," about a Zen retreat gone horribly wrong.



art





*another world is possible (it's just a sweet, sweet fantasy, baby)*, 2020  
Fabric, embroidery thread, quilt batting / Fabrication assistance by Andy Phillips  
72 x 29 x 5 inches

**Joshua Thomen** is an artist based in Los Angeles, California working toward their MFA in Art at University of California, Irvine and received their undergraduate at California State University, Long Beach in Sculpture/4D in 2019. Their work reflects on personal memory, Southern California quotidian life, and diasporic histories to critique cultural structures of domination. Using the physicality of plushness and animacy of textiles, they balance between utopian hopefulness and necropolitical melancholy. This kind of vulnerability expresses a desire for comfort following survival-induced fatigue. In these intimate expressions of personhood, they hope to reimagine a world different from that of the present. Their work has been shown at Irvine Fine Arts Center, Irvine, CA; Angels Gate Cultural Center, San Pedro, CA; Human Resources LA, Los Angeles, CA.



*Eye Plant*

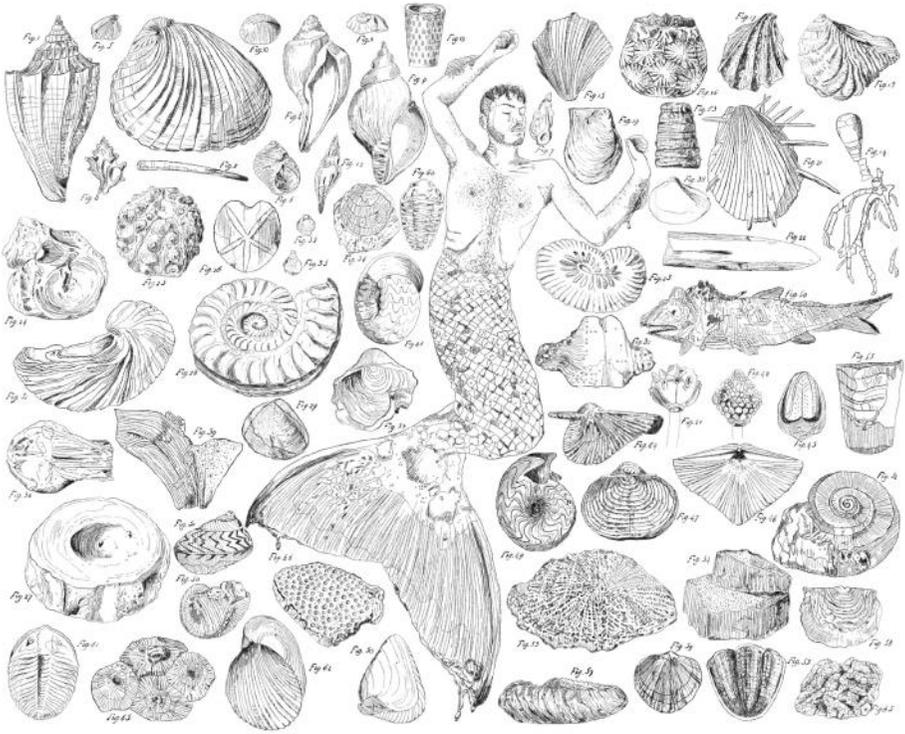
Watercolor and ink on paper  
5 x 7 inches

**Shannon Gardner**'s use of watercolor and India Ink are unforced and create beauty within flaws while crafting an earthy grunge appearance. This technique assists the viewer to observe the Asian aesthetic Wabi Sabi, appreciation of imperfections. Her use of dots create an impression of a technical drawing. Stippling creates clusters of value implying crisp texture and depth, giving the illusion of change through time.



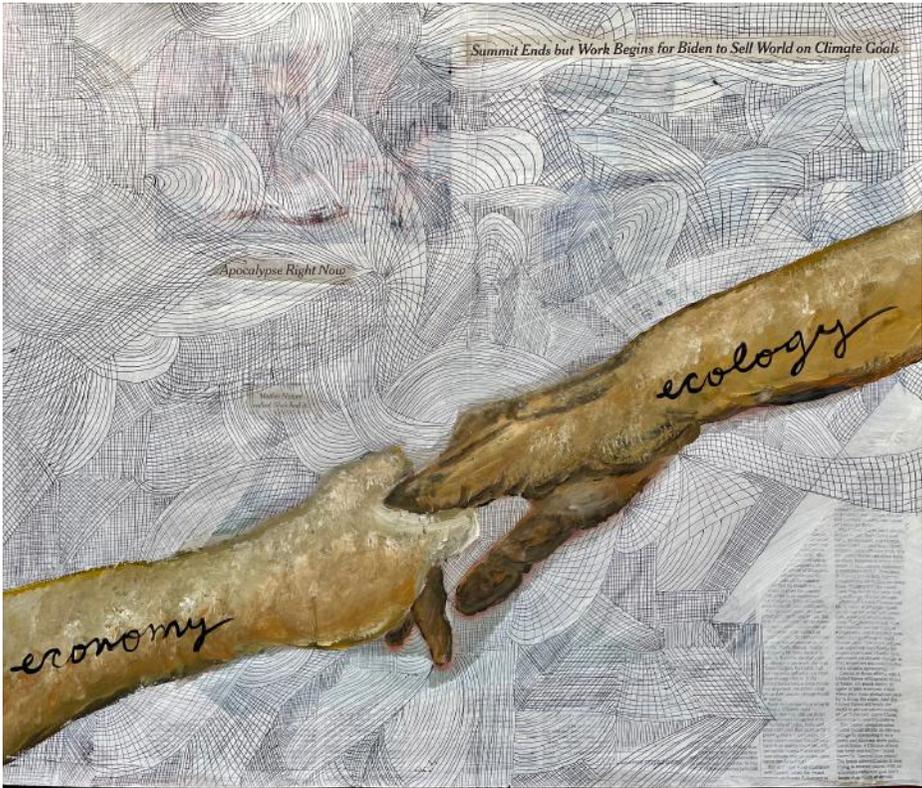
*Forest Witch*  
Ink on paper  
11 x 14 inches

**Shannon Gardner** appreciates the spontaneous process of nature and strives to explore Earth's unearthed beauty and imitate its natural imperfections. She creates art depicting disturbing and horrifying work with elements of occult symbolism and iconography. Her interest in the macabre began while studying nature and the paranormal at a young age. The ethereal mood of her work reaches the extreme and addresses the taboo.



*The Mermaid*, 2021  
iPad drawing  
32 x 26 inches

**Devin Wilson** is a queer interdisciplinary artist, curator, and writer. Devin is currently a first-year visual arts MFA candidate at the University of California, Irvine. Their work focuses on the intersection of queerness and technology in science fiction to imagine alternate possibilities of the future. Devin states that “as a genre, speculative fiction is inherently queer using imagery that goes beyond binaries and presents the post-human body. These non-human identities present queer because they do not conform to cis-heteronormative ideologies as they are usually constructed through hybridization.”



*Hand in Hand*  
Acrylic and ink on paper

Originally from Buenos Aires, **Cristián Pietrapiana** lives and works in New York City. His work explores the vulnerability of human nature and its environment. Pietrapiana has been awarded the Sheldon Bergh Award, was recently selected by the City of New York's DOT Art Program to create a site specific outdoors installation in LIC, Queens, selected artist of the LTA Program of the Guggenheim Museum, Chashama Residency Program as well as The Space Program in LIC. His work has been exhibited at Exit Art NY, AES Gallery NY, Local Project, The Argentine Consulate in NYC, El Bodegon Cultural de Los Vilos Art Center in Chile and Centro Cultural Recoleta in Buenos Aires, among other venues and part of the Pfizer Corporate Collection, The Springfield Museum of Art and private collectors. In the last few years, he has incorporated the urgency of climate change into his practice, organizing exhibitions and workshops in order to create awareness and invite viewers to take action.



*Celestial Autumn*

iPhone 12 Snapseed double exposure  
Boyd Weymouth Center Park

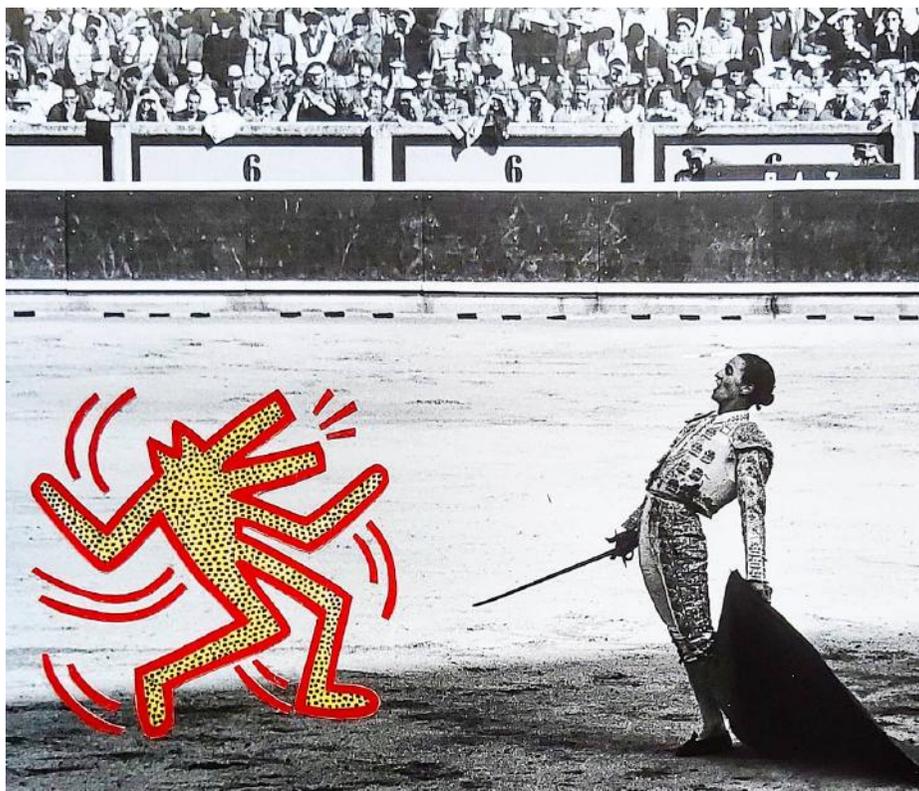
A retired educator, **Garrett Flagg** devotes his time to drawing, painting, photography, poetry and pickleball. He has traveled widely and published poetry in a variety of journals including: *Third Wind*, *Cream City Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *South Florida Review*, *McGuffin*, etc. He lives in North Carolina and maintains a Facebook website called SeedROOT: YWrite.



*Fantasy Birds*

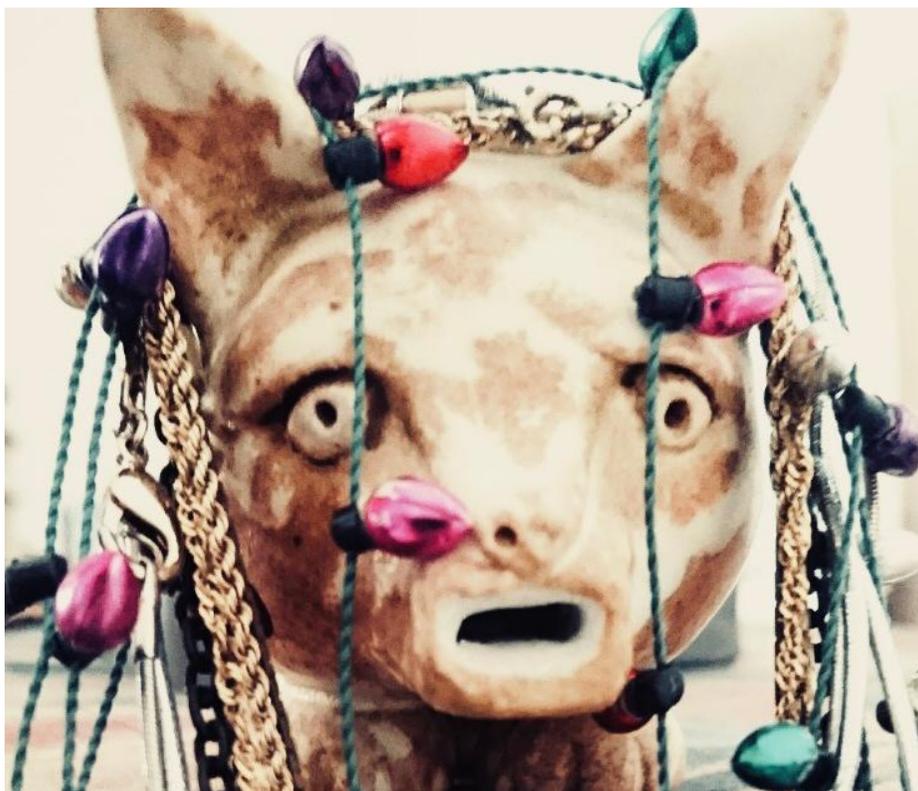
Calligraphy ink, digital drawing, coloring, sketching  
2999 x 3999 px

**Melissa Ceren** is an artist and researcher with a BA in Forensic Psychology from CUNY John Jay College of Criminal Justice. Ceren is interested in how drawing or artistic development can impact educational curriculum, cultural identity, acculturative stress, and risk-taking behaviors in immigrant adolescents. Her portfolio centers around artistic themes that influence her, specifically the socio-economic and political themes in African-American hip-hop which, as a first-generation Guatemalan-American student, Ceren has either experienced herself or witnessed firsthand. Ceren hopes to bridge the gap for artists of color through her art and research.



*underground corrida*  
Magazine paper

**Jerónimo "Nomadecollage"** is a young artist born in Belgium and is now living in Portugal. Nomadecollage has been living life with paper and utensils for several years, exhibiting work in several Belgian and Portuguese galleries. Nomadecollage loves meeting people from different worlds, debating and exchanging points of view, and creating surrealist art with a subtle dose of reality. Nomadecollage's work examines the different faces of human beings, altering them as a way of questioning their personality and attitudes. The paper is destroyed to rebuild and decontextualize, then it is reconstructed. This is where the creation begins.



*Whistling*

Tree lights, necklaces, clay pig whistle

**Ann Privateer** is a poet, artist, and photographer. Some of her work has appeared in *Third Wednesday* and *Entering*.

