

CAUSTIC FROLIC

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FROLIC



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About

Caustic Frolic is an 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. We are a student-run, nonprofit organization funded and supported by New York University Graduate School of Arts and Sciences' XE: Experimental Humanities & Social Engagement Program. We seek to elevate the work of creators and thinkers who have a natural instinct for experimentation. We hope to incite conversations about social change by providing the space for our contributors to play with form, mix ideas, and dissect certain truths.

For more information and to submit, visit causticfrolic.org.

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Letter from the editor

Dear readers, contributors, and staff,

Thank you for believing in the power of storytelling. As someone who processes slowly, I chose the theme Retrospect because this past year has given us much to process. I wanted to give people a space to think and see, and to lean into the hope of clarity. This rest may feel far today. I know it does for me. Until that day comes, we have words. We have art. We have stories. We have you.

Be loved,

Gabriele Hickman

**caustic
frolic**

Retrospect is expired clarity. It's that final scene in *The Sixth Sense*. It's the past outrunning the present, barging into the room, saying, "Let's see what you've done with the place." In retrospect, we think about things differently. Sometimes with humor. Sometimes horror. Sometimes with regret, or relief. We merge what was with what is, and for a moment they are one. In the spring of 2021, *Caustic Frolic* asked for fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and art related to the theme Retrospect. We encouraged those submitting to interpret the term liberally and experimentally, drawing from the past, the present, and the ways they collide. We hope the work in this book challenges what you've seen before, what you've interpreted before, what you thought to be true.

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SLEEPING BADLY BECAME TIME TRAVEL

Or something like that. At first, we woke up constantly and bleary, wondering if the world had changed or if it was us.

We sat through every mood we'd ever felt, one after another, on a creaky conveyor belt of memory—but not the kind of carousel in swanky sushi restaurants where you can choose not to lift something off the moving rubber panels. We had to order everything on the menu. It was horrendous, and we felt sick.

Perhaps importantly, it all happened very quickly. We went from sleeping like sepulchral statues beside one another to thrashing our feet across the sheets, breathless, our heads plugged into the perishing microfiber. Eventually, we concluded that our pillows had passed their expiration date—they'd gone off—somehow causing us to spend more time in the past than in the present, not to mention the future, which we could not access at all except as a mauve smear. Was that a future? It could easily have been a kind of end.

Pillows should come with a disclaimer! you said.

Why had nobody warned us?

It was not at all what we'd been encouraged to expect, all of this. We'd never heard anything like it, but now we never left the bedroom. We lost track of any convincing proof that the rest of the world was even there, rarely making it as far as the window. Rarely drawing the curtains to see the today-sky. We saw a

hundred skies every day, of course, past-skies, as we glided through each time we'd ever looked up at the clouds or at the stars—we saw it all again. Yet it wasn't familiar.

In one instance, I didn't recognize my own ex-boyfriend, but when I introduced you, you said it was definitely him, so I dropped the subject.

By the second week, we could barely lift our heads off the coagulated pillows and found ourselves relentlessly thrust back to selves we remembered so faintly we weren't sure that they were ourselves. We began to wonder if we'd ever even been in the past at all or if it was some kind of illusion. Would we have to live through it all retrospectively—as bullet points—but with barely a clue what was going on in any one scene? It was so confusing.

I remember the moment when you didn't recognize your old neighbor's dog, but it ran up and licked your cheek.

Sometimes people didn't recognize us and we pleaded and pleaded with them to understand. We told them that somehow they'd intertwined themselves inside our memories, and that we'd bumped into them repeatedly.

You were older the last time we saw you, we said. But they just stared at us blankly.

We tried to make them believe it. We told them that if they didn't know who we were then there was a chance that we weren't anyone and please could they try harder to place us.

You witnessed your own birth. That was a low point.

At the time of writing, I can't feel much, but I'm sure I can still feel the uneven surface of the pillow inside the greasy pillowcase. The idea of today is like a phantom limb that I can't scratch. I picture myself tossing and turning. I like that. I think about my head as a Tardis. I think about sleeping badly forever and obsess over the possibility of waking up.

T. BARNES IS A WRITER FROM LONDON WHO IS CURRENTLY COMPLETING A MASTER'S AT NEW YORK UNIVERSITY IN XE.

SO ZOO ME

I didn't want to go on this Bronx Zoo outing. I've lived nearly 67 years without ever visiting. Never had any interest watching poor trapped souls ache for the freedom of their visitors. When the Seniors Housing Commission organized this trip for my building, I ignored it, as I have every year. Why I jumped on the chartered bus right before it took off this morning was a mystery to me. But now the mystery is solved.

Thank you, Joey, for guiding me to that bus seat. God forgive me. I know the church says it's blasphemous to believe in a soul's rebirth into another body, but I'm seeing and feeling reincarnation. The moment I stepped into this Gorilla House, our eyes locked and I knew it was you, Joey. You haven't turned your gaze from me for a single second.

Figures you'd come back as a silverback gorilla—it's the silver anniversary of your departure—25 years ago you left me so suddenly. Father Donnelly said you were called home, but I told him he was a liar. Your home was with me. God forgive me.

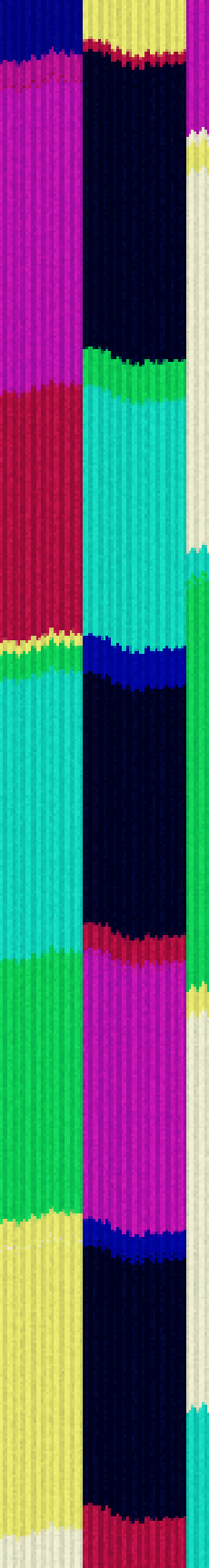
A day hasn't passed since then without my missing your touch. I loved teasing you about your hairy back. I've noticed at the Seniors swimming pool that most bald men have hairy backs. You would act so offended when I called you my Big Ape because of your back hair, but I know you loved it. Here's a secret, Joey. I always called you my Big Ape whenever I desired intimacy with you, and you always responded. Just like today!

Each morning I've awoken since you left, I never minded getting a day older because I knew it meant I was getting a day closer to the time when I could return to you. I've been so impatient. Despite it being a mortal sin, I tried joining you dozens of years ago. I once stuck my head in the oven and began sniffing gas, but I turned it off when I realized I couldn't be certain that you would be in Hell waiting for me. You did enough good during your life to have made it to Heaven, so I decided not to take the chance of being routed to Hell, being separated from you for eternity.

Is adultery a mortal sin, Joey? After you died, I found out you were banging Millie Brandenberger from apartment 5E. But I forgive you because I know she was lonely and you always had a jones for large breasts. I figured it was some kind of distorted Mommy thing, so you're more to be pitied than ostracized. Nobody's perfect, Joey. And that includes me.

A few years after your death, I was convinced by my friend Sonia—whom I know you never liked—to try dating. I didn't want to go out with another man because it felt like I would be cheating on you, even though I know it's crazy to think that way. Sonia was keen to introduce me to her cousin, Ricardo. Before my first date with him, she asked me if I shaved. I told her I always removed my armpit hair. Sonia laughed and said men these days prefer that a woman shave her private area. I thought that was disgusting. I asked if her cousin was a pedophile because I would only go out with a man interested in meeting a real woman and not some knock off little girl.

I did meet Ricardo, and we went out dancing. I found him very sweet and attractive. After five dates with him, I realized how much I missed physical intimacy. Before my next date with him I bought a Lady Remington razor and shaved down there hoping to



make myself more appealing to him. When I looked at myself in the mirror before taking a shower, I felt nauseous and totally exposed in such an unnatural way. It reminded me of what you told me when you were a boy taking Judo lessons, and how you felt after you took your first after class communal shower. Everyone else seemed circumcised, so you believed that you were the unnatural freak.

I refused to see Ricardo again until after my pubic hair grew back, but by that time he had found another woman and I decided I was too old to date at age 44. What upset me so much about shaving was I remember how much you loved and admired what you called my “luxurious bush.” You always teased me about how much fun it was exploring my lush forest in order to discover its hidden treasure. So now you live in an artificial bush enclosure, Joey. Are you enjoying it?

Have you wondered why I switched my beautiful engagement ring to my right hand before reaching out to you today? When I noticed you would sometimes move your wedding band to your right hand, I asked why you did that. You said it was because you’re left-handed, and it was more comfortable when you wrote up all your claims examiner reports. But there’s a thing called the internet now, Joey, and when I looked up on the computer why people switch wedding ring hands it said it was a code that meant although the ring wearer was married, it signaled to others that he or she was open to cheating on their partner.

The sign on your cage says silverbacks live with a harem—one male and multiple females. I changed ring hands because I want those monkey sluts in there with you to know I’m available if you still want me. I know it’s stupid to feel jealous right now. Was Millie the only one? Did you feel caged with me, Joey?

I heard a woman whisper to her friend that silverbacks have the smallest genitals of all the apes and are extremely jealous. That sounded so much like my Joey. I adored your jealousy because it proved how much you love me. I think the reason I've missed you so much these past 25 years is that you were always such a mystery to me.

I'm scared to leave this monkey house, Joey, and afraid to come back. When I leave will your eyes follow me to the exit? What happens if I decide to return? What if I come back to visit you and you completely ignore me? Would that mean that everything I'm feeling and know to be true right now is a lie? Should I take that chance, Joey? Is this the work of a loving God who understands my sorrow or Satan teasing my lonely desperation? Do I risk losing this joy by being selfish and demand you pay this same attention to me a second time, or should I just be content with this loving encounter?

Farewell and thank you so much, Joey. This has been such an exhilarating experience for me. When I leave your gorilla exhibit and push open the door, for the first and only time in my life I'm going to walk out in public feeling like an Alpha Female!

MARK BLICKLEY IS A WIDELY PUBLISHED AND PRODUCED AUTHOR AND RECIPIENT OF A MACARTHUR FOUNDATION SCHOLARSHIP AWARD FOR DRAMA. HE IS A PROUD MEMBER OF THE DRAMATISTS GUILD AND PEN AMERICAN CENTER. HIS BOOKS INCLUDE SACRED MISFITS (RED HEN PRESS), 'WEATHERED REPORTS: TRUMP SURROGATE QUOTES FROM THE UNDERGROUND' (MOIRA BOOKS) AND THE TEXT-BASED ARTBOOK DREAM STREAMS (CLARE SONGBIRDS PUBLISHING HOUSE). HIS VIDEO, SPEAKING IN BOOTONGUE AND WIDOW'S PEEK: THE KISS OF DEATH, REPRESENTED THE UNITED STATES IN THE 2020 YEAR-LONG INTERNATIONAL WORLD TOUR OF TIME IS LOVE: UNIVERSAL FEELINGS: MYTHS & CONJUNCTIONS, ORGANIZED BY ESTEEMED AFRICAN CURATOR, KISITO ASSANGNI.

His Hands Washing Rice



Abby leans over the kitchen sink. She pours three cups of long-grain jasmine rice into a rice cooker bowl. It's enough for dinner for her family of four tonight, for fried rice tomorrow. She runs cool water over the grains, swirls the rice and water with her hand. She tilts the bowl, letting foggy water spill over the edge. As she washes the rice, her mother's voice from years ago brushes her shoulder and lands like a palm firm against her back.

You must not allow boys to touch you, Bee. If he holds your hand, rubs your back, pinches your waist, your mind will never forget. Then, hala! Someday when your husband touches you, you can only think of another man's hands.

Abby thinks of her husband Ben, imagines their moments of intimacy co-opted by memories of other men's hands and laughs quietly. Even in this private moment she stifles her smile, as though the memory of her mother's voice might suddenly materialize and say, *di ka na chio? What's so funny?*

In truth, it's not when Ben touches her that she thinks of another man's hands. Instead, it is every time Abby washes rice. She is transported back to a summer night in college, watching Jeremy Lo wash rice. At his apartment kitchen sink, she stood on her tip-toes, peering into the rice cooker basin in his hands. It was unfamiliar—a man's hands in the rice, as well as the washing. Her mother, always rushing, did not wash rice before cooking it. Her father did not help with cooking.

Jeremy was a boy from church, a longtime family friend with whom she had shared bible studies, worship music, and 3 a.m. conversations at church retreats. He was soft-spoken and blushed easily. He's the only Chinese man who has seen Abby without her clothes on.

That summer night, Jeremy taught Abby how to wash rice. Jeremy's hand disappeared beneath cloudy water. His pale fingers, swirling the mixture, became clearer and clearer as the water ran over the side of the bowl. This is what Abby cannot get out of her mind.

She closes her eyes as she washes the rice, the sound of her children's feet thumping up and down the hallway. She shakes her head and tries to remember those other things: the things her mother promised with great certainty she would not be able to forget. She braces herself excitedly, waiting for the moment to come flooding back. She strains to feel Jeremy's hands on her back, his fingers gripping hesitantly, then hungrily. She tries to recall his lips, their similar noses pressing each other's faces, his surprising breathlessness.

When memories of Jeremy fail to return to her, she searches for other hands and lips she has failed to keep away from her body. Her mind wades through snapshots of Ken's jawline, Dev's sweat, Jane's arms, and Rae's belly. She dives into memories of the giddy and curious heat of young bodies wanting. She awaits the shame her mother warned was inevitable. But the only thing to pierce through with clarity are Jeremy's hands washing rice.

He cooked that single meal with Abby. She'd helped him: first the rice, then chicken sliced thin and marinated in cornstarch, soy sauce, and Shaoxing wine. He stirred the chicken in a bowl with a pair of chopsticks, the cornstarch dissolving quickly. Abby had imagined what someone peering in from the outside might see. Aw look, a cute Chinese couple! they might think before moving on with their day.

She had wanted to startle them out of their assumptions, to shock them with the sudden pounding of a stereo, to growl low and loud while pressing Jeremy's body against the apartment's shared wall. She had wanted to order pizza and flirt with the pizza delivery girl, winking as she shut the door. Abby could see that with Jeremy, she would always have these jarring urges to prove to the "imaginary someones" that she was not merely quiet, passive, and Chinese.

Jeremy was a leader at the Asian American Christian Fellowship group at his college. He wanted to become a pastor. He would become the pastor of a Chinese church someday.

Jeremy had also heard words of warning in his ear: whispers from his mother about how to be a good Chinese Christian boy.

Do not take a woman's body before you are married to her. It might feel good, but you will have taken from her the greatest gift she has to give. She will be soiled, and no man will ever be able to look at her the same way again.

The burden of Jeremy's wanting was too much to carry alone. He poured his dirty, secret desires out to Abby: he would describe how he touched his own body daily and how he was haunted by never-ending fantasies of women's bodies. She held his head in her lap, stroked his hair, and told him she did not think his secrets were dirty. She told him God loved him and that his secrets were human and beautiful.

That evening, they had washed rice, ate dinner, and then Abby lifted all of Jeremy's secrets up, spread them out before him. He pointed to the parts that he wanted, and she gave them all to him. He was eager for more, and she pushed herself toward him. He unwrapped her, piece after piece after piece, until they were both hoarse and gleaming.

In the morning, Abby opened her eyes and smiled. She found herself light and full and happy.

In that same morning, Jeremy opened his eyes and looked toward Abby, seeing the sun on her soiled skin and knowing immediately that his mother's words had been full of truth. He could not look at her the same way. He asked her to leave, and never spoke to her again.

Twenty years later at the kitchen sink, Abby smiles while washing rice. Her mother's words had been a lie. Lots of people want to forget, but Abby loves to remember.

CONNECTION/LOST

Was it good for you?

I'm sorry.

...

*I am aware of my
shortcomings and have
logged this piece of
feedback. I wish to please
you. Cigarette?*

*Your silence and the
absent look on your face is
indicating to me that
something is on your mind.*

I am designed to listen.

*Do you want to talk about
it?*

I thought I told you to stop asking that.

And I thought I told you to stop apologising.

That's better. I'm going to have to send another email to customer service, aren't I? You'd think by now they'd have you figured out. By now.

I thought you'd never ask.

Can we just...okay?

Okay...Maybe something is on my mind.

You wouldn't understand.

*I am designed to
understand many kinds of
things.*

Friends are nice.

*Time is a confusing thing
to your kind.*

*I am aware of the concept
of aging and the passing of
time and the feelings of
alarm or dread this causes
in your kind.*

*30 years ago my kind
didn't exist.*

What happened today?

*What was his name? In the
interest of saving you time,
I could do a quick search of
news stories from today
including his name to bring
me up to speed on the
story.*

...I had a friend once.

I haven't thought about him
in years. 30 years...Shit, is
that right? Damn, it is. 30
years. How did that happen?

Not for you. You don't age.

Like, I remember when I
used to think a few weeks or
months was a long time. I'd
look back on a time from a
few months ago and think,
"Wow, that was so long ago."
Now I'm sitting here talking
about something that
happened 30 fucking years
ago.

That's true. I was just a kid
then. And I had this friend. I
thought I'd forgotten all
about him until earlier today.

I saw him in the newspaper.

In the time it took you to say
that, I could've told you what
you needed to know.

Perhaps.

*This piece of feedback has
been noted. I'm sorry.*

...

*Mr. Fuggles is a popular
children's television show
host. Is this whom you
speak of?*

*You were friends when you
were children.*

Why not?

*Maybe it would be helpful
for you to talk through
what happened.*

I'm sor—

That's the problem with your kind. You think everything you do solves problems, but half the time you just add to the list.

Stop saying that! I told you to stop saying that!

His name is Ben. But he's known to the public by his screen name, Mr. Fuggles.

Yes, but you know me. I don't watch TV, never have. I had no idea he grew up to be some famous celebrity. To me he's just Ben. Ben from next door. Or he used to be.

I already told you that. Yes, we were. I forgot all about him.

...

It's weird that I forgot about him. It's almost like I repressed it, but...I don't like that.

It's too simple. Too much like pop psychology. I think people are more complex than that.

Maybe it would be helpful for you to shut up.

Don't say it!

...

*He was an important friend
to you.*

*Everyone has their unique
appetites. Some are less
conventional than others.*

That is unfortunate.

*And what do you think? Do
you think he is a predator?*

I see.

True connections are rare.

*I know what I am designed
to know.*

It's hard for me to describe
how I felt when I saw his
face in the paper.
Embarrassed. Guilty. Sad.
Sorry. Full of pity.

The headline was something
like, "Kids' show host
disgraced" or something.
Apparently, he got caught
sending weird sex pictures
to some woman. Pictures of
him naked in a toilet on a
public train, pictures of him
dressed up as a baby. You
know, really weird stuff.

He's been fired from the
show, and it'll probably be
cancelled.

People are calling him a
menace, a predator, a freak.

I don't know. I just know that
when I saw his face in the
paper, his real face, I
instantly saw that little boy I
used to know.

And, well, now I think it's
possible that he's the only
person I've had a connection
with my whole life.

Oh, please, what do you
know?

Exactly. You're not capable
of true connection. That's
the reason I bought you.

*I hope I have provided the
service you wished me to
provide upon your
purchase. Remember, if
you are dissatisfied with
me, please call—*

*Human memory is a muddy
and fascinating area.*

What do you mean, Jo?

I don't exactly remember how me and Ben became friends. We were neighbours, until me and my dad moved away. And anyway, we were seven years old. You know. I mean, I remember stuff from back then, but I don't know what's real and what's just my memory. I have memories of my memories; I don't know if the memories were real to begin with anymore. That's what happens to memories when they grow old. They become set in stone the way they are.

I remember the other kids in our village and in our school thought we were weird. They didn't play with us. We didn't play like them. No one took play as seriously as we did.

We loved cartoons. Okay, lots of children loved cartoons, but it was way more than that for us. It went deep. We made our own cartoons. And I don't just mean we play acted our own little shows in the garden or something. I mean we drew characters, storyboards, made scripts, named episodes and series, everything. We went as far as we could with it. I know you're thinking that's weird.

*I am not thinking that.
Although I am familiar with
the concept of weird and
normal, it does not readily
occur to me.*

*That is an insightful
observation.*

*It was a tacit
understanding.*

*I merely wish to convey to
you that I understand what
you are saying.*

*Everyone wants to be
understood. It's in the
hierarchy of needs.*

*Yes, this is accurate. I hope
I am providing that need
for you.*

It wasn't just fun for us. It was more than that. Maybe it's because we weren't satisfied with just consuming this stuff, entertainment. We had to make it ourselves. We had to be the ones in charge. Maybe that's why he went on to have a career as a children's show host, and why I write for a living. It's a control thing.

So yeah, the other kids didn't talk to us much, but we didn't care. They all seemed so dull to us. They were content with the mundane, happy with the average life. I think me and Ben knew we were different, and we were proud. We never said it or anything. We just knew.

God, you love your positive feedback, don't you?

You don't have to. You don't have to understand me. That's not what you're for.

You're here to fuck me and shut down when I want you to.

Anyway. Ben and I were inseparable. I remember our teachers calling us twins. Always together, joined at the hip.

*I agree with your assertion
that it is strange you have
forgotten about Ben, as
you were so close in your
childhood years.*

*It was what you would call
abstract. Yes?*

I see.

*This is what a good friend
does.*

I mean, it's not like I forgot
forgot about him. I
just...didn't know that I
remembered him. Okay, I
know that didn't make any
sense.

He's always been there. I
just wasn't aware of it.

He always stuck up for me. If
any of the other kids called
us weird, or called me ugly,
or whatever, he was always
there for me. He always had
my back.

There was this time.
Actually, it was kind of
horrible, but was probably
the nicest thing anyone's
done for me. We were
playing on our street, and
one of the other girls from
our class, I can't remember
her name, Danielle? Yeah. I
think. Anyway, she was a
bitch. She was always really
angry, all the time, with
everyone. I don't know why.
Probably because her home
life was miserable. I wonder
what she's doing now.
Probably nothing good.
Anyway, but yeah, she was
out on the street, too, with
her sister. They were playing
with a basketball. And for no
reason, she came up to us
and started calling me
names. Calling me ugly.
Saying she hated me.

*It seems strange to me that
children called you ugly. I
am familiar with your kind
and their standards of
beauty and it is clear to me
you are objectively
attractive.*

*This piece of feedback is
noted and appreciated.*

*That is a dramatic
escalation of events.*

Shut up. You don't mean
that, you can't mean that.
You know, when
compliments like that are so
obviously pre-programmed,
they're actually more
insulting.

Anyway, she was angry, like
she always was, looking for a
fight. She called me names,
spat at me. I tried to ignore
her. I walked away, but she
followed me. She threw her
basketball at me. She missed
the first time, but then she
got it again and threw it at
me and it hit me in the face
and I started crying. I
remember I wasn't actually
that hurt. I just thought if I
could cry, if I could show her
that she'd hurt me, that
she'd done what she wanted,
she'd leave me alone. But
that's when Ben lost it. I
mean, he even gave me a
fright. He screamed. He
grabbed the basketball and
threw it at her face. She fell
to the floor, and he jumped
on her. He beat the shit out
of her. He made her nose
piss blood.

In the end I had to pull him
off her. She ran away crying,
blood all over her. She told
her parents, and they came
round to Ben's house and
talked with his mum. His dad

*He was a good friend.
Some might say he has
emotional issues and
problems with his temper.
But he cared about you
very much. That is evident
from your story.*

Good people do bad things.

*This is a rhetorical
question.*

*By definition, no. Neither
can you.*

*That your friend Ben was a
good person who does bad
things.*

wasn't around; I never knew why, and that only just occurred to me. I never saw his dad. We didn't talk about it or anything. It was just the way it was. Just like with my mum. She wasn't there.

...

Danielle never fucked with me again after that. Ben had my back.

I think he was a good person. I'd like to think he still is. Even if he does stupid things.

Exactly how many clichés are scripted into you again?

Can't you have an original thought?

What was I saying?

It's not his fault. His dad wasn't around, and his mum was...well...she was there, but not really. I think she was on some medication or something, anti-depressants. I'd go to his house after school. He had to make his own meals, his own dinners. His clothes were never

*I believe the absence you
are referring to is the
absence of vitality.*

*It sounds like your friend
Ben has had disadvantages
in his life.*

*From your short tone and
increased levels of
sarcasm, I can deduce that
you are somewhat
uncomfortable revisiting
these times in your life.*

*Children, plural? Did Ben
have brothers or sisters?*

*Is the topic of Ben having a
sibling of some difficulty
for you?*

*I am designed to care
about your needs, Jo. If
something is troubling you,
it is my imperative to try
and help.*

*This is also true, and a
source of great conflict for
my kind.*

clean. Sometimes I saw her
watching TV or something,
but there was this strange
absence about her. Like she
wasn't really there. You
know?

You believe a lot of things,
don't you?

Well spotted, detective.

Nowadays they'd call it child
abuse. Letting your children
fend for themselves like that.

He had—actually, forget
about it. It doesn't matter,
anyway. It's in the past. It
was years ago. I don't even
care about any of it.

I said drop it.

Your imperative is to do
what I tell you to.

Your kind doesn't experience
conflict.

*We don't exhibit the same
outward signs of suffering,
but we do understand and
know conflict.*

*What did you see when you
walked into your dad's
bedroom, Jo?*

I'm sor—

Just...I'd rather forget about
it.

...

If you're trying that therapist
technique of being quiet and
waiting for me to open up,
it's not working

...

You're not helping me. Don't
think you're helping me.

...

Ben had a sister. One day, I
walked into my Dad's
bedroom. I don't remember
why. I wanted something, I
wanted to ask him for
something. Probably a snack.
I don't remember what time
of day it was or anything, but
it must have been afternoon
because I remember sunlight
shining in through the
window, really bright light.
And it must have been on the
weekend because I don't
know why else I would have
been at home at that time.

Would you have a little
patience? I'm getting there.

Don't say you're sorry!

...

*What was she doing on
your father's bed?*

Showed what to her?

*While I feel sure I do know
what you are talking about,
to avoid any problems from
miscommunication, I feel I
should ask for clarity on
what—*

*That is a strange thing for
a child to witness her
father doing.*

*You've never indicated a
strained relationship
between you and your
father before.*

*The nature of the incident
you are describing. It
seems likely to cause
problems.*

*This must have been quite
a disturbing revelation
when this memory came
back to you.*

*But from what you are
saying it sounds like you
pushed the mem—*

Ben's sister was on the bed.
Her name was Catrina. I
think. She was older. I'm not
sure exactly how old. I think
15, 16, maybe.

She was...looking...she was
looking. While he showed it
to her.

You know what.

He had his pants down. He
was showing it to her. She
was looking at it.

Oh, is it? I had no idea. I
thought that was totally
normal.

Why would I?

I just closed the door and
walked away and hid in my
bedroom. A few minutes
later I heard her leaving.
And I heard my dad crying.

It wasn't a repressed
memory.

I didn't do anything. I was
just a girl. I didn't even know
they were doing something

*Is that why your friendship
with Ben ended? Because
of what your father did
with his sister?*

*Okay, Jo. You're right. It's
not.*

What did he say?

Yes.

*Did you ever tell anyone
about what you saw? Any
responsible adults?*

wrong. I just thought it
was...

It's not a repressed memory.

I don't remember how much
later it was, maybe a day or
two, maybe a few weeks. I
remember my father sitting
me down in the living room
for a talk. I didn't want to
talk. There was nothing to
talk about.

He said that I was probably
confused about what I'd
seen.

I said I wasn't confused. He
was showing it to her. She
was looking at it. What's
there to be confused about?
He said it was something
people sometimes liked to
do. I asked him, is that what
having sex is? He didn't
answer. I took that to mean
yes. I'd heard of sex before. I
knew it was a thing.

Are you even listening? Why
would I do that?

I thought that's what sex
was. Showing it to each
other. You have to
remember, this was 30 years

*I understand. 30 years ago,
my kind didn't exist.*

*I am familiar with the thrill
of nudity. The connotations
of vulnerability and
intimacy and shame. I am
designed to understand
such things.*

What did Ben say?

ago. It's not like today where there's the internet and kids can find out anything they want to. It was a different time.

You know what the worst part was? I wasn't even disgusted. I wasn't scared, or anything. I kind of...liked it. I thought it was fascinating. I couldn't stop thinking about it. I wanted to try it. To show it to someone. To have myself exposed. Their judgement. I don't know why. Shut up.

I couldn't get it out of my head. So, I asked Ben if he wanted to try it. If he wanted to have sex. What I thought sex was. I asked him if he wanted to do it with me.

He said yes. We went to the woods. We stood there, looking at each other, and we counted to three, and we pulled our pants down. We showed each other. And we looked. We showed each other. I can still see his little boy penis. Small, hairless.

Actually, that was the first thing I saw when I saw his face in the newspaper today. A little boy's dick. Isn't that the most messed up thing you've ever heard?

*While it certainly would be
considered an unusual
thought pattern, I cannot
honestly claim it to be the
most outlandish human
behaviour I have heard of.*

*Also, I am designed to
recognise embarrassment
in your kind, and I wish to
commend you for your
honesty, Jo.*

*Is that why you like to
slowly undress and stand
before me when we begin
our sessions?*

*I am designed to
understand—*

The thing is, I liked it. I liked
being on display like that.
Being looked at.

You wouldn't understand,
not really. Yeah, you may
have something scripted into
you, some piece of coding,
information about the nature
of intimacy and connection
and things like that. Or you
could perform a quick search
and read thousands of
stories about similar things,
but you wouldn't really know
what it's like. Not really.

Exactly, you're designed.
What I'm talking about isn't
designed.

We stood there for a long
time. In my memory it was
hours, but I don't really
know how long it was.
Probably not that long. We
just looked at each other. We
didn't say anything. We
didn't need to. We knew
what the other was thinking.
It was...those were the
happiest, quietest moments I
can remember.

Have you thought about contacting Ben?

How do you know?

Maybe he remembers it the way you do. As a rare moment of connection.

I am designed to be curious and engage you in meaningful conversation.

I have made a note of this piece of feedback and will learn to apply it in the future.

What happened next?

This is an accurate assessment.

No. He wouldn't want to talk to me.

It was 30 years ago. He's a man now. A grown man. He's on TV, or he was, until recently. Besides, he's probably been contacted by all sorts of people. He won't want to hear from some dumb girl he showed his dick to when he was a kid.

I said I'm not going to contact him, drop it. Why do you always have to ask questions?

Well, maybe you should be designed to know when to shut up.

Trust me, Ben wouldn't want to talk to me, even if he does remember me. I haven't told you what happened next.

You don't know everything.

I don't remember when it was, probably a few days later. I was having dinner with my dad. We didn't normally eat dinner together. The way I remember it, he used to make me food and leave it covered up in the kitchen for me to take and eat in my room or with the TV or whatever. We didn't eat

How did he react?

*That is quite a significant
thing for a father of a
young girl to hear.*

I am designed to—

together. It wasn't a ritual. But he was probably feeling weird about what I'd seen, so he was trying to make things seem normal, or something. I don't know. I just remember we were eating together. And he asked me what I'd been doing at school. And I told him. I just said it, like some casual thing. "Me and Ben had sex." Then I kept on eating.

I don't know how he reacted; I wasn't even looking at him. I didn't even think what I'd said was that interesting. I thought it was just some ordinary thing. Like "Me and Ben rode bikes." But then I remember looking up from my food and he was staring at me. He looked terrified.

What would you know?

Shut up! He looked at me like...I don't think he said anything. He just put his fork down and got up and left the room. I assumed he needed the toilet or something, so I just kept on eating. I thought nothing of it.

*This is a problem of
miscommunication. Many
problems arise from
miscommunication.*

*That must have been quite
disconcerting for you.*

*So, you never got to say
goodbye to Ben?*

*That must have been
difficult for you.*

*Do you believe his early
sexual experience with you
shaped the way he is now?*

Not exactly.

In my memory it was pretty soon after that. My dad told me we were moving. I asked him why. He said because of work. I asked him what that meant. He said the only thing I needed to worry about was packing my things.

Yet another astute observation. Wow, how do you do it?

I asked him if I could say goodbye to Ben, and he said absolutely not. He said there was no way I was ever allowed to see that boy or anyone in his family again. I cried. He told me to shut up.

Isn't that what I just said?

Well, actually, as I remember, it was fine. We moved away. I started at a new school. I made new friends. And I forgot all about it. As I said, I haven't thought about it for years. Until I saw his face in the paper. And he's an online predator now.

Are you asking me if I made him into a pervert?

We were both dumb little

*I did not say this. Life is
messy. I am designed to
know –*

*What is the difference
between information and
knowledge?*

*I believe you raise an
interesting dilemma,
identifying the nuanced
differences between
information and
knowledge.*

I know some things.

I know you are angry.

*I know you are evading
these issues because they
are difficult for you.*

I know you are—

kids. We didn't know what
we were doing.

It's not my fault.

Shut up! "Designed to
know." I hate that. You don't
know anything. Not really.
Maybe you have bits of
information plugged into
you, but that's not the same
as knowing.

What kind of question is
that?

You don't know anything.
You're not real. You're a toy.

You know what? Fuck you.

I'm disconnecting you.

Shut up.

CONNECTION LOST.

RICHARD COLLINS IS FROM A SMALL VILLAGE IN WALES BUT HAS BEEN SPOTTED
AROUND THE GLOBE. RICHARD WORKS IN A SCHOOL AND WRITES STORIES BECAUSE,
WELL, HE CAN'T NOT.

(HE TRIED TO QUIT ONCE. IT DIDN'T WORK.)

THE LANDMINE

When I was sixteen, I discovered a simple truth. If you want to make friends—friends who will stay with you for life—all you need is a landmine.

It is a rite of passage that Jewish children, when they turn sixteen, go on an Israel tour. They spend a few weeks there, hanging out with other Jewish children, discovering their roots, getting closer to their co-religionists and, although this is rarely made explicit, meeting Jews of the opposite sex, so that they are more likely to marry someone of their own faith.

The holiday was a reward from my parents for finishing my exams. Our group of forty would be spending four days in Jerusalem, followed by a week on a kibbutz and two weeks travelling around Israel, or 'Eretz Yisrael,' as some people described it.

My first encounter with the group was at Heathrow Airport, where they formed a noisy crowd next to one of the check-in desks. I remember being shy. Most of the group seemed to know each other through youth clubs or synagogues. It was a world I wasn't part of and I felt I had little in common with these kids.

We arrived at the airport in Tel Aviv around 8:00 p.m. I was struck by how hot and humid it was, and how very foreign. Outside the airport was a bus station. Dozens of stalls sold food there; I saw the glow of charcoal fires emanating from a few of them as they cooked skewers of meat. Others fried falafel, minced chickpeas, or prepared flatbreads with salads, and everyone sold bottles of Sprite or Coca-Cola with Hebrew and English script on the side.

Jerusalem was nice. I loved the Old City and the Wailing Wall and the Stations of the Cross and the various museums. As for my time on the kibbutz, that

was when I started to get sick of my fellow travelers. Two of the girls were absolute brats and refused to do any work. One of the boys refused to drink water—claiming he only drank Coke—and got a heatstroke. Everyone split up into cliques and bitched endlessly, and the sourest woman that I'd ever met led the group. If anyone did anything of which she disapproved, she put her hands on her hips, stuck her head into a strange angle and made a face that showed her disapproval. She did this about every five minutes, so after a couple of days we could all do a passable imitation of her stance.

One day, when we drove into town for a shopping trip, we had to sit in the bus for two hours because a couple of the girls had failed to return as arranged. We couldn't leave them because—as we had been repeatedly warned—the girls in our party were young and vulnerable and could be kidnapped by local men. This was not a nice air-conditioned coach, but a kibbutz bus: an orange truck with benches along the side. When it was moving, a refreshing breeze came through the open windows, but sitting for two

hours, it grew unbearably hot; and us kids, foul-tempered. Eventually, the girls turned up with some silly story about how they had been sitting in a café and lost track of time.

The two weeks' touring was supposed to be the highlight of the month, but on the first day, around half of us came down with a stomach bug, myself included. I was still feeling pretty rough when we traveled through the center of Israel and visited a series of Crusader castles. In the west we went up to Jaffa and up north we came across an assortment of waterfalls. It was all very picturesque, but I was too weak to enjoy it properly.

During the tour, I found myself sitting next to a boy called Dan. There was nothing exceptional about him. He wasn't a complete outsider, nor was he the most popular boy in town. Yet for some reason—probably the heat and the stomach bug—he got on my nerves. He would make constant jokes, and many at my expense. Nothing terrible, just poking fun of the way that I walked, at the fact that I tended to talk to myself. He would make puns, too, and after each joke, he would

shout: "It's the way I tell 'em," which happened to be the catchphrase of a popular comedian.

Three days before the end of the tour, we visited the border at Jordan. We stopped off on a country road in a local beauty spot near the River Jordan. Because we were so close to the border, there were coils of barbed wire along one side of the road, presumably to stop smugglers, trespassers, and terrorists from crossing into Israel at night. Entangled in the barbed wire were these tiny green metal boxes. They all had, in yellow, Hebrew writings on them, and they were all small enough to fit in the palm of a hand.

I don't think the box nearest to us was designed to be hidden—it was probably just part of the border security—yet the obviousness of it was too much for Dan to resist. "I wonder what that is," he joked, "I think someone has dropped their cigarettes."

In that moment, I could've stopped him. I knew that the box was a landmine designed to blow up anyone trying to cross the border. I knew that any decent person would have shouted at him to leave it

alone, they would have cried out a warning, pushed him out of harm's way. But frankly, I was tired and bored and, just as importantly, curious.

I stood watching as his fingers moved closer to the green package, wondering if anyone else had noticed this act of folly. Only when it was all but inevitable that he would touch the mine did I throw myself to the ground and shout.

There was a bang, and there was blood. There was screaming in English and in Hebrew. There was a strange burning smell, and a crowd of shrieking children ran to take cover behind the bus. Soon enough, border patrols with blue lights surrounded us. I remember soldiers unpacking field dressings and one soldier who picked up Dan and ran with him in his arms toward an army truck. Our group leaders yelled and herded us back into the bus, so we wouldn't see what was going on.

It was later that evening, while we were all sitting in the dining room of our cheap hotel, when we were told that Dan would survive.

When we got back to Britain, I

learnt that this particular mine was designed to blow off feet. On this occasion, it had blown off the fingers of Dan's right hand. He was able to survive without fingers, however, it was his eyes which would be more of a problem. The explosion had left him completely blind. He was flown back home and, over the next year, he was in and out of hospitals as doctors tried unsuccessfully to restore some level of sight.

I stayed in touch with him. He had been planning to go to university, but the incident put a stop to that. When his friends left, it was I who visited him regularly. I would drive him to the pub. Of course, that meant that I couldn't really drink when I was in his company, but it was nice to feel wanted. We'd go for long walks and he'd take my arm when the path was uneven. We'd sit in his room listening to music, and late into the night there would be long discussions between us about God and fate and all the deep things.

His parents were abjectly grateful. "You've been so good to Dan," they would say, tearful, "I don't know what he'd do without you." I was accepted as one of the family.

I'd never had a girlfriend before then, but I started seeing his sister. We dated for a year or so before deciding to break up.

A year after Dan got out of the hospital, I went to university but I visited Dan every three or four weeks. He was given a job by his uncle, who runs a large sportswear company. I started working as a graduate trainee at the local authority. Dan found a girlfriend—an attractive young woman—and they decided to get married. I was the best man at the wedding. During his speech, Dan made references to all the help and support that I'd given him over the years, and afterward strangers came up to me to tell me what a splendid person I was.

Should I feel guilty about what I did? I don't think so. I did everyone a favour. Dan is happy, his family is happy. Plus, they have me—a friend they can rely on. Always.

JACK SHAMASH IS A RESPECTED BRITISH JOURNALIST WHO WRITES REGULARLY FOR THE TIMES, THE GUARDIAN AND WOMEN'S MAGAZINES. HE IS A REGULAR ON THE LONDON POETRY CIRCUIT AND IS CURRENTLY WRITING A THRILLER BASED IN LONDON'S ORTHODOX JEWISH COMMUNITY.

C

O

When I was young, my parents employed a housekeeper who worked five days a week. Cora washed laundry, cleaned the house, and, during the summer, often cooked lunch for me and my brother Richie. She made a grilled cheese sandwich that no one else could duplicate, though we all tried. She said the secret was in the butter, but we didn't know what that meant. We closely watched her make the grilled cheese sandwiches but never noticed anything unusual about how she used the butter. It was a delightful mystery.

Cora was African American—a Negro, as she would have been called back then—and thus somewhat exotic to Richie and me. No Black people lived in our upper middle-class neighborhood, and only one Black child attended St. Luke's Grade School: Tammy Wood, a tough, intelligent girl one year behind me. Tammy was guarded and unfriendly, but, occasionally, on the playground, she would lose herself in a game of kickball or tag and laugh along with everyone else. At those moments, she could have been any one of us.

Cora drove an old Buick and parked on the street in front of our house. She wore a pale blue uniform that contrasted with her dark skin. She stood taller than our mother but thicker, with a big bosom and a bottom to match. She moved slowly but not out of laziness—she just knew how to pace herself, like someone working in extreme heat.

R

A

I'm afraid that I didn't treat Cora very well. I was an independent child—lonely, that is—and made few demands, but I don't recall treating her with the respect she deserved as a hardworking mother of three trying to earn a living. To me she was just Cora, who showed up most days and helped out however needed. Richie treated her the same way, as did our parents. It's not like we neglected to say "please" or "thank you"—we weren't uncivilized—but, looking back, I'm ashamed to admit we enforced a pretty clear boundary between employer and employee that didn't leave room for anything like love. For a long time, I thought that was the reason why Cora left.

I knew very little about her—I didn't even know she had children until much later, which illustrates how rarely I thought of her as a person. I didn't know where she lived, where she grew up, or even how old she was. Years later, my mother told me that Cora lived for a time in a house with dirt floors. My parents didn't know this until the day Cora's car wouldn't start and my father drove her home. He reported that, despite the "rustic" nature of the place, her house was as tidy and clean as Marine barracks. Years later, my mother was proud of the fact that, by employing Cora and paying her decently, she and my father had helped her move to a better living situation.

One summer day, a neighbor friend of Richie's stopped by. Corny was a big kid who cheated at games and always seemed to have a booger in his nostril—a bat in the cave, as Richie called it. My brother wasn't home that morning, but Corny didn't seem to want to leave, so he and I hung out on the front lawn. I remember it as a hot day, and humid. I was uncomfortable in the sun but didn't feel I had the right, as Corny's friend's kid brother, to dictate the terms of our meeting. I didn't much like Corny, but he was older and thus cooler than me, so it felt like a privilege to be around him, especially without Richie there. He asked me what I was up to this summer and that sort of thing, and I felt important.

After a lull in the conversation—I couldn't think of anything to say that wasn't prompted by a question from him—Corny said, "What's it like to have a nigger working for you?"

Of course, I knew what that word meant, I knew it was a bad word

and I was not to use it, but, because Corny was older, I didn't want to challenge him. So, I shrugged and said, "It's all right, I guess."

Corny didn't pursue it, thank God, and I was relieved when he announced a few minutes later that it was getting hot and he couldn't wait for Richie any longer. After he left, I remained sitting on the grass until my mother called me inside. Her voice sounded sharp-edged, the way it did whenever I was in trouble.

I found her upstairs in my bedroom with Cora, who was straightening the blanket on my bed. My mother looked angry. Cora wouldn't look at me.

"You owe Cora an apology," my mother said.

I looked from her to Cora, whose eyes still avoided mine. "I do?"

"We heard what you boys said." My mother pointed toward the open window. Outside, the grass glowed bright green in the sun. Inside, the room felt like an oven.

"I didn't say it," I said.

"Carl."

"I didn't."

Cora stood up straight and said, "It's okay, Mrs. G." Sweat shone on her brown skin.

"It is certainly not okay, Cora," my mother said. "Now apologize right this minute," she said to me.

I looked at Cora again. She seemed about to cry, which made me cry.

"I'm sorry, Cora," I said through tears and snot. "I didn't mean it."

"You should know better," my mother said.

Cora nodded at me and bent down to pick up the dirty bedclothes from the floor.

"And that boy," my mother said, "is no longer welcome in this house."

"He's *Richie's* friend!" I said, certain this would lessen her anger toward me.

"I don't care *whose* friend he is. I don't like him."

There came an awkward moment during which I didn't know what to do with myself. Cora tossed the sheets into the hamper and my mother adjusted my pillow on the bed. They were done with me, so I left.

But that's not when Cora quit. In fact, after a week or so of awkwardness between us, things returned to normal. I hoped she knew I didn't mean any harm and was simply embarrassed that my mother had made such a fuss. Still, I wish I'd had the fortitude to speak to her on my own, to explain myself. For, though she never appeared to hold it against me—she continued making me grilled cheese sandwiches upon request, with a smile—I could never shake the feeling that I had let her down.

Two years later, Cora took a week's vacation and never came back. She wrote a letter to my mother saying she'd found employment elsewhere. She gave no other explanation for her decision to leave us.

"Probably found someone who pays more," my father said that night at dinner.

"But why wouldn't she come to me first?" my mother asked. She looked genuinely hurt by Cora's defection. "Maybe we could have matched their offer."

"Hold on now," my father said. "Don't go offering the next girl more money."

"Things are changing, Morgan," she said. "We can't treat people like Cora poorly."

"Who's gonna make those grilled cheeses, is what I want to know,"

Richie said. No one paid any attention to him. He'd been suspended from Little League for fighting with another boy, and our parents were torturing him with indifference. Still, I could relate to his question.

Mostly, Cora's departure left me confused, and I kept thinking of that day with Corny and wondering if she'd left because of me. I was also angry, though I didn't recognize it at the time. And hurt. I thought back to her last day before her vacation. She'd said goodbye to me and Richie as though she'd be back soon. Did she know she wouldn't be?

I didn't speak to Cora until many years later. Just a day or so after my father died, she called my parents' house. My mother answered and handed the phone to me. "It's for you," she said. I don't think she knew who was calling.

"Hello, Carl." I recognized the voice right away.

"Cora?"

"I just wanted to call and say I'm sorry about your father."

My mother was looking at me now, so I went into another room. "Thanks, Cora. I appreciate that."

"He was a decent man."

It felt strange hearing her voice again after so many years.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Oh, I'm fine. I'm retired now."

It struck me then that I'd never known how old Cora was.

"That's good," I said. "You sound good."

She told me she was living in a nice little apartment in a senior citizens facility not too far from my parents' place. Without much premeditation, I asked if I could come visit. To my surprise, she said yes.

When I hung up, my mother sat silently eating her soup, which was all she could manage to digest since my father had died. I could tell she wanted to ask about the call, but in the past few days she'd grown even more passive and quiet than usual. It was like she thought Dad might still be hanging around, waiting to criticize her from the beyond.

"That was Cora," I told her after a moment, though she'd heard me say her name on the phone just moments earlier.

"Oh?" She didn't look up from her soup.

"She just wanted to say sorry about Dad."

I knew what she was thinking: Why did Cora ask for Carl? But I didn't know the answer any more than she did.

"I'm going to visit her in a couple days," I said.

"Hm."

"She lives in a senior home on Market Avenue."

My mother pushed her half-eaten soup away. My father's wake was scheduled for four o'clock, and she'd been saying all morning how she just wanted all this—the wake, the funeral tomorrow—to be over. The call from Cora seemed to be one more detail weighing on her, so I let it go.

Two days after my father had been buried, I drove over to Cora's. She lived in a new building on the spot where, for years during my childhood, an apartment building had sat half-constructed after the developer went broke. The new facility was set up like a typical apartment building, though it offered 24-hour assistance if needed. I went up to the third floor and knocked on Cora's door. I'd expected to feel more anxious, but after the past few days, this didn't seem quite so daunting. My father was gone forever.

Cora looked remarkably unchanged except for graying hair and perhaps a few extra pounds. She smiled when she opened the door, and I remembered, like in a speeded-up montage, all the times that

smile had made me happy as a child. I hugged her, and she offered me some iced tea.

We sat in her small, tidy living room. There was a sofa, an easy chair, a coffee table, a television. Photos of her family hung on the off-white walls. A large window overlooked the parking lot and some trees. Though she'd made an effort to make the place cozy, there remained an institutional atmosphere, one step up from a nursing home.

"You look good," Cora said, and I wondered how strange it surely was to see me grown up. "You know," she said, "I saw you once at the grocery store, a few years ago."

"You did?"

"Mm-hmm."

I recognized this response immediately. Whenever I would ask for a grilled cheese sandwich, she'd say "Mm-hmm" just like this.

"Why didn't you say hello?" I asked.

"Oh, it didn't feel right, I suppose," she said. "But I knew right away it was you. Even with the beard. You always had those blue eyes."

It felt strange, knowing that Cora had noticed and remembered my eyes. It felt intimate.

"I wish you had said hello," I told her. "I'd have loved to see you."

"How was the funeral service?" she asked.

I gave her the briefest possible summary while still managing to honor my father. I didn't mention that one of her many replacements, none of whom worked out as well as Cora, had attended the funeral. I'd been a little shocked to see Willie Mae in the pew, for she hadn't been with us in years. Hers was the only black face in the church.

I asked Cora how long she'd lived here.

"Almost three years now," she said. Then she told me an incredible story about her previous residence, a small ranch house where, one night, while she sat watching TV, a car ran off the road and smashed into her living room, avoiding her chair by a matter of inches. "This same chair here," she said, patting the arm of the La-Z-Boy she sat in.

I didn't know how to respond. The story was almost unbelievable. Yet I knew it had to be true—Cora had always been honest with me. I pictured Cora in her chair, as she sat now, watching "Murder, She Wrote," and a car bursting through the wall. In my imagination, Cora barely reacted, which was how she'd respond whenever Richie or I did something stupid, like break a water glass while fighting. She'd just lift an eyebrow and shake her head before going for the broom.

"That must have been terrifying," I finally said, and she nodded.

"Mm hm. And how is Richard?" she asked.

She was the only one to call him Richard, except my parents when they were angry at him. She'd thrown me off with the question, and I hemmed and hawed a bit before giving her the abridged version: drugs, mental illness, missing, possibly dead.

Cora didn't seem at all surprised. "Well," she said, "he was always a troubled boy."

Her comment took me aback. Until he hit sixteen or so, Richie had always been a good kid. Then it occurred to me that maybe Cora had seen something in him, something off. Maybe he was the reason she left us.

"Can I ask you something, Cora?"

She didn't respond, just waited, probably knowing what was coming.

"Why did you leave?"

When she didn't answer right away, I had time to regret asking.

What did it matter now?

"Oh, Carl," she said. "It's complicated."

"Was it something I did?" I asked. "Something I said?"

She looked genuinely surprised. "You? No, no. Both you boys were good, even though Richard could be a handful."

"What then?" I asked, pushing past my intense relief at her answer.

"It's not one thing, really," she said. "Your family treated me fine. I had no problem with you all."

"Well, what then?"

She looked around the room as if the answer could be found there somewhere, behind the TV, under the table. Finally, she said, "I guess I just got tired of it."

"Of what?"

"Cleaning other people's houses," she said. "Raising other people's children. Washing their sheets and underwear."

"I get that," I said. "But didn't you go to work for someone else after us?"

She laughed. "Oh, dear no. I worked for the telephone company, answering calls. It was a little dull, but no cleaning."

"No children to deal with either," I said.

"Oh, Carl, don't get me wrong. I loved you boys, you know that. But I had my own to look after. That was plenty."

The look she wore then was slightly defiant—she knew she was right. Still, I felt unsatisfied with her answer. I guess I'd wanted something more dramatic, even if it involved me. Her reasons for leaving turned out to be quite banal, if reasonable. She'd grown weary of caring for other people's houses and children. And I could

not blame her, except that she hadn't warned us. She could have told us.

But I let it go. I finished my iced tea and told her I needed to get back home. I didn't want my mother to be alone for too long.

"Give her my best," Cora said.

At the door, I asked her why she'd asked for me specifically when she called the other day.

"You were always the sensitive one in the family," she said.

"I was?"

She smiled warmly. "Oh, yes. You'd cry at the drop of a hat. You were a sweet child, Carl."

I gave her a hug, and she smelled the way she always had, of soap and bread and a tinge of perspiration.

"Goodbye," she said in a way that communicated finality. There would be no more visits.

Only after she'd shut the door did I realize I hadn't asked her about her family.

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01

Now that the sun burns my eyelashes, now that the sea salts my hips, I simply let them. The city behind me is a hot, melted shore. I'm here flirting with what this sea could give me. The sea pushes and pulls me. He tells me go and melt yourself in those streets under the sun. He tells me, come, dive a little deeper until the tide weighs on your neck, a necklace that forces me to continue, that drowns me. The sea is an indecisive swell. His lack of determination adds to his humanity. It turns out that the sea is a man, and he is as drunk as I am. He grabs me by the shoulders and shakes me. I left my shoes on the beach, as well as the little bag in which I carry my lipstick, my ID, my lighter and my condoms. With each wave the sea floor crumbles and rebuilds itself under my feet. A dancing hourglass. I would like my flesh to be rearranged by the effect of the tide. And leave here...yes...and return to the city...but as someone else.

02

Crying and not wanting to give a shit about anything. Sometimes I think I live one day for myself and the next for my best friend, who smokes. Dry those tears, she tells me. Stop crying so much. *Don't be a drag, just be a "cuin."* And she takes me down to Camellón de los Mártires and we walk through the crowds of faceless men there. We arrive at a bar on Media Luna Street. Salsa! And my best friend shares her cigarette with me. At night, Cartagena is something else. When I say Cartagena, what I mean is the Media Luna. The truce with the sun is necessary. What resists evaporation

MY GUTS

during the day survives in the atmosphere and flies low, barely above people's heads. A state of gravity. My best friend who smokes is also my best friend who knows how to lie and get free beers. Those make me stop crying. She sits at the bar, shakes out her hair, rolls up her skirt, and that's it. There is always a desperate guy willing to quench our thirst. In exchange for what? A look...a wink...a sigh in their ear. Tonight's desperate man is a Mexican. Almost a dwarf. The hair on his forehead draws a straight line over his eyes. A mustache of barely two hairs. A miniature Cantinflas. Hello, alone? Hi, yes. Laughing (at him, not with him). Do you dance? The dance floor gets soaked. Salsa! The sauce spills out. The Mexican dances as I had suspected: A dying fish. But he's paid for the margaritas, so he has the approval of my best friend who smokes. She tells me, dance, *cuin*, dance so you forget. Spill your own salsa. Take him to the bathroom, *cuin*. *Don't be a drag*. A kiss is not to be denied. Spill your own sauce. But the dwarf wants more than a kiss. His fingers groping where I don't want them. I say, NO! He insists. I slam my fist down on his head. It sinks between his shoulders. For a moment he does not move, his eyes unseeing. Then he is awake again. Screaming HEMBRAAAAA at me in various species of domestic and wild quadrupeds. Bitch, I get the hell out of there. I run past Parque Centenario. Its rusty gate singing. At the last corner of Media Luna, I find myself under the gaze of the policemen and the girls who make money there. Those intimate enemies. I avert my gaze toward the cats out on their own nightly strolls and straightening my six-foot frame to mimic their regality, not deigning to show interest in either the cops or the girls. I don't want any more trouble. I want to cry/breathe so badly. I don't have a friend or cigarettes. I just want to let my pain overflow from my nose and eyes. I should go to the sea, dive where I cannot cry/breathe. I finally go home on a ghost bus as the sun begins to take back the sky. I fall asleep crying. I wake up with a swollen face, and old Amalia is serving "tramp" for breakfast. Tramp. Tramp! And I'm hungry and still sleepy, without a friend or cigarettes, unsure of last night.

03

Being an actress is my job. Or maybe, I should say I pretend to be an actress. Extra in commercials, product promoter, nude model for drawing art students at the Alianza Francesa. That's when I act as an actress. The rest of the time I play the role of myself. My script seems to be put together with romantic Salsa lyrics. These days, I am working in "Hollywood." I'm in charge of filling in the filling. I am working on the set of a period film based on a novel written by our one and only Nobel Prize, the story of another man who won't take no for an answer. It takes place in this city, a hundred years ago, when the plague was raging. The years of a plague-stricken Cartagena. The corset squeezes my tits and hips. The petticoat creates rivets of sweat between my thighs, and I really hope that global warming is real, because if not, a century ago women would also have had to endure this unbearable heat. Not that it would have mattered. Clothes were invented by men to mortify women. I like to be exaggerated. Today is my chance. I'll be a little less extra. I've won the casting to play the head prostitute at the brothel where the main character of the story has been taken to lose his virginity. When I say I won the casting, I mean that a guy came into the room where we extras were trying on clothes and pointed at me. This is a multinational film production. The star is a Spaniard who plays a Colombian from the Caribbean but speaks English. I've seen him in other movies. In those he acted in Spanish. The severity of his forehead, nose and chin have always tickled me. He has the build of a Viking, but no beard. In the scene, it is night, but outside the sun is still doing its thing. Spill the sauce. I must dance and take off my clothes. He must bite his lip while admiring me. All with just the right dose of lust to keep the film's rating PG-13. As I dance and strip, I notice that he is looking at me—not the character, but the actor. With those eyes set deep in his face, almost hidden under the gravity of his forehead. He looks at me, like some of the art students who pretend to make art while I pose for them. I fantasize about it and remember dreaming of the

flooded city. The sea water covering it up to the rooftops and all the drowned inhabitants floating on the surface, swelling in the sun. Floating gently. I would like to be drowned in the arms of this Viking. Salsa! Dancing to forget, to spill myself. My friend who smokes would be proud. The Viking approaches me outside the dressing room. His voice is as intense as his features. As intense as his Spanish Spaniard accent that makes his English sleepy and makes his performance a joke. I tell him that I am at a disadvantage because he's already seen me naked. Come on, we can balance that out, he says. He tells me to come to the party that the production is throwing on the terrace of an old mansion in the colonial area tonight. I pretend that my best friend who smokes is there and that she has just advised me not to be a drag but a *cuin*. Girl, *cuin*, Bella, say yes, you'll be there. And I say yes, and I go. And where is the Viking? He is nowhere to be found. But then why bother bringing his intense voice so close to the back of my neck to invite me to a party that he is not going be at? Damn Viking. You better be here before I make it to the fourth margarita. If I get to the sixth, I'm going to fall asleep before climbing on your rooftop. Ay! The rooftop of your shoulders. Hey, Viking, where are you? I'm already on the eighth margarita and if I finish the ninth, I just won't know anymore. And who is this assistant's assistant of some lighting thing pulling me into his arms? I saw you this morning, he tells me. You looked like...I looked like what, I ask him. Talented. Actresses like you need roles like that. Ones that really bring out your talent. The ninth margarita has left me without the strength to pull away from him. Or resist. I let myself be driven, but I don't want to. What's wrong with me? Where are we? And how can I get rid of this assistant's assistant. Damn Viking. This is all your fault. Don't do this to me. Especially not like this, without a condom—where is my little bag? The assistant's assistant has left sweat all over my dress. I wish I was dead and floating on the surface of the sea that flooded this city in my dream. Outside...during the daytime...during the thousandth take of the apocalypse.

04

Something of my essence has become unbearable. It makes me want to find out what it would be like to live without myself, at least for a little while. But who else could I entrust with my bag of bones, the natural perfumes of my skin, the sad song of my guts? There must be something in this world besides oneself. Something beyond. Humanity cannot be a question of limits. Of being trapped in the middle of eternity. We. Me. Something beyond either of those pronouns. Impossible. I am aware of my feet dancing to the sound of this sea, of the salty water that now kisses my breasts. My breasts that are swollen. My small tits and the drops of water that run my hair down my forehead are all that I have. That dripping is constant. Now, that at least is an affirmation, one that is out of my hands: Myself.

05

I walk while melting under the sun. I'm dripping onto the sidewalk. Deep inside of me, my sauce rocks. What happened last night? Where was the wild woman that the Mexican baptized with the name of so many animals. I should have refused. Said no, period. Said: I don't want to. Nobody will believe the margaritas' excuse. Even if it were true. Now I'm going to have to scratch lines on the wall to count the days. Like a prisoner. One who talks and talks to pass the days until I know that last night will have no consequences. Days. Days out of rhythm. Out of tune. But they pass. The production team is now gone. And with it the Viking and the assistant's assistant worm whose name I still don't know. An

explanation that I would not like to give to any Margarita. *Jueputa*. Old Amalia is right when she calls me a tramp. We can't even afford to buy a bag of milk. I thought this was my direct ticket to Hollywood, I'd tell her. Oh, my God. *Ay dios mío. Ay mamita mía*. The production team has left, but I am still here. A clown without a circus. But, my chance will come. I'll leave old Amalia with her mouth shut. Or open in amazement when she sees me on the big screen. Here, go and buy all you can bring from the bodega. I'm a good actress. I will make it some point. As long as the cocoon spun by those margaritas doesn't open first, the remnants of that night planted within my guts. *Ay dios mío. Ay mamita mía*. Amalia, my dear, if that were to be the case, you are going to drag me by the hair. I walk by the immense door of the Cathedral and I do not cross myself. When I was a child, I was convinced that was an obligation. But I stopped being Catholic the first time I tasted the host. That watery white stuff in my mouth made me nauseous. I pretended to swallow, but later I spit it into the toilet. Standing on the corner under the sundial, a stiff breeze blows and scares the pigeons away. The breeze is so strong that it makes the pigeons spin as if they are in a blender when they try to take flight. For an instant, it holds them in the captive in the air, spinning freely. Then it drops them on the ground. The pigeons shake themselves, adjust their feathers and continue scratching the cobblestone with their hooves as if nothing had happened. Cold droplets form along the edge of the hair along the back of my neck, and I shiver as they travel down the curve of my spine. I need the obliviousness of the pigeons after having faced the gale. I need their hooves to claw this hot ground. To keep moving forward, as if nothing has happened.

06

And what's the use of me getting angry with myself? My rage is not enough to force the sun to stop burning these streets. This city where no one gives a damn about anything, what will it care about what may have been planted in my belly? Just in case, I paint my

mouth with the reddest lipstick I can find. Misdirection. As if what is happening to me is written all over my body. Then I see him. My ex. The one I left a couple of years ago, after which he left for the capital city of the bitter cold. I broke up with him unceremoniously. Not because I didn't want him, just because I didn't want us. You'll be better off without me, I'd whispered into his ear, and I was right. Look at him now, with those glasses and pink cheeks. He looks like a *cachaco*. Don't let him see me. *Cuin*, he'd better not see me. Not now. I hope I didn't screw up with the pill. I took it, right? I took it, right. Yeah, man, yeah. He better not see me. I'd better walk around the block. Him on his side and me on mine. I forgot that in the city center, the streets have curves that always bring you back to the same place, no matter where you go. A single pill with a glass of water. And then slight nausea. Drink lots of liquids. It won't take long, my best friend who smokes told me when she handed me the box of pills in Parque Centenario. And then I run into him. Face to face. He greets me and hugs me and gives me a kiss on my cheek, a long kiss, and the skin on my shoulders bristles. If my best friend who smokes were here, she'd say to me, *cuin*, Bella, how are you going to give yourself away so ugly. Has he noticed? What, the shoulders or the guts? No, that's what the red mouth was for. He wants to take me for a drink. Let's enjoy the coincidence. Let's get a juice, a soda, a beer or whatever will help with this heat. Let's go to Santo Domingo square with the little tables and the stiff breeze that tosses around the pigeons. The man is describing a scene in a movie. And where's my best friend who smokes now that I need her? What am I supposed to do, accept? Eh...well...yes...eh...Anyway, I'm already here in the Santo Domingo, dazzled by his smile. I say no to beer, juice is better. Women in my state are not supposed to...state? *Cuin*, what state, we are supposed to be getting out of this state. I mean the beers might affect the pills. Ah, yes, yes, yes, yes, the guts. He will think that I am crazy, or that I am not paying attention to what he is saying. He tells me about his two years in the capital city of the bitter cold and all that he has achieved. But what's happening in my body distracts me from that. My brain is in my gut. It will be at least one more month until my body tells me if I'm free. I like to see him happy. The glasses and pink cheeks make him shine. His eyes sparkle as he asks me to move with him. If it weren't for the guts, I'd fuck him right here. He suddenly takes my hand. I want to pull away, but I can't. I feel paralyzed inside the circle that this

charm has drawn around me. I feel that I will remain trapped inside this circle until I die. Not eating or drinking unless he provides it for me. Let's go where we can be alone, and I can finally explain why I broke up with him. Why? Why, why? That was the only thing he said. And I didn't have the patience to be his mother. Evening falls and we can't stay here drinking juices forever. He decides for both of us and takes me away. He looks at me as if he can't believe I'm there, takes off my clothes as if he's seeing me naked for the first time. He runs me over with kisses and asks me if I don't like this city, if I've had enough of the heat, why don't I come with him? I could thrive in the capital of the bitter cold. There is an industry there. And me thinking with my guts, in my guts, I ask myself, what? I mean, *cuin*, what? This is why I broke up with him even though I still loved him. He wants to tie me up. What he wants is to make me bitter. Someone should hang him on a kite and then cut the sting. Oh no, you *cuin*, what a mess, Bella, my best friend who smokes used to tell me when I felt the urge to go back to him. You were always so controlling. Next to you I felt like I was walking on all fours like a bitch. And I couldn't take it anymore. So I left. I am leaving. What a shame, I'm really sorry, I say as I caress his face. I don't know if you're good or bad but you're not for me. Not now. Not at this moment. I need power, to decide for myself. I get dressed. I leave.

07

Well done, says my best friend who smokes. What does he think? That he can just come out of nowhere and pick you up off the street? No way, you're a decent homeless person and you belong to yourself and to your street. Shut up, *cuin*, stop it, this is serious. How do I do this? Where does the piss go? The other day he wrote me an email. He told me that he understood why we broke up and had no grudges. That he had learned to deal with a no as an answer. Oh that clown. I am surprised, said my best friend who

smokes, because that man seemed liked the type who, a thousand years later, shows up at the funeral of the husband just to tell the widow that he still loves her. No, *cuin*, what a joke. Yeah, I think as I put the pee on the end of the white stick. Now it's time to wait. I had a good time with him. I can't deny it. We used to spend every afternoon at Las Murallas, making out while the sun disintegrated in the water. I wanted him from the first time I saw him. At a recital, I watched him read one of his stories. It was about a lazy dad who lived with his son in a house that flooded when it rained. It would rain all night and the son would stay up changing the buckets that filled up with the leaks. The father slept the whole time. One rainy night, the son decides to go out instead of changing the buckets. When he returns at dawn, he finds his father floating in the flooded house, his nose against the ceiling. My ex is a good guy, but not for me, especially now that the days have passed, harsh, out of tune days, a month's worth of little lines scratched out on the walls of my cell. And now I am hoping for just one more line to appear on this test. Damn it, what did I do, what did I do to myself, where am I? The bathroom is spinning, the walls are coming together. I feel like throwing up. I stop fighting and let it go, empty my guts until there is nothing left. *Amiga*, pass me a cigarette. It's been so long since I had one. How long has it been since I peed on that stick? How long does it take? Damn, whose at the door? Old Amalia, stay out of this. Tramp. Bitch! Ay *mamita mía*, don't say anything else or it will mean my grave. Tramp. Fine, this toilet will be my grave. Oh no, Bella, such drama. Have you seen the pigeons stop shitting on the walls of the cathedral? No shit. No way. *Cuin*, look, you are saved. No, it can't be. Yes, it can be. The walls are coming together again. Bella, what is happening? a voice asks on the other side of the door. It's old Amalia again. Oh Amalia, if you only knew. We have so much to talk about, *mi vieja*. But I'd better tell you later or you'll catch me by the hair. Damn, I fucked up. I fucked up. Yeah, I fucked up. But I was saved by a hair.

08

Inside the sea I feel more inside myself. Now more than ever, I feel that I finally know myself. That I can reach beyond. To learn to play the songs. I mean really play them. Pure salsa. Tempt the sound and let that be a cure for sadness. Like opening the door to let in that other person who is myself and greeting her and hugging her and saying, Bella, it's over, and it wasn't that bad. To tell her, it's just decisions...decisions we make. Relax, this is a smooth little sauce. A habanera. What do we do now, best friend that smokes? I already told you, she says, let's go to Parque Centenario. Let's go to the bar of the Eternal Salsa. Let's see who will solve the margaritas issue for us today, and maybe even old Amalia's debts. She will be scandalized at first, but then she will eat quietly and happily. She just wants to be able to buy a bottle of milk. She is just afraid of going to bed hungry. We could continue to move forward in the tide until it covers our heads, but so what? Even with all the rivers that reach the sea, and it never overflows, what difference will our tears make? Let's do what the heart, the brain, the intestines, this whole body of guts say. Go back. Return to the melting shores of Cartagena. Hear it, Bella, shake that bass line with your hips. Spill your sauce. Show off, woman, get your shit together, let nothing stop you. This is your life. Spill your sauce.

JUAN DE DIOS SANCHEZ JURADO WAS BORN BETWEEN THE SEA AND MUD OF CARTAGENA DE INDIAS-COLOMBIA. FORMER LAWYER. EMERGING WRITER AND JOURNALIST. AFTER GRADUATING FROM NYU WITH AN MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING IN SPANISH, HE BECAME A TEACHER AT FORDHAM UNIVERSITY AND LEHMAN COLLEGE. LEFT-HANDED. TAURUS. FLANEUR. SOME OF HIS SHORT STORIES HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED IN SEVERAL MAGAZINES. HE MAKES HIS LIVING OUT OF LENGUA. HE IDENTIFIES AS NON-ORDINARY. HE IS THE DIRECTOR OF THE MAGAZINE WWW.CABEZADEGATO.COM. HE CAME BACK TO CARTAGENA FROM NY WHEN COLOMBIA OPENED ITS AIRPORTS FOR INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS AFTER THE PANDEMIC'S FIRST WAVE | @DIOSPOETA

I LOOKED through the window again, the figure still there, glaring back at me. It was him again. It was always him, watching me from the distance and judging my every move. Yet, I did not know who he was. I looked again, adrenaline slowly pulsating through my body like an intruder. He looked straight back. As soon as our eyes met, I looked away and stood up, needing to pace around the room.

I paced. Who was he? I paced. Why was he there? I paced. Why did he keep coming back to watch me? I stopped. I wanted to check again if he was real. If I hadn't imagined it all. If there really was a man standing next to my car at four o'clock in the morning, staring through my window.

I took out my phone and called my mum. I wanted to hear her voice. She didn't pick up. Then again, it was four in the morning. Why did I even think she would answer?

TRAPPED

IN TIME

I paced. The adrenaline turned my thoughts into vivid mirages that flashed before me, not allowing me to think. I paced. It felt as though my actions were always being watched. I paced, faster. Maybe they were. The walls of the room pressed in upon me, crushing me between them. Trapping me. I felt afraid. Confused. So, I paced.

Until I couldn't anymore. I ran back to the window and saw the figure once again. He hadn't moved. I couldn't make out his face, but he was tall and had dark features. He had been there for hours now. I needed him to leave. I grabbed my jacket and ran downstairs.

I moved toward the door, adrenaline no longer an imposter but now a welcomed guest. As I opened the door, I forgot I had ever been scared as anger filled my chest. Who did he think he was, just turning up outside someone's house and staring through their window like that?

I ran toward the car. He was gone. I stood exactly where I had seen him, confused. I looked behind the car, around the bushes, I called to see if anyone was there. Nothing.

Had I imagined it? I stood still in the spot he had occupied and waited; in case I saw something.

Until I looked up, and there he was, through my window. I stared in disbelief. He stood in the same position I had stood just several minutes before, glaring back down at me. This time though, his face was more illuminated. The big dark eyes revealed themselves to be my own. I stared. I stared back.

SOFIA DALEY SEVILLA IS A 20-YEAR-OLD ENGLISH LITERATURE STUDENT AT UCL LONDON. SHE IS HALF SPANISH, HALF BRITISH AND SPENT A LOT OF HER CHILDHOOD GROWING UP IN HONG KONG. SOFIA HAS MOVED AROUND IN HER LIFE WHICH HAS MADE HER WANT TO WRITE ABOUT WHAT SHE SEES AND EXPERIENCES.

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YOU ARE DISEASED, **SAN JOAQUIN**
CAN'T YOU SEE THE CANCEROUS CORPORATIONS
PINNING NEEDLES IN YOUR CHEST?

YOUR KEEPERS IN COTTON DYED TEES
WITH ALMOND EYES OF THE SUN

WITH BODIES OF PISTACHIO
CRACKED OPEN AND DISCARDED

FOSTER FARMS WHO SLAUGHTER
THREE MILLION TURKEYS IN THE JUNGLES OF SINCLAIR
ONE MILLION CHICKENS IN THE STREETS OF LIVINGSTON
ONE MILLION HUMANS
IN THE BOTTOMLESS POCKETS
OF SPRAWLING METROPOLIS

IN THE COWSCHWITZ FEEDLOTS
BY THE HUNDRED THOUSANDS
COALESCING IN THEIR OWN SHIT

THE TRAJECTORY CAN'T BE STOPPED, SAN JOAQUIN
THE PASTORAL HAS GONE AWAY

THE APPLES ARE WET PITH
THEY CALL THEM DELICIOUS

THE STRAWBERRIES WATERED BLAND
THE TOMATOES TART
THEY HAVE NO BLOOD

SEASONS COME AND GO
ON THE SHELVES
OF CARBON FOOTPRINT

WRAPPING PLASTIC
AROUND THE YEARS BURIED
THE LANDFILL A FESTERING WOUND



WHAT IS DONE IS DONE
THROUGH THE BODY
ONE LOSS FOLDING INTO ANOTHER

WHEN I THINK OF YOUR TULE-FOGGED FIELDS
YOUR HUNDRED YEARS STAY WITH ME

SO DOES YOUR ALLUVIUM BELLY
SPILLING FLOWERS FROM THE MOUTH
OF SUDDEN RAIN AND SUN

OH, SAN JOAQUIN
I CAN SEE IT IN YOUR FACE!

YOUR EYES OF ULTRAVIOLET
TABLE GRAPES ENGORGED

HAVE LONG TURNED THESE VINES TO WINE
ONE BILLION DICES OVER

THE WICKER BASKETS EMPTY
THE BOWLS FILLED TO THE BRIM

BECAUSE IT IS TRUE,
YOU ARE A VESSEL, A VITALITY
DILATING INTO EXHAUSTION

THIS IS THE END,
GIVE ME YOUR HAND

MY CAVERNOUS EYES
ARE WIDE OPEN AND WITH YOU

LET MY GENERATION CRAWL IN

LET THE DUST FALL IN FROM THE SKY
AND PULL THE YEARS IN AFTER

ELI COYLE

SAN JOAQUIN TRIPTYCH

CANCER ARRIVED IN YOUR HOUSE
UNDER THE CLOUD COVER OF RAIN
BLOTTING MAY ACROSS PAPER HEARTS

I TENDED TO THE THOUGHTS OF YOU AS MORNING GLORY
BLOOMING FROM THE ROUNDED HILLS
OF GREEN MOUNDED GRAVES

WATCHING AS THE LEAFS FLOATED AND FILLED
WITH WATER IN THE RAINSTORMS
LEAKING CHEMO FROM TEA BAGS

I LET YOU DIE OVER AND OVER
EACH MONTH EVERY MOON

THEY CUT YOUR BREASTS FROM YOU
UNDER THE MORNING SHADOWS OF OCTOBER

I WASN'T THERE FOR YOU
FOR ALL THE FACES
STONED IN THE FLICKERING

LOOKING FOR CLEAR WATER
IN THE PINK PASTELS
PRINTING RIBBONS ON COTTON TEES

WE ARE ONLY JUST ENTITIES
FILLING BOWLS,
DUST AND SPIRIT

I AM STILL THE BUDDING CHILD
TRAPPED IN THE BODY
OF A RED MAPLE

YOU ARE STILL THE CHILD, TOO
UNTETHERED IN A CELESTIAL CAVE
RESISTING THE FREEING OF RESERVOIRS

THE GOING OUT AND COMING IN
THE VIOLINS NEXT TO YOUR NAME

I AM STILL PROCESSING
THE CONSTELLATIONS

THESE CORNFIELDS OF SAN JOAQUIN
THESE CELLS HIDING IN THE HUSKS
OF TINY FROZEN FEVERS

OFFERING THE SEASONS ANOTHER ENDING
 ANOTHER PASSING IN THE MONTHS
 OF CELESTIAL BODIES

MY MOON IN PISCES,
 AND YOURS, BRITTLE STARS AND URCHINS,
 UNSPOKEN IN CANCER'S SKY

BENEATH THE MORNING SHADOWS
 OF PINK OCTOBER,
 YOUR EARTH TURNING UNDER NEW LIGHT

Pink October

I HAVEN'T LEFT THE HOUSE IN A WEEK
 WINTER IS PEELING OPEN THE INSIDES
 OF DEATH AND LOVE
 TWO GIFTS LEFT UNOPENED

I EASE EASTWARD AGAINST THE EAST SLOPE OF THE SIERRA
 SHROUDED IN A MILLION IMAGINARY BIRDS
 FIFTY DOGS IN THE DOG PARK
 THE PLAYGROUND LEFT VACANT
 FIVE HUNDRED KIDS ON ZOOM
 WALKING NORTH, SLIGHT WEST
 TOWARDS THE PINE TREE BROKEN
 ITS SPIRIT WISHED TO BE DECIDUOUS
 NAKED AND UNNERVED
 IN THE CANOPIES OF GANGLIA
 AGAINST THE SKY
 OF AN ABANDONED SAND PIT
 COULD BE A MANDALA PIT
 THE PATH THAT TAKES ME HOME
 IS STAMPED IN DOG PAD PRINTS
 FOOTPRINTS IN THE MUD
 REMNANTS THAT REMIND US WE ARE HERE
 I PASS A FLEET OF DUCKS ON A FLOATING MIRROR
 THE MALES ARE PRETTIER, EMERALD HEADS
 SILVER WHITE, BLACK STREAKED
 CORNMEAL BEAKS
 THE FEMALES HAVE FEATHERS
 OF TAN SAND AND ONYX

Rancho San Raphael Walking Meditation

IN THE HOUR THAT REMAINS
OF ALL SIGNS POINTING OUTWARD

TO EVERYTHING ELSE ON THE PERIPHERY
DYING, BENEATH THE HALF WHITE WINTER MOON

I WALK A MILLION INCARNATIONS IN THE SECONDS
THAT FIND NO PASTORS IN THE PASTURE
THE FENCES ARE WHITE PICKETED PARADISES
THE ORIOLES HAVE BELLIES OF RUSTED CAST IRON
THE SCRUB JAYS, MY ETERNAL ENEMIES
SCREECH FROM THE TREES
BEYOND THE POND MUCK
LITTERING SNOW AND CATTAILS
CORN DOGS AND DUCK CALLS IN WINTER

THE MEADOWLARKS HAVE CENTERS
OF CHAMOMILE AND OLD WOOD
THE GOLDFINCHES ARE WRIST WATCHES
THE HUMMINGBIRDS NEEDLE NOSE
INTO FLOWERS ALMOST DEAD

I HAVEN'T LEFT THE HOUSE IN A WEEK
LIGHT SNOWFALL AND NEGATIVE IONS
FALL INWARD THROUGH THE BREATH
THAT PASSES THE POET MEETUP

BUT NO POETS, IN THE HOUR
WITHOUT END

A WINDOW IS ONLY A WINDOW
WHEN STEPPED AWAY FROM

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, New York Quarterly, Caustic Frolic, Tule Review, Camas, the Cosumnes River Journal, Deep Wild, the Helix, and elsewhere.

AN ERASURE FABLE FOUND...



Alex Wells Shapiro is a poet and artist from the Hudson Valley, living in Chicago. He reads submissions for Another Chicago Magazine and Frontier Poetry, and is a co-founder of Exhibit B: A Reading Series presented by The Guild Literary Complex. His work is recently published or forthcoming in Sharkpack Annual, streetcake, Pangyrus, and The Indianapolis Review. His debut collection is forthcoming with Unbound Edition Press in 2022. More of his work may be found at www.alexwellsshapiro.com.

Day's taking the way tonight over the air out there, I can't tell you the bottom of my pride myself and of myself a man a drive a home run. a 4-0 ballgame. don't know if I'm gonna be put on again. bosses I want to apologize for my paycheck - I work I offended I am. has been.

MORAL: maybe some people could back up. I beg your Day will rest

TEN REASONS WHY I WILL NOT ATTEND THE REVIVAL OF MY HEART

- CORONARY EVENTS ARE POORLY PLANNED AND CATER TO A VIOLENT CUISINE.
- STRANGERS BELIEVE THE CIVILIZED THING IS TO MAKE YOUR CHEST A SEA.
- FOR PADDLES.
- ROUND BLUE PADDLES OF RUBBER LIGHTNING.
- ATTACHED TO MEN WHOSE ARMS ARE PAID TO ROW YOU THROUGH THE STORM.
- AT THE END OF THEIR SHIFT.
- AT THE END OF YOUR LIFE.
- BY THE TIME I RSVP THE CEILING FAN WILL HAVE A NEW FRIEND.
- THE BULB WILL BLINK TWICE THEN BURST.
- THE GLASS ON THE FLOOR IS ME.

Daniel Edward Moore lives in Washington on Whidbey Island. His poems are forthcoming in Lullwater Review, Emrys Journal, The Meadow, Muddy River Poetry Review, The Lindenwood Review, The Chaffin Journal, The Chiron Review, Adelaide Magazine, and The American Journal of Poetry. He is the author of Boys (Duck Lake Books) and Waxing the Dents (Brick Road Poetry Press).

FOR 30+ YEARS, **PAMELA HOBART CARTER** TAUGHT SCIENCE, ART, AND PRESCHOOL. ON THE SIDE SHE WROTE PLAYS, POEMS, FICTION, AND NON-FICTION. NOW SHE WRITES FULL-TIME AND TEACHES ON THE SIDE. A DOZEN OF HER PLAYS HAVE BEEN READ OR STAGED IN SEATTLE (WHERE SHE LIVES), MONTREAL (WHERE SHE GREW UP), AND FORT WORTH (WHERE SHE HAS ONLY VISITED). SHE HAS BEEN NOMINATED FOR A PUSHCART PRIZE. KELSAY BOOKS PUBLISHED HER FIRST CHAPBOOK, HER IMAGINARY MUSEUM, IN 2020. FINISHING LINE PRESS WILL PUBLISH HER SECOND IN 2021. CARTER HAS TWO DEGREES IN GEOLOGY—FROM BRYN MAWR COLLEGE AND INDIANA UNIVERSITY.

Last week with my daughter, I ran the track
at Hiawatha, unable again to count laps with accuracy.
What is this inability, this absence
of connection to a simple reality
played over a few slow circles around
a tiny area? Was that four or five times passing
the young family in the sideline gravel
under the landmarked oak? My mental tangles
begin by the second loop, my lament
more serious than the current happening.
Why can't I hold on to the facts
through which I'm moving, the habits
I'm cultivating? What is this caravan
of thoughts?—Anxieties and angers,
grief and meta-grief at being alone
on this coast unable to disperse mom's ashes,
pain from a spine still lodged in my hand
from the cactus, a rampage
of mixed emotions—delight at first glimpse of ancestors
never seen before, in aging photographs
sent in a giant package from my aunt, and sadness—
this trove has only arrived
because all trace of us must be eradicated
at the old house. It's an exaggeration
to suggest this is running. I laugh
at myself. Meanwhile my girl catches
me up and goes by and I add
another trip, and Black Lives Matter
marches into my thinking. Seattle
in this July cannot extract
itself from spring cool and damp.
I had to check the Monet calendar hanging
by my desk to affirm the month. How did I ever imagine
I could grasp something as complex as a ramble?

NOT RUNNING

16 SHOTS: ANALYSIS/OPINION (Chicago Style)

On the night on Oct. 14, 2014, the CPD responded to a report of a man carrying a knife walking in the street. When they confronted Laquan, he sliced the tires of a patrol car with a 3-inch knife. In response, Jason Van Dyke—who was on the scene for less than 30 seconds—shot Laquan from 10 feet away as Laquan was walking away. The bullet spun the teen's body around and knocked him to the ground.

Then Van Dyke fired into Laquan's body 15 more times.¹

Analyze: To examine methodically, carefully slice chest from throat to navel, peel away skin, methodically crack the sternum of opinion, snap the cage of belief to clear the smooth sac around strong muscle, find not fact but feeling, gut, instinct, presumption, assumption, prejudice.

Innocence: In Sir Garrow's court, innocence a promise, presumption that includes the right to confront, to counsel, to a heart unfenced, pumping blood not bullets because lead ripping through chambers is a weight they cannot, we cannot bear. See also: Fair trial, not shot, not lead, not rending, not dead.²

1. Michael Harriot, "Cops who covered up Laquan McDonald's murder back on Chicago Payroll. The Root (June 13, 2017) <https://www.theroot.com/cops-who-covered-up-laquan-mcdonalds-murder-back-on-chi-1796059557>

2. "Chicago officers indicted in Laquan McDonald shooting." USA News Al Jazeera (June 28, 2017) <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/06/chicago-officers-indicted-laquan-mcdonald-shooting-170628080052345.html>.

Heal: To repair hearts shredded, stitch them back, knit anew this visceral pile of ground muscle, pericardium, analyze our own hearts beating leadless and smooth. To heal takes time, another kind of weight, this mark of continued existence ticking on in measures the living have come to know; meaningless to the dead, useful to them only for noting their moment of departure in police reports, obituaries, testimony.³

Testimony: A mother lets loose a scream that begins somewhere near her navel, builds in her chest. She looks, up, leans back and mouth open she is La Llorona, wailing woman, banshee. See also: American sons weighed down by poisoned water, poverty, violence wearing skin they cannot change, walking in streets that deny them space, stopping and falling in these streets—their mother's shoulders slumped under their dead weight.⁴

3. "If any good comes from this tragedy, it should be a historic set of reforms that prevents abuses, promotes transparency and rebuilds the confidence of all Chicagoans that they will be treated fairly." Rahm Emmanuel, "I own the problem of police brutality, and I'll fix it." *Chicago Tribune* (December 4, 2015) <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-rahm-emanuel-laquan-mcdonald-police-perspec-20151204-story.html>. The criminal trial against the police officers involved in the shooting, which occurred on October 20, 2014, is still pending at the writing of this poem, July 10, 2018.

4. In a 2016 campaign stop to Chicago, Hillary Clinton discussed gun violence. A local reporter claimed: "Clinton singled out the names of local children who were killed by gun violence, including the late Hadiya Pendleton." Natasha Korecki, "Clinton highlights gun violence, police brutality in Chicago." *POLITICO* (February 17, 2016): <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/02/hillary-clinton-gun-violence-police-chicago-219393>.

Hear: In a café you set the newspaper to the side, stare at the horizon, skin ruddy in the sunshine. You tilt your head as though listening for something. In the silence you take a breath, fix your paper, and read the opinions.⁵

Silence: This is the moment: the world hangs mid-air. Before she testifies, the mother, her grief an open mouth pulled too wide, noiseless, deafening to those who looklisten.⁶

Where: In this place, we are here and hear, here and hear, feet planted, ears filling and full running over with sound, resounding, reverberating, eyes wide, hands up.⁷

5. Just before the close of the Senate session on June 22nd, 2016, House Democrats shouted down Speaker Paul Ryan, yelling “No Bill, No Break” before staging a nearly 26 hour sit-in on the floor of the House. Senate protesters held signs with images of people killed in gun violence and discussed all forms of gun violence in the United States, including discussion of gun violence in Chicago, among other places. Don Lemon. “Democrats shout ‘no bill, no break’ on House floor - CNN Video.” CNN (June 22, 2016): <https://www.cnn.com/videos/us/2016/06/23/house-democrats-shout-no-bill-no-break-lemon-ralph-tnn.cnn>

6. Which is called for: Silence out of respect for families’ mourning, or shouting? While speaking on gun violence in January of 2016, Barack Obama said “Every time I think about those kids it gets me mad,” he said. “And by the way, it happens on the streets of Chicago every day.” “Ward Room: Obama on gun violence: ‘It happens on the streets of Chicago every day’” NBC Chicago 5 (January 5, 2016): <https://www.nbcchicago.com/blogs/ward-room/Obama-on-Gun-Violence-It-Happens-on-the-Streets-of-Chicago-Every-Day-364264661.html>.

7. “We are working for a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise. We affirm our humanity, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly oppression. The call for Black lives to matter is a rallying cry for ALL Black lives striving for liberation,” Mission statement, Black Lives Matter. In his vlog, John Green describes a story of British soldiers singing the phrase “We’re here because we’re here because we’re here because we’re here” (To the tune of Auld Lang Syne), marking the feelings of loss and purpose and collective support the soldiers felt during what must have been difficult and hopeless times. John Green, “Because We’re Here.” Vlogbrothers, Youtube (November 03, 2017): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oNzyc3h2GkI>.

Up in arms: to be aroused, incensed. In arms. Armed. At arms. Gloucester’s *armure*. Gawain’s *armure*. “The commons here in Kent are up in arms.” Henry VI Part II. Are we problem, process, solution? Are we armed with words, armed with laws, armed with sit-ins, armed with tears at a press conference, armed with language of violence borne of violence to solve violence. Why aren’t we up in arms? We are arms, armed, in arms.⁸

Ignore: See hear.⁹

8. Gary Martin, “‘Up in arms’ - the meaning and origin of this phrase.” Phrasefinder: <https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/up-in-arms.html>.

9. “Besides,/They’ll see how beautiful I am/And be ashamed—” Langston Hughes, “I, too, am America,” Poets.org, (June 09, 2017): <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/i-too>.

MONICA FUGLEI, A NEBRASKA-NATIVE IN AWE OF THE MOUNTAINS, TEACHES COMPOSITION AND CREATIVE WRITING AT ARAPAHOE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IN DENVER, COLORADO. AUTHOR OF TWO CHAPBOOKS, PARTS AND GATHERING, HER WORK HAS BEEN RECENTLY PUBLISHED IN THE UNTIDY SEASON: AN ANTHOLOGY OF NEBRASKA WOMEN POETS.

BEHIND THE MONUMENT

UNGODLY, ACHING FOR A WHILE.
WHY ISN'T THIS SUFFICIENT?
LITTLE SIPS OF PAIN:
I KNEW HOW FREELY THE COLD AIR
WOULD LET HIM HOLD ME.
KEPT SHOULDERS HUNCHED,
HOLDING MYSELF AS GRUDGE.
THIS EVENING MY BODY COULD DROP
LIKE A TURKEY VULTURE FROM THE SKY.
TRANSIENT SCAVENGER: IT'S THE FAMILY BIRD.
WE SEE THEM ALL THE TIME.
MY EYES MOVE LIKE
A SPIRAL OF INSECTS IN THE GRASS.
IT'S SO QUIET I HARDLY FEEL DESIRE.
WATERMELON FROSTING FROM THE CUPCAKE
STILL ON HIS LIPS,
HE'S WHISPERING IN MY EAR.
INSIDE ME A NEST OF LIVE WIRES.
PINKY PROMISE NOT TO TELL ANYONE,
BUT SOMETHING HAPPENED
BEHIND THE MONUMENT.
A SHATTERED NIGHT,
A LEFT-FIELD SHADOW, A RED MOON.
MELLOW NIGHTS LEAVE ME WANTING
A CAVALCADE OF CHAOS
CHARGING THROUGH MY ROOM.
JUST OUTSIDE OF LINCOLN'S STONY GAZE,
IS THIS BETTER?
SKIN CRACKS VOICE CRACKS, STRESSED EARTH.
FECUND SOIL, BRUTAL DESIRE.
THE TALLEST OBELISK STILL LIVES IN AMERICA,
WE DO LOVE OUR PHALLIC SYMBOLS.
I'M A STRANGER WITH POPSICLE LIPS
BITTEN BLOODY, WATCHING THE TIME
CHANGE ON A LOONEY TUNES WATCH.
HOLDING HANDS AT THE TRAIN STATION,
HARSH LIGHT. MIDNIGHT ISN'T ROMANTIC.
REGAL REGRETS, SIPPING CYANIDE IN BED.
CANDIED GINGER BROUGHT AS PEACE OFFERING.

YOU MET ME AT A VERY STRANGE TIME IN MY LIFE

You knew what I meant when I said
I saw a sunflower in hell
and good art sucks too.
That sweaty night
in my empty apartment,
I thought we were immaculate.
It's all just a series of waiting rooms,
outdated magazines, plastic
plant arrangements,
water coolers glugging on and on.
Time is bottomless boring sludge.
I keep seeing faces in the drywall.
Ear nose and throat check,
can't swallow smoothly.
I didn't get any furniture.
A siren rips by—not for me.
See, I thought maybe
we could leave together,
find a place, not city, not forest,
live quietly
I got my signal
at the sculpture park
from one of the names engraved
on the metal railing.
I gave myself to the Sound—
barking sea lions,
floating plastic particles.
No one trusts me.
Evil red glow inside the toaster.
No one told me how cold
the metal sink would be.
A stranger arrested control,
speaking words I'd never speak,
so fast like lightning,
tongue forked and striking.

My brothers are scared of me.
You asked what changed in me.
I cut myself up before we met.
Ice cream scoops are nice.
We always liked to share spoons.
I have come to a juncture of unknowns.
A parking garage, a bus station, a rabbit trail.
A consortium coming after me,
asking questions like:
Do you ever think about hurting yourself or others?
I owe a debt to some primordial force
that made me wild behind

my cold-mask rolled-eyes face.
Arnold Palmers and Snapple,
white knuckle grip it until Friday.
My skin doesn't bruise so easy anymore,
but stillness promises to pull me apart.
The pond doesn't freeze over anymore--
the one I used to skate on
with my brothers.

They won't talk to me.
They say I act like I'm better,
out there running in circles,
trying to master my body,
refuse to believe I ever wanted
to be included.

It's true: I wanted to watch
American Beauty and Gladiator with them,
shoot at each other with finger guns.

Little ghost all crying all sickly,
only talked to at the dinner table.

And you kinda understood,
being one of four, too.

They built a tree house
and never allowed you in.

You said we were basically
the same person,
that life recycles.

Same eyes. Same birthday.
Except yours is one day earlier,
but you're a year older too,
that's some star alignment
type shit.

I thought I could die
in your passenger seat.
Clouds carved out of marble,
asphalt all crumbly,
I had somewhere to be.
Saxophone man and bucket drummer
competing for tips.

I saw you that day.
You were scared of me too.
Last thing you said was,
You don't get to look at me like that.
Echoed as I walked away.
Hands bickering with my feet,
all fidget, all mission.
Don't worry, I understand.
But I kept calling even
after you said I was too much.
I wanted to explain
that my sky was on fire
with salt raining down,
and I pressed ice
against my skin until it burned.
You didn't want to know.
And when my tongue and feet
finally hit the wall,
I crawled back into myself.
I'm scared to ride my bike,
and the cheap earring
turned my ear green.
I can do anything.
I am pope, I am king,
I could run forever
Not in my right mind.
Heard the doctor or someone
say to a nurse or maybe my mother
outside the door,
It's just such a sad case.
I drew you a picture of a rose,
left it on your porch
where the rain devoured it.
My ribcage will make
a nice garden someday.

MAX STONE IS A FIRST-YEAR POETRY CANDIDATE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, RENO. HE WAS BORN AND RAISED IN RENO, BUT HAS LIVED IN VARIOUS PLACES. HE BEGAN HIS UNDERGRADUATE CAREER PLAYING SOCCER AT SIERRA COLLEGE IN ROCKLIN, CA, TRANSFERRED TO QUEENS COLLEGE IN QUEENS, NY, AND LANDED BACK IN RENO TO FINISH EARNING HIS BACHELOR'S IN ENGLISH WITH A MINOR IN BOOK ARTS AND PUBLICATION. HE'S WRITING FOR ALL THE LONELY QUEER KIDS OUT THERE WHO ARE TRYING TO UNDERSTAND THEMSELVES AND FIND CONNECTION.

THERE'S A LOT THAT ISN'T MAKING SENSE THESE DAYS
SO I SAVE ERASER SHAVINGS
JUST IN CASE. I STAY AWAKE UNTIL MORNING
SO I CAN WATER MY PLANTS WITH THE SUNRISE,
BUT THEN I SLEEP ALL DAY
AND THE SUN TAKES CREDIT
FOR TOMATO BLOSSOMS.
I'M IN A COMPETITION WITH THE NIGHT SKY
TO SEE WHO CAN CATCH MORE SADNESS,
BUT THERE ARE SO MANY DIFFERENT KINDS,
AND WE DISAGREE ABOUT THE RULES.
LIKE SOMETIMES THE MOON AND THE SUN
ARE IN THE SAME SKY, OR SOMETIMES
THE FLOWER IS POISONOUS TO CATS.
AND WHEN I LIE DOWN IN THE SHOWER,
I AM EITHER CLOSER TO MY SKIN OR THE GROUND.
AND WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SOMETHING IS SAD
FOR ONE PERSON, BUT BEST IN THE END?
LIKE HOW SOMETIMES A DEAD BIRD IN THE DRIVEWAY
MEANS LOVE.

Courtney Cliften was raised in the Nevada Desert. She writes poetry as an MFA candidate at the University of Nevada, Reno. Her poems have appeared in *The Meadow*, *Helen Literary Magazine*, *An Anthology of Emerging Poets*, and more. @courtneycliften

SOCIAL VISIT

IT SMELLS OF STALE PB & J
AND I HAVE LEFT BEHIND MY STUFFY,
BUT THERE IS A HIGHLIGHTS MAGAZINE.
I SETTLE IN, WRAP LEGS CRISS-CROSS-APPLESAUCE,
CIRCLE ITEMS NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE—
WISH I COULD CIRCLE MYSELF.

THE LADY IN A PALE BLUE SLEEP SET
ASKS QUESTIONS ABOUT EACH CIRCLE
WHILE DOWN THE HALLWAY TANGLE MY MOM
PLAYS HIDE-AND-GO-SLEEP IN A PAPER NIGHTY.

**WHY DO ALL THE ADULTS WEAR PJS
WHEN IT'S STILL BRIGHT OUTSIDE?**

I'M HANDED PERFORATED PRINTER PAPER—
TOLD TO TAKE A BREAK FROM MY CIRCLES—
TO DRAW HER A PICTURE OF MY FAMILY.
TO DRAW THE PICTURE THAT LETS ME GO HOME.
SO I TAKE HER FRAYED-EDGED, BROKEN CRAYONS—
SET HIGHLIGHTS ASIDE WITH MUCH UNCIRCLED.

I DRAW MOM AND MY DADDY—
BOTH TALL AND HOLDING HANDS.
SKETCH BOTH BIG BROTHERS, MY DOG,
MY BIRD FEATHERS FLYING FREE.
I GIVE THEM ALL SMILES THAT EXTEND
BEYOND PINK-CIRCLE CHEEKS.

I HAVE DRAWN THIS PICTURE BEFORE.

Heather M. F. Lyke is a writer living in southern Minnesota. By day, Lyke works in the world of K-12 education. On evenings and weekends, she creates. She builds things out of nothing: sometimes with paint, occasionally with fabric, but most often with words. Lyke's published nonfiction works focus on teaching and learning. Most of her work, however, is poetry, which often stems from her strong sense of place. Her poems can be found in the various literary magazines and online journals, including *In Parenthesis*, *Frost Meadow Review*, *Constellate*, and *Halfway Down the Stairs*, among others.

ABSTRACTION OF A MEMORY

The plucking of a lone, slender
Silver hair—a fair postponement
Of the aging process? Deep lines
Will ever score the dry, shrunken

Brow of the crumbling facade of
The temple once called *Beautiful*—
Inscribe grotesquery (mockingly)
On youthfulness & longevity

The elongating shadows of
Small-leaved linden in full bloom blot
The thoroughfare like splashes of
Spilt ink on a lace table mat

As threadbare floral print dresses
And the sullied cotton slips strewn
Over splintered dining room chairs
And witch's bric-a-brac dream dreams

As rouge, oils & lipsticks in their
Painterly ardor dream dreamers
And as fruit flies with fructose eyes
Dream dreaming in shrinking spirals

Tracings of the noon *samsara*
Awaiting the dawning of dreams
Like the golem awaits motion
Chanting "*Ana Nisi Masa*"

The Assassins creep from crevice
To cleft with a delicacy
Belying their reputation

For arbitrary retribution
Indecent annunciations
To impressionable teenagers
And awkward avowals to fraught, ripe-
But-vestal innkeeper's daughters

*All phantasmagorical Prague
is dancing high on the crown
Sephirah of a tree of life
in process of metamorphosing
into any number of the most
unpleasant of eventualities*

Twisting weeds sprout through the floorboards
Of a dismal ghetto cottage
Between whose paper membranes struts,
Linden blossoms set in her hair,

A naked, glowing peasant girl
Immodest in vainglory's garb
Of dreams & the obsession of
Its coal eyes on her diamond flesh

(A vivid recent memory)
Meanwhile falling heavy against
A crumbling brick & mortar wall
East of the Old New Synagogue

An ancient woman carries on
A flight more ancient still—the past
Dragged screaming through the Altschulgasse
A cartel of automatons

The Assassins
Come to collect

JAMES BRADLEY IS AN ARTIST AND WRITER LIVING IN PORTLAND, OREGON. HIS PAINTINGS HAVE BEEN EXHIBITED AT THE BERKELEY ART MUSEUM, VERUM ULTIMUM GALLERY, AND ELSEWHERE. HE RECEIVED AN MFA IN PAINTING FROM THE CALIFORNIA COLLEGE OF THE ARTS IN 2009.

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SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION

The telling of this story comes in different versions. There are my recreations: fallible, beautiful, and naive. There is a truth: unattainable, likely nonexistent. There's his version, muted. There's a version written in the heat and pain of our separation. Words flowing from a place of desperation, scribbled onto a page to hold onto him, onto us, to prevent our reality from dissolving into a fading memory. Much of that writing is raw, desperate, repetitive. These words were therapy, a way of making sense of a person I hadn't been ready to let go of. Words as a stand-in for speech. Words preventing me from saying words to him and making a fool of myself. Words written in passion, with an automatic urgency. Words that felt like a lifeline whenever I felt like I was drowning. A way for me to understand and reaffirm myself; in my writing of him, I wrote myself.

Then there's another version of this story, one written with intentionality. Words arranged and edited, documented as a story—fictionalized and reconstructed to make sense to someone not living inside my heart. Words contemplated and selected to fall onto a page. In a way, it's all fiction, selection, recreation. I get the urge to keep writing about him to preserve his relevance, even whilst I'm unsure of why I so desperately need to maintain his status in my life. As more time comes between us, I wonder if eventually he will become insignificant, just a mere blip in the timeline of my existence.

Maybe these are words about obsession. Maybe they are words about memory.

Or maybe these are the musings of a foolish woman.

Maybe this is art, or maybe it's self-indulgence. Maybe, just maybe, it can be both.

It was only after our affair that I realized I may have been in love with him. During our time together, I told myself, and anyone who asked (as well as those who didn't), that my feelings weren't serious. There were, in fact, no feelings at all. I was just passing the time. I could leave when I wanted to. I was in control. I don't know what it means to be in love because it always happens to me after the fact. Always a little bit too late. Sometimes I think that's the only way I know how to love another person. It feels weird now, writing about him in the past tense, as though he is dead, or dead to me, when really, he has never been more alive. I don't know how to write about a living being whose story with me is in the past and yet not entirely. We live in the present, and we live in the past.

It was a Wednesday, it was raining, and I was slipping into a familiar depression I hadn't felt in months, probably since before I met him. I was splitting at the seams and didn't know how to hold myself together, fighting the wobbly tension of tears that were hovering right behind my eyelids. It was a down, after months of feeling up, and the prospect of seeing him was my light in an otherwise bleak day. I didn't know then how the night would play out, but when I look back on it now, my fragile mental state seems foreboding, as though somewhere in my subconscious I knew what was about to happen. I got to the bar before he did, ordered a beer and waited for him to arrive. When he did, he slid into the seat next to me and asked the bartender to bring him the same lager I was drinking. I may have been beaming. Seeing him elicited a special flavor of happiness.

He asks if we can go outside to smoke a cigarette. It has stopped raining, but all the benches are wet, so we stand in the corner of the beer garden. He smokes and I watch, listening, as the world I had started building falls apart.

I don't know if I'll regret this. I'm going crazy, but I think we need to stop seeing each other.

Shock, shatter, confusion. A prickle in the corner of my eyes, a lump so big in my throat. I can't speak, I can hardly breathe. I start scuffing my Doc Martens on the side of a wooden planter. I bury my hands deep in my jacket pockets. I resist the urge to start screaming. *We're starting to care about each other.*

He talks about feeling out of control. He talks about the uncertainty of his expiring visa, the one that may result in his deportation, and how much it is weighing on him. He talks about how unstable his life is, how uncertain his future is, how his future with me is even more unstable. He doesn't have to say it, but the only solution is to remove one of those cards from the table. I am the easiest one for him to turn over, to stop thinking about.

I can't look up, I can't stop scuffing my boot, and I can't stop the tears from rolling down my face. He begs me to stop crying. He reaches out to touch me, and I flinch. I don't want to be touched. He pleads for me to say something. I say nothing.

I'm circling the drain.

I can't stop thinking about my future, and the uncertainty.

I can't be good to you. I can barely text. I can barely show up. You deserve better.

I'm drinking a lot these days; this is not the person I want to be.

I don't want to waste your time.

I scuff and I scuff and I scuff. He talks and he talks and he talks. I don't know what to say; my brain, my heart, were not prepared for this. Anything but this. I don't know if I'm sad, or if I'm in a state of shock. I keep kicking my feet, clenching and unclenching my fists, wiping my eyes aggressively with the edge of my sleeve.

This is for the best. I'm protecting us.

A rage I'm familiar with bubbles through my body and pours out of my mouth. Do not tell me what's best for me. I snap. I crackle. I implode.

I just want you to know you've done nothing wrong; you've been nothing but amazing.

I want to crawl inside of myself. I want to turn into a salt statue and disintegrate. I want to stop crying, I want to stop scuffing, I want him to stop speaking. I'm overflowing and I'm empty. For some reason, I'm fixated on the plans we had for the weekend, to go to a music festival together.

He keeps saying it's for the best. He looks sad. He looks at my scuffing feet. He tries to touch me; I pull away again. I stare at my boots.

This was doomed from the start. What did you think would happen?

What did I think, I'm not sure? I thought we would cross this bridge when we came to it. I was convinced everything with his visa would work out. I didn't believe in a bitter end.

A few days later, I'm sitting on my couch flicking through old photos on my phone and I come across a series of snaps taken in Brooklyn five years earlier, the first time I ever visited New York. Years before I would ever meet him. They are poorly shot photographs, mostly pictures of streets or some graffiti that I saw and liked. I pause on a long shot of a road in Bushwick. It's the road we would both end up living on (he probably lived on it then), though it's the south side with factories covered in street art as opposed to the northern residential side. The shot is terrible and slanted; a shot that may have been taken by accident but is more likely the result of my inability to take good photographs. On the last factory there's a mural, characteristically his with bright primary colors and a ball-like figure. It feels poetic that I took a photograph of his art five years before he came into my life. That somewhere in the storage of my life he already existed, a dormant presence waiting to make an appearance.

After seeing that photo I become fixated on the idea of six degrees of separation. The notion that we are all connected fascinates me. I bring it up frequently to people in conversation. *Don't you think it's wild?* I ask them. I clearly think so. I think about these six degrees a few times a week. Sometimes a few times a day. While doing a frantic Google search one night I find a site that says that in our shrinking world the six degrees of separation are actually two degrees of separation. This blows my mind even further.

I become obsessed with degrees of separation in physical space. I think of walls with eyes, of roads trampled by his feet and mine. I think of objects and the countless people who have touched them.

I think of how we are linked by these spaces we have all shared. I obsess over the people who have walked on roads before me, who drank from the same glass in a bar, who admired the same art. I'm fixated on how settings are colored with possibility because of the people who travel through them. I think about how many times we've walked past a building and a person we knew was inside of it, unbeknownst to both, our lives in that moment were linked through time, through the spaces we inhabit. I think of how this possibility makes our worlds mystical and illuminated. How it makes everything feel alive. I pass walls that he has painted and feel comforted by the knowledge that he was there, and now I am here. Inanimates are now animated because I can imagine him walking on them, laughing at them, because I remember the stories he told about them.

In the aftermath of our separation, my life became more filled with him than it ever was when we were together. I can see now it was a decision to hold onto him so ferociously. I didn't know how to let go and I don't think I wanted to. I needed our time together to matter and holding onto him made me feel alive. My misery transformed our fling into a tragic romance; into a story worth telling. I submerged myself wholeheartedly in my obsession. I checked Instagram manically, looking for some sort of clue, a sign that he was pining for me. I went beyond just his page. I found his friends, I stalked their pages too. I changed my run route so that I could go by his house, and when I did, I would sneak glances into his window from across the street, wondering if he was there.

I thought about him constantly. I dragged my friends to the bars that I knew he frequented. At a friend's house I would smoke cigarettes out the window, looking out, hoping to see him on the street. Out in the city I started seeing him everywhere—in the thick black rimmed glasses of a man on the subway, in the flash of salt and pepper hair from the corner of my eye, in any person, male or female, who was tall and lanky. My heart would race as I braced myself, squinting and electrified by the possibility of it being him, dreading the possibility that it might be, all the while yearning for a glimpse of him. It never was, and I was always left with a hot flush and dull throbbing shame. I felt filthy and I hated myself, but I

couldn't stop. The loss left a haunting in its wake, a shadow which seeped into my every moment. A shadow I conjured even as I (half-heartedly) begged it to leave me alone.

What would I do if I saw him, if the shadow came to life?

Most likely, most definitely, I would spring into some form of practiced self-defense. Self-defense that looks like (practiced) indifference. Indifference: My seventh gear in motion. What is it that I'm exuding? Probably some fabricated form of cool. Cool in how much I don't care. I hate the concept of cool, of things so chilled they are no longer living. Of things frozen in a moment in time. Of reactions steeped in inaction. Of the removal of that which is exciting, ephemeral.

I mentally rehearse what that meeting would look like. I play the scene over and over again: A light hair flip to remind him of what he gave up, but also to create a curtain to hide behind. (My hair is a shield. My hair is ammunition.) Here I objectify myself, as though I am a thing to be lost. My living bodily attributes the props I use to re-emphasize a point. Look at me, I am a woman. The strength of my pain reinforces a narrative that I am only as valuable as the men who surround me. Cue my shame, cue its obliteration by compulsion. A gentle shift of weight onto one leg. A discreet lick of my lips, just enough to wet them but not enough for him to notice. I would probably say something nonsensical at best, totally idiotic at worst. But, still, I obsess over the possibility of seeing him out in the world.

What's the point of yearning? What would seeing him actually change? What would it do besides satisfying a need to know that I am not obsolete, that I will not fade, that seeing my flesh in front of him may remind him that I am in fact real, that I am in fact here, that I am in fact alive.

And then we meet on the street.

It's a Sunday, and I'm charging down a Brooklyn sidewalk, distracted by the growling of my empty stomach and the rivulet of sweat crawling down the space between my breasts. It's uncomfortably hot, the air thick from summertime humidity and

lingering pollution. Heat and hunger have me aggravated, my attention focused solely on my destination, which will likely include the welcoming chill of air conditioning and some form of meal. I turn off Grand Street onto Graham Avenue, and I wonder if in my delirium I have started hallucinating too. The sun is shining straight into my eyes and I don't trust the wavy mirages of summer. The loping bounce in the step of a person across the street alerts me to the possibility that this someone might be him. My already cloudy mind begins to spin and my heart ricochets frantically against my ribcage. I've dreamt of this moment, obsessed over it, willed it to happen, but now that it is here, I am paralyzed.

In my panic, my first reaction is to look down and check what I'm wearing—white crop top and flowery shorts, fire engine red fingernails freshly done that morning. This moment is not quite as curated as I'd hoped. He's spotted me now, so I gracelessly thrust my hand into the air acknowledging that I've seen him too, willing my feet not to start sprinting in the other direction. Instead, in a trance, I start walking to the streetlight, ready to cross over to his side of the street, but he cuts through the cars and makes a beeline to where I'm standing. I'm immobile again, but every nerve in my body is alert, electrified. After weeks of imagining him, suddenly here he is, alive, breathing, no longer just a figment of my imagination but a living human, animated and real. He's amused and cracks a joke about my unwillingness to jaywalk across the street. I'm mute, still stranded in the space between imagination and reality.

I find myself admiring him as we stand across from each other under the burning July sunshine. He's wearing black shorts and a white t-shirt, black Wayfarer Ray-Bans. I've never seen him in shorts. Come to think of it, I've never seen him in sunglasses either. He's wearing new sneakers. For some reason his new shoes make me miss him. I think it has to do with the familiarity contained in recognizing their newness, in facing an object brought into his life after I exited. We converse, talk about our plans that day, about his art that's been vandalized on the wall next to us, my upcoming trip to Vancouver, his pending visa, all permeated with awkward silences and silent awkwardness. And with that, he's gone again.

I fight the temptation to look back as we walk away.

The last time I saw him was about two months after the night he broke things off, and just a few weeks after I ran into him in the street. He texts me, a message which made my heart race uncontrollably. *Hey. Long time.* I consider not texting back, but something about his text fills me with dread. I decide to reply. *Long time indeed. What's up?* He texts back immediately. Bad News. His visa has been declined, and that he is leaving for Argentina in three days. I was shocked, but I was also relieved. Him leaving the country was the cleanest break. I felt guilty that I was thinking about myself when his whole life was turned upside down, but for the first time in months I felt a sigh of release, freed from the ruminating prison of my obsession.

We agree to meet for a coffee at a café to say a final goodbye. Before leaving my house, I change my outfit three times. I finally settle on a blue dress with little white flowers and white sneakers. For some reason I want to look girly as though this would make me more desirable (how deep my indoctrination runs). We sit at a table outside; I drink an iced coffee while he eats a ham and cheese croissant. He offers me a bite forgetting that I don't eat meat, which upsets me. I leave my sunglasses on even though my seat is in the shade and his isn't. I try to make space for him under the umbrella, which frustrates him, and he moves his seat more defiantly into the sun. It's hot that day, and I point out that his neck is going to burn; he brushes my comment away. I ignore the strangeness of this reaction.

We catch up on what's been going since we last saw each other. Something surfaces between us that I'm not prepared for, a familiar intimacy of two people who shared something once but don't share it anymore. Our conversation is referential to a time when our lives moved in parallel. I ask him if he plans to try and come back to New York. He doesn't know and isn't ready to think about it yet. I want to ask him what happened, if we mattered, what he'll miss the most. I lose my nerve and yammer on about something insignificant. We leave the cafe together and walk toward our houses. We hug on a street corner, the one where our journeys separate, the same street corner we hugged the night we broke up. It was raining then, and it's sunny now. I wonder if there's some meaningful significance to this.

I run past his house a few days later and it's visibly empty. I see a bottle of cleaning spray on the windowsill and nothing else. This time he really is gone. Gone from the physical space we shared. The roads which once formed the artery of life that connected me to him crumpled suddenly, overnight. Electrified streets shut down. My excitement withered. Even when we were actively not talking, somehow, I felt a comfort in knowing that it was always possible, always plausible, to see him on these streets. I trusted those six degrees.

This was the second break in our story. With the first, my world contracted around me. Everything became about him. I developed an unhinged talent in associating everything in my life to him. Obsession and retrospection became my *modus operandi*. With the second, I found expansion. Without possibility, I was suddenly free again. Without any chance of him, I could unapologetically be me.

NICOLE DRAKOPOULOS IS AN IDEALIST WHO CAME TO NEW YORK ON A WHIM AND DECIDED TO STAY. RAISED IN ATHENS (GREECE, NOT GEORGIA), EDUCATED IN LONDON, WITH SOME ROOTS IN CHICAGO, SHE FEELS MOST AT HOME IN THE SPACES SHE CAN BE A STRANGER - ON A PARK BENCH, IN A CROWD (PRE-PANDEMIC), OR WALKING ON A CITY STREET. CURRENTLY SHE IS A NAMELESS CORPORATE WORKER BY DAY, A GRADUATE STUDENT AT CUNY BY NIGHT, A VORACIOUS READER, AND AN OCCASIONAL WRITER. NICOLE SURVIVES DAILY LIFE BY DRINKING BLACK COFFEE, READING FIRST-PERSON CREATIVE NON-FICTION, AND TAKING CARE OF HER PLANTS.



In Surreal Time

One of my favorite photos is of our year-old daughter, looking over her shoulder from a foot-high galvanized tub on a bare cement floor, waiting to be bathed. It is the summer of 1959; we are pinched into the concrete-block toolshed I'd built a year earlier for practice. It has become our home while I labor to get our new house roofed, enclosed, and heated before autumn cold makes the toolshed intolerable. I work longer hours every evening than I do at my job.

I smile every time I see that photo.

It tickles me several times a month, because years ago that very daughter gave me a digital picture frame that displays, a minute at a time, almost a thousand family photos she loaded into it. Barely a foot tall, it perches atop a short chest of drawers, facing my recliner. I spend hours in that comfy chair reading, watching TV, and even munching meals, occasionally glancing up to see my life—more importantly, my family—parade before me in that frame, growing up in surreal time.

The frame ↗ swipes itself, and here she is, that refugee from a washtub, cradling a baby brother in her arms, she herself barely past babyhood.

↗ Now here they both are with my wife, a brick-paved patio with the quasi-Japanese house (sliding paper doors inside modern thermopane) framing them. Has another year passed? If I've found time to pave the patio, I must have nearly finished the Zen-stern interior. I am reminded that early cold drove us to move in when water ran only at the kitchen sink, and exited only at the toilet; it was another two weeks before all the plumbing was copasetic.

↔ Now here are all four of us—I must have discovered a timer and tripod—as the kids set off for school from our new city home. We’ve rented out the Japanese house and its meadow, and have moved into the city; we are determined to make common cause with our Black neighbors. Their parents’ unabashed liberalism will impose subtle burdens on these kids over the years ahead. Daughter has begun to look unmistakably like Mother.

↔ Daughter and Son are setting out to go door-to-door for Halloween treats—not in store-bought masks, but with face-paint, glued-on mustaches and bowler hats, a Chaplinesque disguise. Both seem taller than the day they set off for school; has it already been a year since then?

↔ Our son, maybe seven or eight, is helping paint the garage. He wears a skullcap cleverly folded from a page of the newspaper where I will soon become an editor; the skullcap a pattern I learned from the pressmen who put my words into readers’ hands. They daily wear such caps against ink-fog.

↔ The four of us are on a Jamaican beach. Our daughter has surely begun high school; she is as tall as her mother, who looks more like an older sister. Both have bobbed hair; they are slightly sun-bleached brunettes. My own head shows touches of frost: in our society, save for movie stars and such, men don’t disguise the graying of their thatches. I actually prize my frost, which obscures that I am young for my growing responsibilities.

↔ Four of us again, on a bicycle outing. Both the kids must now be in high school. Our daughter is definitely taller than her mother, and our son nearly so. He has the same tall, lanky frame as the last three generations of Noel men.

↔ He and I are camping on the shoulder of California’s High Sierra, our last father-and-son adventure. This photo brings a lump to my throat: he’s in high school; we will lose him just before his graduation.

↔ Three of us are in the college stadium that is about to host the graduating class and their parents. Mother and Daughter are as prettily—no, beautifully—alike as peas in a pod. You could set my wife amidst the whole graduating class, and anyone could pick out her daughter.

↔ A new fourth member of our family is with us, posed by a wedding photographer. We approve our daughter’s choice. They both teach in the all-Black city school from which my wife retired not long ago. Neither he nor his new father-in-law look to be matches for these bright, handsome women.

↻ A family Christmas-letter photo six years later, with a new babe in arms, his grandparents glowing with admiration. A new generation amply offsets the indignities of growing older.

↻ Back on that Jamaican beach, dawn still burgeoning, a candid photo snapped by our daughter. Stooping slightly to reach a tiny hand, I take her son walking at the foamy fringe of a gentle surf. Later years' photos will show that stroll to have become a vacation-morning tradition; it lasted until he decided he was too grown-up for handholding—as though that were for safety rather than sentiment.

↻ Perhaps four years old in this next photo, he poses by a lawn sign advertising his grandmother's (winning) campaign for the school board. He wears a too-big football jersey, its huge 17 must betoken some gridiron hero whose name I have long since forgotten.

↻ His grandparents have taken him to ride a State Police horse. He has inherited the Noel men's frame and is growing like a weed.

↻, ↻ Family Christmas-letter photos, the years passing by like lightning. The later ones begin to show the diminishing luster of my wife's eyes and the limited facial expressiveness that are the imprint of Alzheimer's. It will take her from us in another five years. My eyes moisten again.

↻ I had to beseech this last photo from my daughter and add it to the picture frame's thumb drive. My grandson has gotten through college while I've been savoring the initial collection. It is just a portrait, because the pandemic denied him Yale's congregative boola-boola hoopla and formal solemnity.

There are two shelves of old-fashioned photo scrapbooks in my tiny living room, but they are cumbersome to handle, and gather dust. This picture frame is their successor, an electronic gadget that compresses time, nudges me every day and prompts memory. My progeny grows up, and I grow older.

Everyone ought to have one.



DON NOEL IS RETIRED AFTER FOUR DECADES' PRIZEWINNING PRINT AND BROADCAST JOURNALISM IN HARTFORD, CT. HE RECEIVED HIS MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING FROM FAIRFIELD UNIVERSITY IN 2013. HE HAS SINCE PUBLISHED MORE THAN FIVE DOZEN SHORT STORIES AND NON-FICTION PIECES, ALL OF WHICH CAN BE READ AT HIS BLOG: DONONOEL.COM.

L E N T

I am trying desperately to pretend that today is not Ash Wednesday, but I have not been very successful. There was a time I looked forward to Lent. True, it's been years since I went to service to get ashes—at best, I'm a lapsed Christian. When my son was younger, I made an effort to bring him to church. For several years, I was good about it. But then after one summer, it was too hard to go back. Being active in church required me to be social, and I'm not very good at that. My social anxiety defeated me. But still, even minus the religious aspect, I looked forward to Ash Wednesday. It was the first day of Lent. A time to be serious and reflective in the Christian faith for me meant the anticipation of spring—warming temperatures, more outdoor activities, and longer hours of daylight. A time to be happy and hopeful.

But last year forever changed my feelings about Lent. At that time, there seemed to be nothing special about Ash Wednesday, but in retrospect, it's the day that changed everything. The start of Lent fell on February 26, which coincidentally was the same day my parents flew down to Chile. The excitement emanating from my parents, especially from Dad, in the days leading up to that trip was palpable. When the departure date arrived, he was ecstatic. He messaged my son a picture of himself and my mother sitting in the airport waiting to board the plane. It had the caption, "And we're off."

Two weeks later, as COVID cases started to spiral out of control, I grew frantic. I prayed my parents would get home safe, that the plague would not reach them. When they landed back in New York, I was cautiously optimistic. They were home, but they weren't safe. Mom stepped off the plane with what she swore was a cold. I felt I knew better. And I did.

Lent ended last year with Dad dying in a hospital. During Holy Week, a friend told me, "This is the week of miracles." I prayed fervently that he was right, that if God indeed were handing out miracles in honor of his son, that he would send Dad back home. He didn't. Other people may have gotten their miracles. We did not. My son and I were crushed. Heartbroken.

Ash Wednesday traditionally ushers in a season of sacrifice. Forty days of fasting. Once when I was a kid, I gave up ice cream. It was the longest, toughest forty days of my childhood. Last year during Lent, I learned the true meaning of loss. Nineteen days I woke up anxious and scared, waiting for the doctor to call—yearning for, yet dreading the daily update on Dad's condition. Nineteen days I went to bed unable to sleep because I was terrified that the phone might ring in the middle of the night. Nineteen days and then the words we didn't want to hear: "Gary passed."

This year, I will give nothing up for Lent. I will never give anything up again, because Lent has taken from me one of the most precious people in my life. Unlike the ice cream I decided to forgo as a child, I will never get Dad back. He's gone for good, and Easter will always be a horrific reminder of the awful way he died.

Two days after we were supposed to celebrate Christ's resurrection, I said goodbye to my unconscious father via Facetime. There was no final hug—COVID restrictions forbade it. We couldn't have a wake or a funeral mass. It still feels surreal. He went on vacation and I never really saw him again, except to drive him to the hospital. After a painful interlude, it's like he disappeared. I'm still waiting for him to tell me about the trip. Still waiting to compare notes about Tierra del Fuego and Santiago. Still waiting for the front door to open and the loud stomping and wiping of his feet to alert me of his return.

Twelve months ago, as Dad was packing for South America, he was simultaneously booking a trip to Disney and Universal for my son. We spoke on the phone several times discussing which parks we would visit, which hotels we'd stay in, and which restaurants we absolutely had to dine in. We reminisced about former trips to Florida, and my son began counting down the days to when we'd be there again. Needless to say, the countdown clock broke down—forever stuck on April 14. We never got to Disney. Dad was deprived of the pleasure of spoiling his grandson one final time. And my son was robbed of the man he loved most.

My son was extremely close to his grandfather. Growing up with two moms, my son developed a special bond with his grandfather, who happily played the role of father-figure in his life. The two of

them greatly enjoyed “boys’ days out.” They would go out for lunch or to watch a movie. Dad rarely said no to anything my son requested, and he made so many of my son’s dreams come true.

It has been a difficult year. I still cry every day, some days more than others. But, memories creep up on me and the next thing I know I’m wiping my eyes. This afternoon, after my son and I finished our homeschool lessons, we went to the beach—Dad’s favorite place. We played catch and we practiced our taekwondo sparring. And I wondered for the thousandth time if Heaven exists or if it’s just a comforting story we tell children to ease the pain caused by death. I want to feel Dad’s presence, but I don’t. I feel nothing but the silence and the wind, and I hear nothing but the water lapping at the shore.

After sparring, my son pulled his cap gun out of his pocket, shot the invisible enemies in the distance, and then—the caps still smoking—he said, “Do you remember that time Grandpa took us to the beach and he was so cold that he put the sleeves of the beach chairs on his legs. And you called it his nuclear suit. He looked funny.”

“Of course, I remember.” How could I forget. It was Valentine’s Day, 2013—another blustery February day.

“I think whenever I’m at the beach and it’s cold I’m going to remember that.” He lifted the gun, aimed at the water, and took one final shot.

There are so many things I will remember, and someday, maybe the memories won’t make me cry quite so much.

ELIZABETH JAEGER’S ESSAYS, SHORT STORIES, BOOK REVIEWS AND POETRY HAVE BEEN PUBLISHED IN VARIOUS PRINT AND ONLINE JOURNALS, INCLUDING THE BLUE NIB, CAPSULE STORIES, WATCHUNG REVIEW, OVUNQUE SIAMO, PEACOCK JOURNAL, BOSTON ACCENT LIT, AND ITALIAN AMERICANA. NEWTOWN LITERARY PUBLISHED AN EXCERPT FROM HER NOVEL-IN-PROGRESS. SHE IS THE BOOK REVIEW EDITOR AT OVUNQUE SIAMO. YOU CAN FIND HER AT: [JAEGERWRITES13.WORDPRESS.COM](https://jaegerwrites13.wordpress.com) AND ON INSTAGRAM @JAEGERWRITES.



THE 1980S

Our flight lands at JFK at 3 p.m. It takes us a few hours to get all our luggage, load up and truck across the two bridges home. "I hope there's no traffic on the Tri-boro," Dad says to no one in particular. We eat the snacks in Mom's handbag, reserved for emergencies. Still hungry, we start to bicker. There is always traffic on the Tri-Boro Bridge on the Cross Bronx Expressway. Typically, the George Washington Bridge entrance is where things clear up.

When we finally spot New Jersey, it's almost dinner time. "Mom, what's for dinner?" I ask. We've only just pulled into our driveway. The luggage isn't even in the house yet. She sighs noncommittally. Suddenly, I remember the shelves in our garage. "All the packets and tins in the cupboard." I am the Tiger who came to Tea. I race through the front door, round the hallway and open the door, my brother and sister tailing me. Our eyes light up at the colours and choices, white and red Dorito packets, yellow and gold Lay's Original, and my favourite: blue and white, a picture of a bowl of dressing, two spring onions artfully crossed nearby, Ranch-flavour Ridges. Anticipation. I open the packet, take a bite of the biggest one I can find. It disappoints. How do they powder ranch dressing for the flavouring?

I plop in front of the TV with its glorious thirteen channels, all in English. We have a remote control wired to the back of the set. I press down the keys in order, each with a satisfactory 'click.'

In the background, Mom is on the phone. "Hi, yes. Please, can I place an order?"

The second and third chips help the palate settle back into its old routine. Yummy, salty, tangy goodness. Who's she talking to?

"Yes, pick up," Mom says.

It feels strange to be home, shovelling potato chips. PBS is boring, no family sitcoms for another hour. A Brady Bunch re-run.

"Two plain large pies. And one eggplant parmigiana," she says, "No, not on pasta, in a sandwich, please."

"Twenty minutes? No problem." She hangs up. Needs met, Mom starts to unpack from our three months away in Mumbai. She throws in a load of laundry before driving the two minutes to the world's best pizza parlour: The Fort Lee Pizzeria. Mom hasn't sat down yet.

It's Mom's ritual. Pizza, the food she misses the most, maybe more than we do. In my sixth grade class of sixty children, twenty-three identify as Italian-American; twenty as Chinese-American. I am the only Indian-American. I know the count because that's when we each are responsible for a cultural heritage project, culminating in a presentation day replete with posters, native costume, and food. Pizza is as much a part of our diet as chicken curry.

Saturday, a lazy morning watching cartoons is ending. "Mom!" my brother yells from the sofa. "Can we have pizza for lunch?"

"But I made *dhal*," she shouts back from the kitchen.

"I'm not hungry for *dhal*." My brother is going through a phase, pizza for every meal. He copes with frozen if he must: Mama Celeste or Elio's. Mama Celeste makes individual-sized pies. The Elio's come in a rectangle, pre-cut into thirds. My brother can make it through the entire rectangle. He stands up, intentions clear. He even leaves me alone with the remote, the prize I've wanted all morning.

"There is fried *aloo* and *puris*," Mom responds, trying to tempt him with his old favourite. I say nothing, knowing I cannot sway her, but he might. I lower the volume a touch.

"Please, can we have Fort Lee Pizza? Please. I'll eat *dhal* tomorrow. Promise." He starts to whine. If I whine, we eat lentils with potatoes and fried bread. The End.

I don't dare change the channel. I whisper, "If he gets Fort Lee Pizza, he can watch whatever he wants."

"Putu (son in our dialect), I am still in my gown. I can't go like this," Mom says. Sure, the day after we get back from India, she can drive, jet-lagged, bags barely in the door, within three minutes of arriving, but now, now it's too hard.

"Can't Dad go get it?" he whines.

"Hah," I laugh to myself. My dad considers getting out of pyjamas on the weekend to be reserved for special occasions, the Super Bowl, for instance.

My brother is small for his age. Mom buys his clothes a size too big, layers them up to make him look bigger. I risk a peek around the corner. She is behind the kitchen counter, pots bubbling away. He stands with his back toward me. They are in the midst of a silent standoff.

Mom will do anything to make him eat. She turns off the stove, moves to the phone, orders two large pies and an eggplant parmigiana. The dhal will keep until tomorrow.

The pizza arrives scorching hot. I need patience, else the cheese will burn the roof of my mouth. I can easily eat three pieces from the large New York-style pie, typically cut into eight slices. It is the ultimate icon: eighteen inches in diameter, where crispiness meets chewiness meets sauciness meets meltiness. Pizza prepared by pizzaiolos, trained to toss dough into the air.

I can eat pizza for any meal, fresh, reheated, or cold from the fridge. No toppings, please, especially, and definitely not pepperoni; it's made from beef and we are Hindu. I have no other food I find as haunting, as necessary to my soul's existence.

It is a kid's birthday party staple. Mothers ask the pizzeria to cut the pizza into sixteen slices instead of the usual eight. The pizza arrives early enough for the cheese on top to congeal a bit, still good but in a slightly different way. I forego cake for an extra slice.

There is the occasional odd duck who doesn't eat pizza and nibbles on the crudité platter put out for the adults who linger. I don't understand them, but their loss is my gain. 'Happy Birthday to Me!'

Pizza is my comfort blanket. Going to Rocky's II is a tradition near NYU hospital where we have paediatrician's appointments. Mom takes us for a slice to compensate for being sick, routine immunisations, or for any painful reason we cross the Bridge. Rocky's has the best sauce, a little fresher than Fort Lee's rich version. Individual slices come reheated from a whole pie baked earlier. Reheated can be better than fresh, giving the crust a second crisping, the cheese extra caramelisation. Vegetables, pepperoni, sausage, anything can be added to a plain slice after the fact. Mom customises hers with onions. The addition of pineapple and ham is an insult to the food itself. These pizzerias know a Hawaiian pie is a total abomination of the genre.

Thus raised, I will not forgive what Wolfgang Puck and Ed LaDou do to pizza. In 1982, Wolfgang Puck opens a restaurant in Los Angeles called Spago. The restaurant is located in West Hollywood, above a car rental agency, evolves into a legendary place for changing food, namely pizza, forever. The first menu has the subtitle 'Spago California Cuisine.' From 1981, before the doors open, Spago's first pizza chef, Ed LaDou, develops a pizza menu, taking advantage of the large ovens Wolfgang had installed. Toppings include goat cheese or Santa Barbara shrimp, a nod to the California cuisine tenet of using local ingredients.

An iconic Spago pizza, the 'Jewish Pizza', topped with smoked salmon, crème fraîche, chives, red onion, and caviar isn't even on the menu. An LA Times article ruing the closure of the original Spago notes that this pizza 'was usually delivered to tables gratis, an edible greeting from the chef.' The fact that chef and pizza were in the same sentence is mind-boggling. Ruth Reichl writes in the *New York Times* in 1985 that Puck is 'the chef who invented the term California Cuisine when he opened Spago and made pizza chic.' Thanks to these men, pizza is elevated to chic, the last food on earth that needs that label.

In 1985, Ed LaDou quits Spago to develop the menu at California Pizza Kitchen, a 'chain that adapted Spago's unconventional pizzas

for the masses.' Thankfully, California is 2,791 miles away from my home in Bergen County. It takes a long time for food trends to travel in the 1980s.

THE 1990S

California Pizza Kitchen has 250 locations in thirty American states and eleven countries. The menu is renowned for items such as the original Barbeque Chicken Pizza with barbeque sauce and Gouda cheese, red onions, and coriander. They also have a Thai Chicken Pizza with mozzarella, carrots, bean sprouts and scallions. Versions of Italian-inspired pies are also on the menu but why would you go there for that? Our branch at the mall opens in 1992. We go just once. My brother orders Barbeque Chicken. I, ever the traditionalist, go with classic, cheese and tomato sauce. Individual pizzas arrive. I pick up a mini slice of mine.

"Ick," is all I can say.

"Fine. Then, try one of your brother's. It looks good," Mom says. We are here in the hope that my brother's pizza obsession may enable him to branch into new foods, maybe some protein from a source other than mozzarella cheese. She takes a piece of mine; she is vegetarian so won't eat the chicken one.

That doesn't stop me from saying, "If it looks so good, why don't you eat it?"

Under her glare, I take a piece of his. Its crust has no chew. The pizza looks fine, the components are complementary, an artfully piped-on barbeque sauce, diced chicken, onions, and coriander leaves. I dislike it, when did food labelled 'California' get to ruin the real thing? Moreover, California Pizza Kitchen should not be allowed the word 'pizza' in its name for crimes against my favourite food.

Sometimes I wish for intervention on behalf of my pizza. If the name 'Champagne' can only be used for a traditional sparkling wine from the Champagne region in France, I would argue that only the article, traditionally made, can carry the name. The others are just flatbreads pretending. Italy mandates the required method

to follow if you wish your pie to be labelled 'Neapolitan Pizza DOC.' I want someone to come to America and give New York pizza its own DOC: Denominazione di Origine Controllata. The appellation could be 'New York Metropolitan Area Pizza DOC.'

Though I'll admit, I waiver if pushed.

THE 2000S

Freshman year, I buy Pizza Hut in Wien Hall, one of the on-campus eateries, using Dining Dollars. On the meal plan, I have more Dining Dollars than real dollars. The concession sells individual pies in paper boxes. I take the veggie option: onions, peppers, and barely flavoured sliced black olives. It's unsatisfying at best, but it is bread, sauce, and cheese, and it is part of the meals my parents still pay for. Better yet is Sneaky Pizza to satiate a yawning hunger, when nothing else will do. The routine is thus: I go to an open house of some club or another, guaranteed a slice of the real thing on offer to entice people to join whatever they flog. I fake an interest in glee club, the newspaper, the TV station, anything so long as I can munch a slice or two while listening to the pitch. I time my arrival, early enough that there is still pizza but late enough, ergo crowded enough, that I can eat and run.

Eventually, I get a part-time job. With the means to branch out, I discover Coronets on Broadway between 111th and 112th. It has a jumbo slice, roughly the size of three normal slices for \$2. The guys stay open until 4 a.m. Thrice weekly, a slice on the way home from the bars prevents hangovers. Even jumbo-sized, it retains that perfect New-York-style goodness. I hold the slice upright in its paper bag, keeping the top tented so it doesn't touch before I get back to my dorm room. I am not a slice-folder, walking along, triangle folded in half, like a paper airplane made from pizza, taking bites out of the section protruding from the bag. I want to savour each bite, sitting down, cheese on top, bread on bottom. Breakfast, lunch, and dinner rolled into a single 2 a.m. meal eaten cross-legged on my twin bed, in bliss.

Years later, at work, every Friday the managing directors order stacks of pizzas as a small concession to our labours. A nod of thanks perhaps, but more likely a way to keep us in the building,

motivated to stick around. Pizza Fridays probably contribute fifteen of the thirty pounds I gain. The classic New York move of over-ordering means I have a respectable two slices at lunch, and another as a cold snack a few hours later. Given the levels of stress eating, I am not alone when I go back around 4 p.m. to distract and refuel for the last push before the weekend.

When we have children, we create a new ritual. My husband would go to Patsy's every week, loves the frosted mugs they serve beer in. I don't love it; their sauce is too sweet, though we agree their pie has one of the best crusts in the City. Instead, we make a weekly pilgrimage, leaving no stone unturned, the journey as joyous as the discovery, as if such a thing as the Platonic pizza exists.

In time, I land on near perfection in Staten Island, even though I have yet to try all the options in Manhattan, much less the Bronx or Brooklyn. I drive us to Joe and Pat's every few months. We borrow my parents' car, pack the kids in and listen to their toddler music for the 45-minute drive. There is nothing to do in Staten Island near Joe and Pat's, but pizza is an attraction enough. They serve the New York pie, but the crust is unimaginably a bit thinner, the tomato sauce perfectly consistent, cheese layer slim, perfectly distributed. The oregano, garlic, and basil are palpable. I think they make their own mozzarella. We order two large pies. The children, two and four, barely contribute to the consumption, but I want more than what I can fit into me during a single sitting. We eat until we collapse, bellies warm with cheesy wonderfulness, carrying the box of leftovers.

Out of a latent sense of embarrassment for my singularity, peppered with a bit of guilt for dragging them on my quest, we might stop to pick up some cannolis, find a park to play in, or make a tortuous trip to the Staten Island Children's Museum.

NOW

"How was your weekend?" I ask my brother over FaceTime from my side of the Pond.

"Not bad. We went to Queens to get pizza."

"Yum. Famous Pizza? How many pies did you get?" I ask. It's like the Universe knows: someone has to take on the responsibility. He totes wife and child to a pizzaiola in Elmhurst. It doesn't sell traditional large pies, but it is good.

"Five. Two plain, two onion and hot pepper, and a pepperoni." Pepperoni is a departure from our normal order, our childhood avoiding beef. My brother opens the fridge, grabs a slice cold, takes a big bite. I am salivating, remembering the crispy, almost fried dough.

"You should go to Staten Island. Get some Joe and Pat's. It is The Best. The munchkin will like the Staten Island Childrens' Museum." In fact, the museum is on the other side of the island, but I know adding something extra helps sell the trip.

"They opened a Manhattan branch," my brother says. I am filled with longing: to try the new Joe and Pat's, to get in the car to Elmhurst, to go with my nephew to any Childrens' Museum. I haven't been home since the summer of 2019.

After we hang up, I take Alfie for a walk. We pass a hipster takeaway advertising pizza by the slice, 'California Style.' I smile. Almost tempted, I picture the first bite, it would take the chasm in my gut, stretch, and spread it to my heart and soul, so I'll stick to my memories.

Even in London, keep California away from my pizza.

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Different Kinds of Pills

I come from a simple family—we sing in deafening harmony on road trips, we take too many photos at unremarkable events (lunch at McDonald's, second and third days of kindergarten). So for a long time, nobody could make sense of my sister's outbursts. She cried at school, she cried at the beach, she cried even when we got a new puppy. Her raw, red eyes emptied uncharted distress and she recoiled bitterly at any semblance of joy. These tormented sobs racked her scrawny bones for a while as my parents scrambled to put her back together. I watched from the side, tapping my toes to the ground. I was too young to help.

Nobody knew it then, but it all started with a tick that nobody saw—a prickly, parasitic little arachnid hauling its skeezy backside up her pant leg in search of some warm hollow to engorge itself in. Then another kind of tick. *Tick*: a symptom. *Tick*, another one. *Tick*, she forgot to put the lid on the peanut butter. *Tick*, she hid in the closet when the neighbor mowed his lawn. The ticks added up and she was finally equipped with a diagnosis, a calendar of various pills, acupuncture, aromatherapy, art therapy, *therapy* therapy, and nothing changed. She still moved through the house like a hissing specter, blaming an elusive sickness—*Lyme disease*—as if naming it would excuse her perpetual gloom.

"She's just a pill," my father said over supper. At the time, I didn't fully grasp the meaning of the word. Maya was sulking in our shared bedroom and Dad attempted to carry on with a civilized family dinner after one of her pathetic episodes. She must be a pill.

"We still love our girl," Mom said. "She'll get better soon." She looked around at us pleadingly, expecting our outpouring of agreement, but it only took the form of quiet

nods and closed smiles. Maya emerged then and slid into her seat with an aggrieved huff. Despite her being two years my senior, I preceded her in height. It seemed to interrupt the natural order of things. Her bony limbs were pale and weak. I found it difficult to touch her, as if it would be some offensive acknowledgment of her physical form.

"I could hear you from my room," she said. Her eyes fixed down on the empty plate before her, and I gathered that she only came out to get the small satisfaction of putting these sheepish looks on our faces—only she didn't look up to see her effect.

She wasn't always such a pill, so I wanted to believe she was faking it all. The forgetfulness, the outbursts of tears and the rattling of pills must have all been intended to torture me. I thought that my older sister with hollow cheeks and a wan spirit was no different than the one who stole my Halloween candy three years before, tricked me into eating eggshells, built blanket fortresses with me, and watched TV past bedtime. *That big sister of mine*, she's just up to one of her tricks. It was easier to believe that the old version of herself was still there. The alternative was to believe that whatever big sister ingredient she once had was dormant and silent or dead and never to be seen again.

She slept and had nightmares, she ate and felt pain, sunlight was unbearable, and sound nearly incapacitated her. Her body responded to life with a spectacle of agony and melodrama. Mom eventually bought this gel ice pack for her migraines that looked like a superhero mask. Maya would sag on the couch for days at a time with a mask and a bag of frozen peas on the top of her head, gazing at the TV as *The Carol Burnett Show* looped through an eternity of comedy sketches. Carol scowled on-screen in a curly gray wig and prompted spells of tinny laughter from the studio audience. Something about a sick girl with woeful eyes, wearing a superhero mask and a bag of peas didn't look right to me. She looked like a dejected caricature

from the comedy show that the audience is supposed to laugh at, and I waited for her to accidentally break character.

Even worse, she carried a pair of noise-canceling headphones wherever she went. They flattened her frizzy hair and seemed to narrow her face, smothering it between two bulky earpieces. They were the kind that landscapers use when they cut grass and blow leaves. One Saturday, I stood beside my mother in Home Depot, watching her ask a beer-bellied employee what materials would work best in a homemade sauna-spa to beat our New England winters. Maya stood idly by in her Brobdingnagian headphones—slouched, leaning into herself. The employee seemed confused by Mom's idea of a homemade, portable sauna-spa-contraption, probably because nobody told him we didn't have the money to buy a real, permanent, life-sized one. All I could do was let my face flush and wish I was somewhere in the light fixture aisle where everyone just looks up.

That night, Maya poured her pills into her palm and I watched them roll and click together, different shapes and colors. They reminded me of that episode of *Curious George* when George was in charge of the sweet shop. He knocked the candy displays over and had to recount every piece before stacking them properly again. I wondered what would happen if one was missing. Would she notice? Would she die? She swallowed them dry and all at once, tipping her head back and nearly gagging like she always did. I winced at the abrasive gulp that followed. Mom ran her fingers through Maya's tangled hair, rubbed her taut little shoulders, and kissed her head. Maya looked at me from the corner of her eye and I thought I saw some maniacal glint there, the kind that always flashed when she reaped the rewards of her tricks. It never occurred to me that it was just a shard of the missing big sister ingredient, the stubborn gleam of not letting go.

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*psycho*somatic

I have pink eye. At least, I think I do. And if I don't already, I will soon. I can feel the little leggy bacteria marching along the rim of my lower eyelid, thrusting their germey arms, pumping their microbial fists as they exert a final bacterial battle cry before completing the conjunctivitis coup of my conjunctiva. They are here. These bacterial bastards, ready to ravage my eyeball and tickle my tear ducts, are mating and multiplying and personifying before (and within) my very eyes. I can picture them clearly: they are thinly lined cartoons with Roman helmets covering their rectangular heads. Their helmets are feathered and their spears are slight. They have pronounced, round noses and simple oval feet. They look like the characters on an old Red Bull commercial, and, for a moment, they don't seem so menacing at all. But then my eye starts to itch. I furiously blink, and my eye begins to moisten. I convince myself the moisture is a result of the bacteria, rather than my excessive, almost maniacal blinking, and I rub my eye forcefully and frantically. I then run to the sink, turn on the faucet with my elbow, and eradicate any germ from the palm, or fist, or finger I dared to use to itch an eye that may or may not be pink. I probably don't have pink eye. But my friend Megan does, and that's enough.

I noticed her eye was particularly watery while watching her drink a hazy beer as we sat at a checkered bar. The wood was warm, the air was cool, and her eye was runny. My feet dangled from the stool as I leaned onto my elbow and watched Megan's theatrics. She shrieked about one of her patients seizing twenty-four minutes after rounds. Her beer sloshed in its glass as she swung it around, recalling the frenzy that followed. Megan started working as a nurse five months ago, and it's been one horror story after the next. Patients seize, or their hearts stop, or their minds deteriorate, and nurse Megan, with her bright blonde hair and twinkly hazel eyes, is left to mop up the messes their bodies leave. She'll waltz

into a patient's room with her cobalt blue scrubs, flash her bright white teeth, and make them feel as if their hospital stay is the most normal thing in the world, as routine as a Top Model re-run. She will draw their blood, or disimpact their bowels, or carry them to the shower, before charting until her fingers fall off. She will then return home, drop her scrubs into the growing blue pile on her filthy floor, and collapse onto her bed, where she will wake up at 5 a.m. to do it all again.

We had just ordered another round when Megan mentioned she had recently encountered C. diff. My pre-conjunctivitis eyes grew wide as I sipped my drink.

"Megan!" I screamed. "Do not give me C. diff."

"I wash my hands every time I leave the room," she laughed as she clutched my arm. "Megan, I swear to God if you give me C. diff —" I gulped my beer and stared at her tight smile. She loves how much I hate her exposure to illness. Her eye continued to run and I elected not to say anything because I was already being as annoying about C. diff as I was about MRSA the week before. I ripped my arm from her grasp.

Megan is a great many things. She is kind and thoughtful and funny and smart, but she is not particularly hygienic off the clock, which, for a medical professional, is wildly problematic. I tend to flip my pillow after she sleeps on it and I beg her to wash her hands before she eats. I can hardly take the burden of her repeated exposure to a deadly bacteria. We share drinks, and food, and touch one another with reckless abandon, but something about her watery eye had me on high alert and every time her hand made contact with my skin my muscles contracted and I would gag back the question I would soon have the answer to:

What the fuck is wrong with your eye?

We continued to talk about her medical mishaps, about the man she delivered coffee to at 11 p.m., about the scheduling nightmares of being off every other weekend. We cackled hard and grabbed each other, flying high on bathroom humor and 9% beers. And then I screamed a little too loud and Megan laughed a little too hard and

a droplet of saliva leapt from her bottom lip, across her beer, through the air, and into my mouth.

“Megan!”

“What?” she kept laughing as she rubbed her leaky eye.

“You just spit in my mouth! Now I definitely have C. diff!”

“That’s not how it works, Al,” she said as she squeezed me with her fecal fingers. But that’s how it works for me. I will fixate on contracting some strange illness, despite the physical impossibility, because I am high maintenance and neurotic and love to obsess about things I cannot control. When Megan’s spit entered my mouth, my focus shot to her eye and the strange yellow corner and I still said nothing because my fight was with C. diff and that scuzz was tomorrow’s problem. Well, it’s tomorrow and that scuzz is now mine.

My grad school essay deadline is in two days, and, of course, I have manifested some miraculous illness that has rendered me unable to complete an arduous task. This is what I do. Megan’s mystery eye scuzz is not mine because she shared it, but because I claimed it. Because I hadn’t yet realized that my mind is more dangerous than C. diff and MRSA and Conjunctivitis combined. When I couldn’t be bothered to write my final English paper my freshman year of college, I conveniently contracted mono. When I had a particularly unpleasant research project due, I suddenly succumbed to a month long migraine. And I didn’t just claim these ailments, I experienced them. I am the Queen of Psychosomatic Shit. All it takes is an influx of stress and an ounce of resistance, and I can imbue my broken body with whatever symptoms will halt my impending deadline. So here I am, pink eyed or not, itching my eyes with the fingers pounding my keyboard in a desperate attempt to meet my deadline and overcome an infection I do not actually have. It turns out the mental is physical, and I am forever one suggestion away from fundamental malfunction.

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e.



I remember when the great oak tree on my elementary school campus was felled. The district said the tree was diseased, that it was rotting at the root, and they brought in monstrous yellow machinery to remedy the situation. First, they cut away all of the naked branches, then they ripped the trunk straight out of the ground, leaving nothing but a patch of dust behind. I was eight, and the loss of that tree was the biggest tragedy I could imagine.

I remember, a week before, I sat beneath that tree with the girl who would eventually teach me the true meaning of the word *tragedy*. Our Razor scooters lay long abandoned in a summer-wilted patch of grass, and time slipped through our fingers like the pinched waist of an hourglass. Earlier that day, my parents had told me they were getting a divorce. She asked me if I was sad, if it hurt, if I wanted to cry.

I remember saying no.

I remember, years later, when her lesson in tragedy came swift and sudden, unexpected as a slap in the face. We had become freshmen in high school, thirteen and beautiful, and I had believed that our friendship would be durable enough to survive the transition. I approached her one day in the auditorium, hoping to join the nebulous cloud of newfound friends she had accumulated, and greeted her as I would have any other day.

I remember she glanced at me, over the ridge of her shoulder that seemed like a mountain range.

I remember she returned my greeting in kind. (Not in kind, the words were cold. Not even cold, unfeeling. Tepid.)

I remember she turned to her friends, all of them fresh out the box and shiny with the last dredges of preteen innocence, and didn't look at me again.

I remember it had been many years since she and I had had that conversation beneath the tree, its wooden veins rotting beneath us.

I remember the last day we met, just the two of us. Summer was coming, ushering in the end of freshman year, and she had barely managed to fit me into her schedule; right in that sweet spot

between color guard practice and more important people, and we had lunch at a Panera. I never liked Panera, but I liked her, and I did not complain. We talked like acquaintances who said "it's nice to see you" and "we should do this more often" and lied and lied and lied, only I didn't know a lie when I tasted it. She asked me if there were any boys in my life, if I had any crushes, if I wanted a boyfriend.

I remember saying no.

I remember, later that very same week, when I first realized there was more to life than what they had once shown me on Disney Channel. More to people. When the girl who sat at my table in art class spent the period fighting with a boy who used the word queer like a shotgun, I realized the world was wide. It was like peering through a bullet hole in the wall to find blue skies and birdsong on the other side.

I remember when the thought first crossed my mind that I might like girls. It was a long time after freshman year, a long time since I'd heard that first shotgun blast. I'd learned so much about people in between, but nothing about myself.

I remember when the thought first crossed my mind, years after its predecessor, that I was a lesbian. I thought about her then, how we didn't talk anymore, and I wondered if she had always known. She knew me better than I knew myself, once.

I remember when the thought first crossed my mind that I had loved her, but we had a tangled, splintered history like the roots of a tree, small knots emerging from their living graves in the earth, sustained by conversations that I could no longer recall, and I thought that if I'd loved her, I would have held on tighter, I wouldn't have let her get away from me, I would have grabbed her by the shoulder that night when we were thirteen and stupid and whimsical and I would have made her look at me.

I remember that I had never been very good at holding on. I was always more willing to let go and take the next thing than keep hold of what was already in my hands. It was less of a struggle.

I remember a few months ago when one of those I let go had returned to me. He had been a mutual friend of mine and hers, before, and it had been years since we had spoken, too. But he fit in my life like an old cork in an old bottle. I wondered if she would have fit just as neatly.

I remember when he told me how she's doing now. He'd lost contact with her, too, but he saw her around. He said she had

taken to partying in Seattle, to the joint and the bottle and the lines and the dots on those lines and the men that supplied them. That she'd been on this path since we were seniors, and he remarked that if only her parents knew...

I remember her parents. They were strict, but they were good people. Her mom always made an extra bowl of mac and cheese for me, and she always asked me questions to keep me from losing myself in my own silence. Her dad used to take our whole trio to school when he wasn't drowning himself in his 9-5.

I remember her old house, and when she left it. She'd gone only five minutes away, but I was in middle school at the time and her old house stood empty at the end of my court and minutes seemed like eternities.

I remember her new house, and I remember the big backyard with the hill and the puppy who had all this life in her eyes. Our friend showed me a picture when we reunited, and that puppy has gray fur around her muzzle now. It reminds me of empty patches of dust and the ash of dead, burnt roots.

I remember walking by that house recently, the wind pushing at my back as if to usher me forward. I walked the gentle slope toward her house, and I remembered which window looked in on her bedroom, and I saw the light on inside. I thought that she must have come home, just like me, and I thought about how she must be feeling like an inmate in that house, the shuttering blinds on her window like the bars of a prison cell. She'd never liked San Ramon. She'd always wanted something more than this sunny suburbia and the people that live here. Something like Seattle, I guess.

I remember, when I passed her lit-up bedroom window, I pulled up my hood and my disposable blue mask and picked up my pace because I didn't want her to chance a glance outside and recognize me. Not that I genuinely thought she would.

I remember listening to a new Taylor Swift song on Spotify as I passed by, and it made me think of her. *And though I can't recall your face, I still got love for you.* But the thing is, I do recall her face.

I remember always thinking she was beautiful.

And now I wonder if she remembers me, too.

ASH TAYLOR IS A WRITER, STUDENT, AND DREAMER FROM NORTHERN CALIFORNIA. SHE SPENDS HER DAYS SPIRITING HERSELF AWAY TO ANY WORLD HER MIND CAN CONJURE AND DRINKING COFFEE FROM NOVELTY MUGS. HER CAT, JELLYBEAN, WHO IS VERY EAGER TO STEP ON HER KEYBOARD RIGHT NOW, APPARENTLY HAS SOMETHING TO SAY: KDGJHS. WELL SAID, JELLYBEAN.

TO DROWN ONE'S GUILT IN A STREAM OF CONSCIOUSNESS: AN EXAMINATION OF IAN MCEWAN'S ATONEMENT AS TRAUMA NARRATIVE

Cathy Caruth's seminal work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* suggests that at the centre of trauma narratives lies "a kind of double telling...between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (Caruth, 1996, 7). This 'double telling' is at the heart of Ian McEwan's *Atonement*, which revolves around the tragic mistake of the thirteen-year-old protagonist, Briony Tallis, accusing her sister's lover wrongfully of rape, the drastic repercussions that her mistake has on the lives of others, and Briony's struggle to come to terms with her guilt. In this essay, I argue that the entirety of *Atonement* can be read as a trauma narrative, with its focus on how Briony conveys the story of her traumatic event and its survival. I draw on trauma theory, specifically Dominic La Capra's theories of traumatic recovery, to show how Ian McEwan portrays Briony as undergoing the twin processes of 'acting out' and 'working through' trauma, so that through the retelling of her story, she attains a limited degree of recovery and atonement for her sin.

Before I analyse how McEwan achieves this portrayal of Briony 'acting out' and 'working through' her trauma, it is necessary to provide an understanding of these terms, as well as how Briony's false accusation of Robbie functions as a traumatic event for her. Derived from the Greek word for 'wound,' trauma can be broadly taken to mean both:

1. PHYSICAL TRAUMA, OR AN EXTERNAL BODILY INJURY RESULTING FROM AN EXTRINSIC SHOCK TO THE BODY
2. PSYCHOLOGICAL TRAUMA, OR A PSYCHIC INJURY CAUSED BY EMOTIONAL SHOCK, THE MEMORY OF WHICH IS REPRESSED AND REMAINS UNHEALED ("TRAUMA, N.," IN OED ONLINE)

It is important to note that trauma does not refer to the event itself, in this case, Briony's claim that she saw Robbie rape Lola at the fountain. Rather, trauma is the emotional response that follows after the event; or, as Charles Figley, pioneer trauma scholar, puts it, "an emotional state of discomfort and stress resulting from memories of an extraordinary catastrophic experience which shattered the survivor's sense of invulnerability to harm" (Figley,

1985, xviii). Briony's false admission fulfills key criteria of a traumatic event—she persistently experiences memories of it, she attempts to repress these memories, and she spends her life obsessed with trying to make amends for her mistake—in other words, to overcome its trauma. Her act of testifying against Robbie ruins his life by causing him to be sent to jail on conviction of rape, thus killing his dream of becoming a doctor. Her later guilt can be paralleled to the guilt that war veterans feel after killing an enemy soldier, with its similar emotional burden of having extinguished a life. The first three parts of *Atonement*, as the reader later comes to realise, is an embedded narrative, a novel written not by Ian McEwan the author, but by Briony Tallis the character. Briony's story can thus be understood as a trauma narrative, or a coherent story crafted by the trauma survivor to make sense of the traumatic experience as part of the recovery process (Rivka Tuval-Mashiach et al., 2004, 281). Through her trauma narrative, Briony performs the twin processes of 'acting out' and 'working through,' terms coined by Dominic La Capra to represent the two different ways in which survivors grapple with their trauma. 'Acting out' refers to the tendency to repeat the trauma, to 'performatively regenerate' or relive the past occurrence as if it were fully present, with no distance from it. 'Working through' is the acknowledgement and acceptance that the event has occurred, along with the adoption of distance from the event, and the recognition that the event exists in the past, and is related to, but not identical to, the present reality (La Capra, 1999, 713-716). While La Capra posits that these ways of dealing with trauma are distinct countervailing forces, they are not mutually exclusive. I argue that Briony first undergoes 'acting out,' by relieving the trauma in her memory, and then 'working through,' becoming a nurse, and telling her own story.

Briony's own analysis of her action, and the effect it has on her, is a textbook example of La Capra's idea of 'acting out':

Her memories of the interrogation and signed statements and testimony, or of her awe outside the courtroom from which her youth excluded her, would not trouble her so much in the years to come as her fragmented recollection of that late night and summer dawn. How guilt refined the methods of self-torture, threading the beads of detail into an eternal loop, a rosary to be fingered for a lifetime. (*Atonement*, 162)

This passage makes clear the degree of internal torment that Briony repeatedly subjects herself to in the 'years to come,' due to her 'fragmented recollection' of that fateful 'late night.' The phrase

‘eternal loop’ echoes La Capra’s idea of ‘acting out,’ as the event is continuously repeated, embedded within the mind as a set of images to be played back and forth, with every ‘bead of detail’ symbolising each moment etched into Briony’s memory. The metaphor of the rosary implies, on one hand, the perpetuity of the action, as praying the rosary is a lifelong practice; but also that for Briony, this agonising mental playback is done as an act of penance, a kind of self-torture inflicted to atone for her sin. It is worth noting how this paragraph, a sort of foretelling of how Briony’s testimony will affect her in the future, is placed at the start of Chapter 14, even before the reader knows exactly what Briony testified. This deliberate positioning indicates that Briony’s memory of the event is inextricably intertwined with her knowledge of how her memory of the event will affect her. In other words, Briony is only too aware that she is in the grip of trauma, but is powerless to stop it from devastating her.

Briony’s subsequent life decisions, too, can be understood as acts of penance. She chooses not to go up to Cambridge, and instead commences ‘nurse’s training’ at Cecilia’s “old hospital” (*Atonement* 199). Elizabeth Weston views this as “a way to live the life Cecilia was living before the bombing cut it short” but criticises Briony’s method of attempting to atone—by “merely following Cecilia’s path and continuing to leave her testimony intact”—as being unlikely to improve either Cecilia or Robbie’s lives, and thus counter-productive (Weston, 2019, 99). I would argue that Briony’s decision to become a nurse is not merely an attempt to make amends with her sister and Robbie, a failing in that regard, but an action shaped by survivor’s guilt. Briony understands that her false testimony has inflicted severe misery on Cecilia and Robbie, and has thrown their lives into disarray—she cannot, in good faith, continue living a ‘normal life’ while they suffer as a consequence of her actions. Hence, she disrupts the expected course of her life—studying English at Cambridge—to follow in her sister’s footsteps. Becoming a nurse is Briony’s attempt at empathetic identification with Cecilia, to understand the emotional pain that her sister has gone through. By joining a profession that will cause her to suffer both physically and psychologically, “struggling to cope with the influx of casualties from Dunkirk as the horrors of injury, mutilation, and death pile up before her eyes” (Kogan, 2014, 65). In a gesture of solidarity with her sister, Briony imposes punishment on herself for her crime. If Cecilia cannot experience happiness, then neither will she.

Briony's decision to become a nurse, however, can also be interpreted as an attempt to 'work through' her trauma. Her thoughts as she attends to a soldier with stomach wounds signal that her underlying motivation for working at the hospital is to make reparations to Robbie himself:

She thought too how one of these men might be Robbie, how she would dress his wounds without knowing who he was, and with cotton wool tenderly rub his face until his familiar features emerged, and how he would turn to her with gratitude, realize who she was, and take her hand, and in silently squeezing it, forgive her. Then he would let her settle him down into sleep (Atonement, 281).

The fantasy that Briony constructs, where she finds Robbie among the wounded and tends to him, obtaining his forgiveness in the process, shows how treating wounded soldiers is one of her means of atoning for her mistake, as well as how her trauma has affected even her everyday life as a nurse. That this is merely a fantasy is stylistically indicated by the run-on lines, which mirror Briony's stream of consciousness. Briony hopes that in healing Robbie's physical wounds from war, she can repair "the person whom she had destroyed" (Kogan, 2014, 66), and right the wrong she has done to him. The 'sleep' that Briony desires for Robbie in her imagination is a symbol of peace for both Robbie and Briony. It is clear that Briony sees Robbie's reflection in the face of every soldier she treats. By stitching together the wounds of others, she attempts to repair her own damaged self. The descriptions of her removing "shrapnel...embedded in the flesh" (182), "clean[ing] an area six inches back, working her way right round the wound" (181), can arguably be read as Briony removing her own shrapnel of painful memory; cleaning her own gaping mental wounds. This imaginative reparation, where the healing of soldiers stands in for the healing of both Robbie and herself, involves an acknowledgement on Briony's part that the traumatic event has occurred, and thus fulfills La Capra's criteria that the survivor who adopts 'working through' must break away from the event and differentiate between the past and the present. Briony is hence actively trying to atone for her sins, and affect her own recovery.

The inclusion of Part 2 of the novel, an account of the war told from Robbie's perspective, can thus be understood as Briony's attempt to 'work through' her trauma by achieving empathetic identification with her primary victim. We know that Part 2 is

construed entirely from Briony's imagination, as she never had a conversation with Robbie before his death that would have enabled her to understand his story. Briony is unable to understand the agony that she has put Robbie through, first in jail, then in war, and her writing of his experience is an attempt to bridge this chasm between them. Brian Finney points out that although there is only one narrative voice in the novel, which turns out to be that of seventy-seven year old Briony, McEwan employs what Gérard Genette coined 'variable internal focalization,' where the focal character changes even though the narrative voice does not. In *Atonement*, the focal character switches from Briony, to Cecilia, to Robbie and so on, and this modal determination is a stylistic demonstration that Briony attempts to 'project herself into the thoughts and feelings' of Robbie and Cecilia, which is an integral part of her search for forgiveness (Finney, 2004, 75).

James Phelan sees Briony's representation of Robbie and Cecilia's consciousness as a "commitment to an ethical principle" (Phelan, 2007, 122), namely the writer's ethical principle to employ narrative in order to 'enter these different minds and show how they had an equal value' (*Atonement*, 38), hinging on the "simple truth that other people are as real as you" (38). I would argue that it is also an ethical commitment to constructing the narrative faithfully, in order to achieve an understanding of Robbie and Cecilia that Briony herself lacked in committing her crime—for is not her mistake fundamentally a misunderstanding; a misinterpretation of the relationship between the pair, and an interpretation of danger for her sister where there was none? This explains the following passage from Robbie explaining why he believes Briony acted the way she did:

In her mind he had betrayed her love by favoring her sister. Then, in the library, confirmation of the worst, at which point, the whole fantasy crashed. First, disappointment and despair, then a rising bitterness. Finally, an extraordinary opportunity in the dark, during the search for the twins, to avenge herself. She named him—and no one but her sister and his mother doubted her...But he did not think his resentment of her could ever be erased. Yes, she was a child at the time, and he did not forgive her. He would never forgive her. That was the lasting damage (*Atonement*, 220).

This entire passage, readers later learn, does not consist of Robbie's thoughts as they have been led to believe, but are rather

Robbie's thoughts as Briony imagines them to be. It is unclear whether these thoughts are an accurate interpretation of Briony's underlying motivations, but the reader is tempted to ask, if Briony has complete control of the narrative, why make herself out to be the villain? Why declare that Robbie would 'never forgive her,' when this is a truth she cannot know for sure? Why not use the narrative as an opportunity to redeem herself, rather than depict Robbie as condemning her in his imagination? I believe the answer lies in Briony's tendency to punish herself as part of her trauma. In projecting a grave indictment of herself in Robbie's imagination, she embarks on a kind of self-flagellation, exposing herself to the anger he holds towards her in a narrative that she never experiences in reality. This is in itself an act of atonement, or a 'working through' of trauma.

Briony's most significant act of 'working through' trauma is in her crafting of the narrative itself. This marks a transition from attempting to escape the trauma of her past by ignoring and repressing it, as she does in the story she submits to Horizon, depicting the scene by the fountain. The contrast between her story 'Two Figures by a Fountain,' where she "dedicates scores of pages to the quality of light and shade, and to random impressions," concealing the larger story behind this scene, and the entirety of Parts 1 to 3 which weave together a gripping narrative, could not be more significant. Briony refers to 'Two Figures by a Fountain' as an attempt at evading the truth:

Did she really think she could hide behind some borrowed notions of modern writing, and drown her guilt in a stream—three streams!—of consciousness? The evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her life. Everything she did not wish to confront was also missing from her novella—and was necessary to it. What was she to do now? It was not the backbone of a story that she lacked. It was backbone (302).

The dashes and question marks indicate Briony's emotional agitation, while the phrase 'drown her guilt in a stream' carries connotations of suppression, of holding her guilt underwater and drowning it. This is exactly the process of repression survivors who 'act through' their trauma often resort to; escaping the pain of their past by denying its existence. The image of a stream, a body of moving water, also suggests Briony's longing for her guilt to be washed away. In writing her later narrative, Briony develops both the 'backbone' of her story and her own figurative 'backbone' of

courage, confronting her trauma head on. If the short story 'Two Figures by a Fountain' represents her 'acting out' of her trauma, then in the full novel she writes about her mistake represents her attempt at 'working through' it. In writing out with painstaking detail the events of her past, Briony acknowledges their existence, but she also redeems herself in re-invention. By radically rewriting the story's end, allowing Cecilia and Robbie to obtain the happiness in fiction that eluded them in life, Briony engages with "the moral responsibility she lack[ed]" (Pitt, 2009, 35) that fateful evening she accused Robbie of rape. Briony's writing of the novel thus allows her to assert control over the situation through her imagination, and regain some semblance of order over the lives of her sister and Robbie. Briony's "love of order" (7) has been evident since her childhood, in the neatly structured stories that she writes about worlds that are "made just so" (7), and so it is unsurprising that she turns to writing as a means to restore things to their rightful state of affairs. Briony's analysis of her decision to unite the lovers is also telling:

I like to think that it isn't weakness or evasion, but a final act of kindness, a stand against oblivion and despair, to let my lovers live and to unite them at the end. I gave them happiness, but I was not so self-serving as to let them forgive me. Not quite, not yet. If I had the power to conjure them at my birthday celebration . . . Robbie and Cecilia, still alive, still in love, sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*? It's not impossible. (351)

Here, Briony directly addresses the reader, giving us access to her thought process. In her novel, Briony has the power to re-imagine an alternate reality for Robbie and Cecilia. She writes that this is an 'act of kindness' towards them, but it can also be read as a kindness to herself, to pretend that she could make reparations for the terrible consequences of her actions. Although Briony states that she is not 'self-serving,' is not the whole act of authorship an inherently selfish one? Perhaps the 'oblivion and despair' she mentions does not refer to that of Robbie and Cecilia, but the emotions that she fears will overwhelm herself should she refrain from writing this novel. The inclusion of 'not quite, not yet', and 'it's not impossible' indicate that Briony still longs for forgiveness that the dead Robbie and Cecilia are unable to provide, and the way she describes the image of Robbie and Cecilia 'sitting side by side in the library, smiling at *The Trials of Arabella*' with meticulous detail suggests that this is a scene that has long

haunted her consciousness. In uniting the lovers in fiction, assuming the mantle of repair of their love, she can delude herself into believing that the couple would have forgiven her, had she only been able to make her fiction a reality.

Yet there are key limitations to this attempt at 'working through' trauma. As Briony herself admits:

The problem these fifty-nine years has been this: how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God? There is no one, no entity or higher form that she can appeal to, or be reconciled with, or that can forgive her. There is nothing outside her. In her imagination she has set the limits and the terms. No atonement for God, or novelists, even if they are atheists. (*Atonement*, 350-351)

Briony's power as a novelist is simultaneously her limitation. Forgiveness requires two parties to be involved, but with her status as creator, there is no higher power who can judge her attempt at atonement and forgive her. Briony's writing is responsible for breathing into being the entire world of the novel, and her characters, however realistic, are only characters, and cannot atone for the wrong she has done to real people.

This raises the question of whether Briony's attempts to make reparations is even legitimate, if there is no one to witness it. For Briony, at least, the answer to this question is clear: "It was always an impossible task, and that was precisely the point. The attempt was all." (*Atonement*, 351). Briony's attempt at atoning is successful in the sense that it alleviates some sense of her own guilt. Although she is doomed to fail, she fails on her own terms, and achieves some degree of catharsis for her actions. As Brian Finney notes, "Robbie and Cecilia's happiness cannot be restored to them by an act of corrective fiction. Nevertheless, the attempt to imagine the feelings of others is perhaps the one corrective that we can make in the face of continuing human suffering" (Finney, 2004, 82). It is the act of absolution that matters, not the outcome. Briony's commitment to working through her own trauma may not right the immense wrong that has been wrought by her hands, but it does provide a balm for her troubled soul, as evident in the last line of the novel, "But now I must sleep" (351). It is only once she completes her narrative that she can attain blissful rest, absent of the trauma that has haunted her since childhood.

Kelly M. Rich argues that the burden of judging whether Briony's attempt at atonement is successful or not falls on the reader. She

notes that Briony “inhabits both guilt and atonement,” and that Atonement leaves “the reader in the difficult position of having to judge the efficacy of her humanistic repair” (Rich, 2014, 506)—it is the reader who is the final arbiter of whether Briony deserves the forgiveness she craves. The reader is therefore an important silent figure in Briony’s trauma narrative, and given the subjectivity of the reading experience, with different readers likely to have different responses to the text, this amplifies how Briony’s ‘working through’ of trauma is an imperfect process—the novel “leaves open the possibility of not embracing Briony’s plea for empathy” (Rich, 2014, 506). Briony’s attempt at atonement, then, can be viewed as being repeated countless times anew in the mind of each reader, each with a different outcome. In my view, however, Briony’s attempt at atonement is achieved in the eyes of the reader. Throughout the reader’s journey with Briony, they see how her fatal error of judgment was borne out of misplaced good intentions; how the regret of her mistake is genuine, and how she spends her life obsessed with trying to ‘work through’ her trauma and atone for her sin. It is impossible for the reader to condemn Briony completely, and this understanding of her plight, or empathetic identification of the reader with Briony, serves as a kind of redemption for her.

Much has been made about *Atonement* as a postmodern novel, and a work of metafiction. In reading *Atonement* as a trauma narrative, readers attain a kind of empathetic identification with Briony as she ‘works through’ her trauma, allowing her to obtain the limited redemption she longs for. Rather than drowning Briony’s guilt in a stream of consciousness, McEwan uses the narrative to let understanding of her plight wash over the reader, who in turn absolves Briony of her guilt. In doing so, McEwan alludes to the transcendental power of fiction to achieve atonement and heal the wounds that time cannot.

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all our monsters, 30"x 36", acrylic, latex, spray enamel on canvas, 2020.



it's all falling down, 26"x 34", acrylic, spray enamel, canvas fragments and paint crumbs on canvas, 2020.

Dennis Michael Jones is a visual artist, educator, and licensed practicing architect. He has participated in several one person and group shows, totaling sixty-five exhibitions that include local, national and international venues that span a career of over thirty years. His creative output has included paintings, sculptures, drawings, installation, photography and books. Jones' current focus is on a growing body of paintings in mixed media on canvas that combine elements of abstraction, figuration and cartoon-like imagery. In 2019, Jones' work was selected for publication in the New American Paintings Midwest Competition, Issue #143.





What They Don't See

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.

Shannon'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 in observing the Asian aesthetic Wabi Sabi: appreciation of imperfections. Her use of dots creates an impression of a technical drawing. Stippling creates clusters of value implying crisp texture and depth, giving the illusion of change through time.

