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FOLIO

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FOLIO

Volume 35, Issue 01

NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader,

As always, the editorial team has endeavored to bring you a meaningful collection of new work that will enrich your understanding of the human experience. Specifically, we embraced a theme we called *All Systems Go*. We looked for writing that wrestled with systems of every kind, from government and economics, systems of liberation and oppression, to the workings of the body and the natural universe. Not least of all, we sought work that also engaged the beauty of systems that humans, and all of nature, inhabit.

Our hope was this: to curate a volume that celebrates the joys and challenges of human interconnectedness as much as it explores the struggle against systems that deny our common and individual humanity. The quality of work from our contributors surpassed our expectations and our hope has come to fruition in these pages.

We continued FOLIO's tradition of awarding an Editor's Prize for the most compelling or original piece in each genre, especially as it relates to our theme. This year, Murwarid Abdiani's "Good Girls and Daughters" was chosen by Non-fiction Editor Tim Englehart, who admired its "unrelenting willingness to confront complexity." Caroline Adkin's poem, "Notes on Carrying My Own Firewood" was chosen by Poetry Editor Shanique Charmichael, who was taken by its "affronting first line" and dramatic tension. Fiction Editor Alexus Blanding chose Kristina Gorcheva-Newberry's story "Gene Therapy" for the fiction prize, for the way it "masterfully examines the role of one's cultural history and its effects on their future."

We were also pleased to award the Editor's Prize for Art to Anni Wilson for the incredible piece that became our cover art – and helped to further define our vision for this volume.

I had the privilege of joining FOLIO's Managing Editor Emily Holland in an interview with Elizabeth Lindsey Rogers about her breathtaking new book, *The Tilt Torn Away from the Seasons*. Visually captivating and experimental in form, Rogers' collection tackles entwined systems of oppression through an ecopoetic lens.

Finally, we are thrilled to present to you work by creators both emerging and widely published – and are grateful to you, our reader, for engaging in this literary dialogue by giving these writers and artists your time, and in turn, allowing them to share their gifts with you.

– Cristi Donoso

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NAN BECKER

Verity

Not now – but often,
at the very edge of exhale,
I feel the color of rain

– of sympathies gladly forgotten

– of memories staring down half-wild,
waned thin as a day-moon

– of rains soon to come or barely done

smelling of things familiar,
plausible, dear things,
you could wave your hand through
as if it were yet here,
as if ever it was.

LISA COMPO

Litany of the July Mountain Burn

The burrowing owl looks to me in question.
The parking lot settles and becomes liquid
night, the owl finds me strange in the barbed chain-link
desert. The mountain is a shell

of itself, a volcano lung that likely craves
the heat, a quick match. The burrowing
owl wobbles its head from the earth
and its feathers crinkle in the wind.

It does not seem to say, *hello*. It does not
speak to me in a way I would hope. I could not
ask if it was born from desert grass, dry weathered
bird, fire-beak-silent. I am left alone

with my thoughts and it is the expected burning
that is more July than any burst
or color in the sky. We wait for the fireworks
at the mountain's feet and beside

the detention facility: the car radio rattles, smells drift
sour, *I'm free fallin'* loops and there are street lamps hiding
somewhere, they're speaking
about cement– it's all they see. The deep voices

of my father and his work friends accompany locust whine
like a cello among notes. *This is the closest*
you can get– there was likely talk of whether it would catch fire
again, talk like it somehow could not. The burrowing owl peeks

from its puddle of night– the sky a bucket of prayers, collected
murmurs: freedom faint, beneath all the sound swishing
about. My father's friends still wear their uniforms,
beige tan brown blending together. Quiet outlines

against car hoods, heat rising from asphalt swallowing
their black boots. I pretend: the building is empty,
like it's also just listening for a crackle,
the rumble. Yellow eyes furnish

the desert, bringing together shadows, not a light
bubbles. *Five more minutes, will it catch?* I glance again to the burrow
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an abandoned hole
that some animal would make
a home of and the men with their heads tilted to smoked sky
wait for the salt and stars to rain – the mountain a lantern left open.

ACE BOGGESS

Contraband

THEY FOUND Ron Johnson's homemade tattoo gun easily enough. He had been running ink when the lockdown was called. He didn't have time to stash the equipment after the Security Team sallied through the back door of POD 4B. During the searches, it would be the first thing a guard spotted – Johnson's depraved, spider-like mechanism put together from the motor and wires of another inmate's old CD player – right where Johnson left it in the floor of the cell's bathroom area. One of the cons up front noticed the water had been shut off – sure sign of a shakedown – but word hadn't filtered back to Johnson. When he got out of the hole in sixty days, he'd be pissed about that, but not at anyone in particular.

The officers came *en masse* through that back door as if a bold move, as if they didn't try the same trick every time. "Face down on your bunks," the lieutenant shouted. Always the first one in, he was the cockiest of the officers on the Security Team. He wore sunglasses inside. His dark, greasy hair hung a bit too long on his forehead. The lieutenant had the attitude of Tom Cruise in *Top Gun*, but the lanky build of Ryan Styles from *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* Nobody took him seriously other than at times like these. He held the largest can of mace, his belt stuffed with so many zip-ties that he looked as though he had started growing a tail. "No talking, no moving. If we catch you off your bunk, you're getting sprayed."

One of my cellmates, Scott White, panicked as he rolled over onto his belly. He cussed and muttered into his pillow. I heard a tremble in his voice. I might have heard tears. He had the bottom bunk next to mine, and although he was new to the cell, I almost asked if he was okay.

I didn't, figuring it was better to keep quiet. Best not to draw attention to our cell. All six of us had at least some kind of contraband stashed in our cuts. For me, it was two roll-ups flattened and slid into the narrowest gap between the wall and three-inch-wide steel frame of my bunk. It was a good hiding place. The guards at Boone County Correctional never thought to look there.

"Who's talking? I heard talking," said the lieutenant.

C.O. Bunting laughed as he said, "We gonna have to spray somebody today?"

"Shut up, White," whispered Meat – a nickname – from his top bunk over by the wall.

White made a sound like a horse whinnying, but then went silent. He was a young guy, maybe twenty, with a face that swore fifteen. He had shiny black hair that reminded me of Freddie Mercury's, no muscles to speak of, no visible tattoos as of yet. Aside from the numbered khaki uniform, he looked clean-cut and normal. He could've been someone's college roommate – the one who never rifled through drawers, smoked out the window, brought women back from bars at three a.m., or listened to Jethro Tull with the volume turned way up. He was the guy you didn't worry about, the guy who might be a serial killer that no one would discover for another twenty years. I had no idea why the state of West Virginia sent him to the penitentiary. He wouldn't talk about it, and no one in this cell pried into his personal business. It wasn't for serial-killing, though, or he wouldn't have ended up in medium security.

The lieutenant shouted loud enough for the whole POD to hear, "Now that we've got your attention, listen carefully. We're coming to your cells. When we call your name, you're going to climb out of your cut and walk backward to the cell door." That was new. "You'll be patted down and directed where to stand. When we have you all lined up, you'll be escorted down to the chow hall, where you'll take a seat and sit quietly until we're done searching the POD."

"You can't do that," someone shouted from one of the back cells.

I heard something bang against a cage a second before C.O. Bunting said, "Rafferty, who told you you could talk?"

"We got rights," Rafferty said. "Stay here and see you don't plant nothing." I don't know if what he said was true, but I had heard it many times. It could've been one of those myths like how a cop has to say he's a cop if you ask. Not that it mattered. Boone County Correctional had been a prison only for a couple years, having been converted from an old hospital. It was county-run and leased to the state. Most of the correctional officers were guards because it was the only job available in the area. It was all new to them.

Bunting shouted, "Knock it off, Rafferty. One more word and you're getting it in the eye."

"We got a right…."

"Shit," I moaned, preparing myself for the sound of Rafferty screaming once the mace hit him. That would be followed by sounds of all of us retching. In a closed-off POD like this, if one guy got sprayed, we all did. The fumes would fill the air in seconds.

"One more word, Rafferty, and I shit you not…."

"It's the law, man."

Here it comes, I thought.

"Shut the fuck up, Rafferty!" A different voice. I recognized it: Max Hedley, who all of us called Philadelphia. Hardest guy on the POD. Nobody messed with Philadelphia. One of his favorite expressions was "Don't call me an inmate. I'm a motherfucking convict."

"That's right, Rafferty," Bunting said, yucking it up. "Listen to Mr. Hedley. Might keep you out of a little trouble and a lot of pain."

I waited for another slick comment from Rafferty, but it didn't come. He might talk shit to a C.O. with a spray can, but once Philadelphia said his piece, Rafferty must have squeezed his lips as if he had sewn them shut.

The lieutenant said, "Any other wise guys?"

Nothing.

"All right. You'll do exactly what you're told from now on."

Next to me, I heard White mutter, "My parole hearing," before he buried his face in his pillow.

They found Hook Lawson's jack book hidden under his mat. He had cut pictures of women out of old *Playboys* and taped them over the filled-in answer lines of a twelve-step workbook salvaged from one his required classes. Together, this collection formed a gallery of meek erotica he could smuggle into a shower stall and flip through before he turned the water on. Everyone knew about it. He had shown it to half the POD, and a couple of the floor officers. The magazines themselves weren't contraband, but as soon as Lawson cut them up and used them to create something new, this new thing broke the rules.

They discovered an empty Bic lighter in the next cell up. None of the inmates would claim it or seemed to know anything about it. The lighter had been tucked tightly into a groove beneath the sink. It could've been there before the eight men currently in that cell arrived, the turnover in this facility being similar to that of employees at McDonald's, except in prison years.

In the same cell, they located a cache of three roll-ups under the insole of a work boot. The boot was next to Shorty Haschem's bunk. Shorty swore that neither the boot nor cigarettes were his, but the write-up went to him because of the proximity.

We found our places around steel picnic tables in the chow hall, quiet at first but adding volume to our conversations as time passed until the room sounded as it usually did when all of us were hunched over trays. The C.O. left to guard us should've shut us up, but she was caught blushing in a conversation with Philadelphia, who sat at the nearest table to her. Even from my distance, I could tell he was hitting on her hard and might get her in trouble one of these days.

I sat at a table with Meat, White, and Bradshaw, one of our other cellmates. All of us but White were in our tees and sweats. White still wore his full uniform which clung to his thin frame so tightly he looked like a soldier – how all of us were supposed to look, though the flimsy khakis left most of us resembling hobos, drunks, and clowns. White sat with his back to the table. He rocked back and forth like a junkie in need of a fix, his arms crossed atop his groin, hands holding elbows. He kept his eyes closed. His head bobbed.

"What's up with the kid?" Meat said, squinting.

"Don't know," I said. "Hey, White, you okay?"

He ignored me.

"Hey, White," I said. "Hey. What's up, man?"

"What the shit, White?" Meat said.

That got his attention. White looked over his shoulder at me as if I were the one that cussed him. His face was paler than his name.

Bradshaw said, "Whew, man. You look scared to death."

"You okay?" I said again.

"Just got my home plan approved," he said.

"Yeah?"

"My parole hearing's next month."

"That's cool," I said. "Why you getting upset about it now? They haven't denied you yet."

He failed to appreciate my sense of humor. "Can't get a write-up," he said. "That'll push my hearing back three months, and I'll have to get a new home plan."

"What they gonna write your skinny ass up for?" said Meat. "You been holding out on us?"

Bradshaw said, "You got dope stashed? Cigarettes?"

White ignored the others and stared at me. "My radio," he said, "for the TV." The POD televisions were connected to FM transmitters, so we needed radios with headphones to be able to listen to whatever shows or football games were on.

"When'd you get a radio?" I said, surprised. He hadn't owned a radio in the three months he had been in the cell. Usually, I let him borrow mine.

"Last night," he said. "Traded two weeks' worth of breakfast trays for it."

Meat said, "They're not gonna waste paper on you over a radio."

"You think so?"

"Why bother?"

"Still has somebody else's number on it."

"You didn't scratch yours on there?" I said.

"Didn't have time."

"Aw, hell," said Bradshaw. "You're in a world of hurt, son."

I side-eyed him, looking mean while trying not to laugh. The kid was sweating that radio like it was a shiv. Not funny, really, but it struck me as absurd, silly, unwarranted. Turning back to White, I said, "Don't worry about it."

"Can't help it," he said.

"Technically, it *is* contraband," said Meat. "If they find it and check the number, they could write you up for that."

White twitched.

Bradshaw said, "Or trading and selling. Could get you for that, too."

Meat added, "Or theft."

White turned away from us, his body taut as he stared at the milk machine over by the window where we collected our trays at chow time.

"It'll be all right," I said. "If they write you up, you can … I don't know … maybe get the magistrate to drop it to a class-three violation. Then it won't mess with your parole." I was trying to be reassuring.

He didn't hear me. Though his mouth was closed, a noise built in his throat like steam, starting deep and rumbly, then rising in pitch until it became a shriek. His body became a pale tremor as though an earthquake struck and touched nothing but him. He fell sideways onto the floor, head striking white tile barely covering stone. It sounded like a snapped wet towel.

They found tobacco in three other cells on their way to ours. Eric Watts had a pouch of it under his mat, Smitty Plymale kept a baggie full of roll-ups in his gray storage box, and a guy we knew as Stubby left a real Marlboro, filter and all, in the pocket of the khaki shirt he tried to hide in his laundry bag, buried under his dirty drawers and socks. The guards were searching everywhere – we never found out for what. We heard rumors of a cellphone, rumors of a blade. We thought they might be looking for watermelon hooch after two guys on POD 4C turned up drunk last week. But it could've been anything: drugs, needles, money, a map of the prison showing an escape hatch marked with an X. All we knew was that officers from the Security Team ransacked our POD like thieves.

They found the quartered playing cards we used for poker chips in the next cell over. Someone would take the fall for those – maybe the guy we called Drumstick, a thick-necked goof who kept the bank in exchange for a tiny rake.

They collected extra or overdue library books, and they tore down pictures that had been taped to undersides of bunks. No one received write-ups for these, or for the many sets of charred razor blades scattered across the bathroom floors of every cell.

They didn't discover whatever they were looking for. They didn't find answers any more than they would've had they asked us the questions directly.

After his head hit the floor, White flopped fish-like. His eyes rolled into a ghoulish milk. He had ceased to make that animal sound, that shrill, droning noise, but now his throat whirred and gasped, his lips parted, drooling. It reminded me of John Hurt's scene right before the baby alien poked its head through his chest.

I had known people who were epileptic, and others prone to seizures after periods of heavy drinking and drug use. Not once had I witnessed the transformation from normalcy to unconscious flailing. The wild sounds, the suddenness of collapse – they startled me like a sealed bottle of beer exploding against a wall beside my head. My brain said, *Help him,* but I couldn't move. I sat there, wide-eyed and staring. One time I saw a deer descending a hillside at full speed, its time and angle perfect for it to crash headfirst into the side of the red minivan in front of me. I felt now like I did then: watching a coming collision I couldn't prevent, then driving past the twitching buck, its neck snapped, antlers shattered like a windshield by a rock.

Someone yelled, "Stick a spoon in his mouth!"

Someone else said no, he'd break his teeth, as if the spoons weren't made of hard plastic that could be gnawed through.

I heard the C.O. shouting into her walkie talkie, "Medical emergency in the chow hall! Medical emergency in the chow hall!" She pushed past several cons. We all stood up as if ready for the encore at a classic-metal show. She went between and among us, not afraid of being groped or hurt. She was as focused on White as we were. "Turn him on his side," she said. "Just turn him."

Meat was the one who got down in the floor with him, rolling him gently as if removing a hook from the mouth of a catfish while trying to avoid the spines. Meat rocked White with the slightest of motions as one might an infant. "My brother has episodes," he said to no one.

White seemed to calm, no longer a bullhorn for beastly noises.

The C.O. knelt there, too, looking at White with tenderness and at Meat with a glance that resembled someone in love. Her radio buzzed and whined with a dozen voices attempting to speak at the same time.

Other officers entered the chow hall from all directions – one at a time at first, and then in clusters. "Everyone against the wall," they yelled.

We obeyed, silent and deadened.

Soon, the medical staff arrived, as did the Security Team, along with the cocky lieutenant shouting, "What the hell happened down here?"

By now, White's eyes were their normal dull green again. One of the young nurses, taking over from Meat, eased the young felon to an upright position. He looked as though he had woken up after a blackout bender and had no idea where he was.

"He's epileptic," the nurse said. To White, she added, "We'll take you to Medical for a couple of hours. We'll get you checked out, make sure you're all right. Be back in your own bunk before you know it."

They didn't find my roll-ups, flat as an envelope and smashed together in their secret niche. They didn't find Meat's stash of rhythm-and-blues CDs for which he had traded boxes of cakes, bags of chips, and jars of coffee from the commissary. They didn't find Bradshaw's two issues of *Hustler* smuggled in by one of the kitchen staff who knew his family on the outside. Nor did they find whatever treasures our cellmates Hong and Hendershot kept hidden. They found nothing in our cell. It wasn't clear that they even found our cell.

We returned to the POD and discovered our bunks made, the charcoal poly-fiber blankets tucked neatly under the mats as though we had prepared them for morning inspection. No one had emptied out our gray storage boxes. Pictures of wives, girlfriends, and naked models remained taped to walls and the undersides of upper bunks. It looked like our cell had been skipped, perhaps forgotten after the crisis in the chow hall.

White didn't know that at first and must have worried for much of the evening. Apparently, he had another seizure while in Medical. He came back to the cell after midnight, once the nurses finally released him. When we told him what happened, he called it a miracle, called it fate, thanked whatever god he claimed.

In the morning, White wrapped the radio in toilet paper and disposed of it in the wastebasket near the front of the dayroom. He swore he would break no other rules while he waited to see the Parole Board.

Later, when I offered him a hit off my roll-up, he said no, not even that, although his eyes widened, and I recognized a man who couldn't keep promises to himself for long.

ALISON STONE

The Plan

I'm in the hospital with kidney stones,
my friend texts. I struggle to keep reading –
spring suns blurs the screen
despite my cupped hand and the dog
tugs at her leash – first warm week
and so much to smell.
I start to put the phone away
but see *leukemia*, which I guess
they found because of the stones.

My dad's co-worker was driving when his heart stopped.
The crash jolted it back to beating. His other friend
collapsed on a treadmill and never got up.
Some people believe in a god
with a plan and rewards for the good,
prayer helping (perhaps mitigating death to a bad flu)
except when it doesn't. Maybe the best plan
is to follow the dog's agitated tail
toward Hook Mountain's base, and stop
as I do every morning and look up –
two hawks earnestly circling,
snow finally melted from the peak.

ADAM TAVEL

Murder Show Bingo

Fade in. Trailer park. A Firebird
peeling paint like skin three days
after sunburn. The reenactment cast
with better teeth than anyone
in the real family photos. The phrase
wanted a better life. Awkward
commercial break. Job at gas station.
Job at bowling alley. Job tending bar.
A white man in jeans proving quickly
he isn't human. Long panning shot
of a hatchet and duct tape shown
three times. A wine glass smashing
in slow-mo. The dolled-up neighbor
who can't form sentences quaking
before she sobs. The word *ligature.*
Behind the headboard, one fleck
of blood. The lead detective
retired. The lead detective dead
from cancer and 87 crime scenes
in his head. An aunt moping through
faded birthdays in a shoebox
to help producers milk the hour.
Near the end, blue gloves
taking underwear out of evidence
to show the camera how plain
they are, like ours, and stained.

KIT SABISTINA

Evidence

When you leaped from naked
gladness (having been born),
no measurement was taken.
That makes it harder to believe
in your significance. How do
you know how far you've come?

Your fingers type reports
then lie like dormant roots.
A chair is for sitting
in front of a terminal screen.
The last thing that you'll see
is the tumor of its twitching.

Meanwhile, more data
is assembled to undermine
the previous facts.
Subtract the body's future
disappearance. Add the cost
of sunrise, sunset.

EDITOR'S PRIZE NONFICTION

MURWARID ABDIANI

Good Girls and Daughters

"YOUR MOTHER and I have been saving this for you."

We had an hour left at the airport in Hong Kong when my father pulled an envelope from his jacket and handed it to me. We were on our way to Afghanistan, a place I hadn't seen since I was three, for a family reunion. I took the envelope in my hand and assumed it was money. The heft proved me wrong. This was not cash.

"Open it."

"What's in it?

"It's for you."

"But for what?" I hadn't accomplished anything or done anything worthy of gift giving.

"Open it."

I tossed it from hand to hand. It sounded like a bag of coins. My father watched me impatiently. When I finally opened the envelope, I was overcome. Dad sat across from me smiling.

Inside, gold. A small breastplate made of pure gold – a necklace, crafted by hand into the intricate shape of lotus blossoms – one that fanned out as it crawled up and around the wearer's neck. Next to that, inside a pouch, chandelier earrings the size of baseballs sat nestled next to shiny gold bangles and a ring to match. I held up the necklace and let the chain fall through my fingers.

"Put that down, *Bachem*," my father said. "Don't invite thieves."

"*Baba*, what is this?"

"There's this, too." He pulled out another envelope.

Out came a second gold ensemble, this one laden with tiny gems. "I bought these years ago, for your wedding," he said. "But your mother and I, well we don't know when you will marry...or if you will marry, *Bachem.*"

The Afghan girls I'd grown up with had long ago married. They had families and houses, husbands and cars. I barely had a career. I lived in an apartment with roommates. At 26, I was already past my prime.

The closer I got to 30, the more my mother emphasized that my time to snag a husband and start a family was passing me by. This, of course, was by Afghan standards. By my standards, I was right where I wanted to be. I was living with college friends and we were all in the early throes of forging ahead with careers in the entertainment industry. We lived in Los Angeles and spent our weekends hopping from industry parties, to favorite dive bars, to random homes in the hills where it was possible to run into anyone you'd seen in a movie. Marriage was not in the cards.

"You can keep whichever gold set you want. The one you don't keep is for your brother, for his bride."

"*Baba*, he's only 22. If you give it to him now, he's gonna give it to some girl he's dating and he'll never see it again. Let mom hold on to it." It had always bothered me how preoccupied my culture was with marrying young women off, while young men were free to date all they wanted.

"Maybe you're right," he said.

On my visits home I changed the subject every time my father brought up marriage. When my mother told me to take tea out to my father in his garden and sit with him, it was a sure sign that a serious discussion would ensue. The discussion was almost always about my future and the possibility of my moving back home. Inevitably the conversation would turn to marriage and my fear was that mine would be arranged. And why was it a fear? Because those same Afghan girls I'd grown up with – the ones with the families, homes, cars and husbands – had all had arranged marriages.

"I have things I want to do Dad," I'd tell him. "Things I need to accomplish. I mean look at me. I'm just a baby. I'm not even done with school. What business do I have getting married? I want to travel the world and interview Gorbachev. There's so much I haven't done yet."

My father hated it when I called him "Dad." It was too American for him.

"Who would want to marry you with your sharp tongue anyway."

That line, always stung. It implied I was somehow less-than as a young woman. It implied I was combative – the kind of woman my culture found distasteful and undesirable. But as long as my father believed that I would be a tough sell, I didn't have to worry about making anybody's dinner or ironing any underwear. Yes, underwear.

Years later, when I finished college and moved to Santa Monica in pursuit of my career, my mother would let me know just how serious those chats over tea were. "You had suitors," my mother said while we were on the phone one sunny afternoon. "We had families who called to ask if we would give you away."

In my awkward teenage years, the young Afghan girls that showed up with their parents, for tea or dinner, always outshined me by a mile. I was dumpy. I sported a uni-brow. I wore hand-me-downs from boy cousins. They had lush, perfectly blow-dried hair and wore the current fashions. I was a tomboy. They were real girls.

My parents' friends only seemed to take note of how hard I worked around the house and how much I helped my mother. "She's such a good daughter." They'd say. "See how she washes those dishes! She must be like a right hand to you! What a *sturdy* child!" I never got over that one, sturdy. But I was. I was the kind of prize cattle the farmers in the old country might find worth investing in. I served my parents, I helped them run the household and take care of my little brother. I respected my elders. What's more, I'd left for college and *actually gone to college.* For all the young Afghan-American women of my generation who'd ended up married, there were also the ones who'd run away in rebellion or worse, run off with boyfriends who'd gotten them pregnant. Those girls were also "away at college." Generally in "med school."

"Someone took a picture of you at the funeral you went to in Los Angeles – the one you attended with your Aunt Zohra," my mother said to me on the phone that day. "They wanted you for their oldest. I guess the mother passed the picture around to all her relatives and friends until someone recognized that you were our daughter. *She tracked down our phone number and she called the house to speak to your father!*" My mother was laughing, remembering the absurdity of it all. But it wasn't absurd, this is how girls got given way, this was how young women were married off to families they barely knew, even in America. "Anyway, your father said you were busy with your studies and you weren't interested."

All those conversations over tea, I never fully understood that when my father called me outside, it was serious business. I'd treated those conversations flippantly. My father, being who he was, never indicated outright that someone had come calling. Instead, he asked questions about what I wanted to do with my life, and who I wanted to be. During

every exchange in the garden my father gauged my answers carefully in order to determine what to say to the family that came courting.

On all those occasions, my parents – really my father because the power to marry me off lay mostly in his hands – had let me be. And that was astonishing, because growing up, I never felt I had any agency over my life. Most young women of my generation, the generation that arrived here as young girls from a war-torn Afghanistan in the 1980s, and the generation that had been first born in America in those early years, felt the same. We worked hard to gain our parents' trust so that we might be allowed to leave our homes someday and go to college or pursue careers. Though we were growing up in America, that decision was rarely in our hands. Those kinds of aspirations were something we held close, quietly. Most of us were waiting for the inevitable. The bold ones made a run for it, for their sake, never to be heard from again.

To think that back then I had any agency over my future was noteworthy, because growing up, marriage had been weaponized. My own mother often threatened me if I didn't do as I was told, if I didn't learn that obedience was a necessary trait for a young woman in an Afghan family – a *Muslim* family. When I failed at being a dutiful daughter, all I heard was: *If you'd grown up in Afghanistan, your father's family would've married you off to a cousin already!*

I was my parents' prize cattle. I was a success. And according to my mother, *I was sought after.*

So I didn't make it a habit to fail. I was a good daughter. I was proud to keep my parents in high standing in our community. Every time I came home from university on a break my parents paraded me around as proof that I was away *studying*, not off with a boyfriend knocked up. They did this because when a young woman left home, that's what people in the community whispered. It's how they punished parents who dared to let daughters go.

Every step of the way, the onus was on the girl to prove she was trustworthy enough to carry her parent's reputation out into the world. That weighty responsibility began long before she might even dream of setting foot in that world. And no one knew that better than me...

"Go ahead, ask her." My mother looked at me. Then back at my father. She stood behind him at the kitchen sink, yellow gloves dripping with greasy dishwater.

"She wouldn't lie to me. I saw the car."

My father stood stiff, eyes glaring. "Who gave you a ride home?"

The panic nailed me in place. I tried to breathe. It wasn't the time to have a tell.

"Who was it?"

"*Baba, it was Julie*."

"I'm going to ask you one more time."

I'd looked at him bewildered, as if I hadn't understood what he was asking. As if he were the stupid one.

"It was Julie," my mother repeated.

"It was a *white car*," my father said.

"Dad, Julie's car is white." And it was. Julie was my best girlfriend. Julie had a white Ford Maverick. She'd idle her car at our curb every morning until I jumped in and we rumbled away. She just never dropped me off. That was Andy's job – and he was a best friend too, but he wasn't a girl.

"*Who was the boy?*"

It was my senior year of high school in Northern California's East Bay, and part of what made it bearable was my friendship with Andy. Part of that friendship included riding around in his old Mustang convertible. For nearly a year Andy had been dropping me off around the corner from my house. I'd walk home the rest of the way pretending I'd walked home from school. But on this day, this one time, we'd been careless.

Pulling out of the school parking lot and heading down the boulevard toward my neighborhood, we'd spent so much time laughing that Andy had forgotten I wasn't like all the other girls he knew. And so had I, because I'd let that old Mustang roar down my street and up to the walkway that delivered me to my door. I was like any other American teenager getting a ride home from her best friend. Except I wasn't.

"That wasn't a boy, was it?" my mother asked when I'd walked into the kitchen and kissed her hello. "Mom, I'm not stupid." I'd scanned the contents of the fridge, hoping she really hadn't seen who was in the front seat with me. And that's where we'd left it until my father walked in and called me out.

"*Who was the boy?*" he repeated.

"There was no boy."

My father had trailed us from the high school parking lot to the

house. Unbeknownst to me, he was there to pick up band equipment for my little brother's upcoming school concert. It was there in that parking lot, as he stood loading equipment into the van that he saw me in Andy's arms. It was there that he saw Andy open the car door before guiding me in. And it was from there that he'd followed us, watching me in that convertible as Andy drove me to the door. His duty was that of a father and he wanted to be there to witness the worst of what he thought his daughter – what I – was about to do with an eighteen-year-old, blond-haired, blue-eyed boy.

He put the terror in the air, but it was my mother who came at me crazy with the first blow to my face.

"Liar," she wailed as she pounded me with her fists. "*You made a liar out of me!*"

My mother allowed me my little white lies, about friends, about school, about teenage life as an Afghan girl in America. But on this day, I had crossed a boundary.

She stood by as my father dragged me by the hair into my room.

Screaming and crying was useless. I had been caught. It didn't matter that Andy was my friend, that he'd hugged me to console me after a bad day. That bad days at school were something I suffered often because moving between two worlds is exhausting for a young woman. What he cared about was the boy, and how the boy would reflect on me, and how I would reflect on the family, and how the family would be humiliated in our community.

Where my father came from, family honor and community respect hung in the balance when a daughter's virginity was in question, and being found with a boy, being found with Andy, put my virginity in question. By my father's standards and by the standards of the tribe from which he came, the *Pashtuns*, I had violated the most important tribal pillar, *Nang and Namoos – honor and dignity*. My actions had put his reputation at risk. It was the worst kind of fire a girl could play with.

In my room, the harder I fought the incoming assaults, the harder the assaults became. The harder and faster a father hits you, the less you feel it. You float away. Disengage. His hand gripped my hair and yanked it in one direction and then another. I felt the tension in my neck as he jerked me around violently.

I took the beating quietly until I could hold it in no more, and then I began screaming as the objects of my room flew past my eyes: pink ribbons from glass ballet slippers hanging on the wall, candles and a small brass cat on my bureau, a collage of '90s supermodels: Cindy, Linda, Christy, Naomi.

"*Whore*," my mother kept screaming. Her venom gutted me.

I'd humiliated her. Dragged her into my lie and put her in harm's way. In our community, my sin was hers.

It did no good to say that we lived in America and that boys and girls, men and women could be friends. There would be no selling my father on equality or feminism – he'd cite our Mormon neighbors, his Catholic friends, orthodox religious practices in the U.S. where young men and women were not to mix unless the intention was marriage. If everybody else had rules, why not us?

My virginity was a matter of my father's honor, and by extension, the family's honor. Those Afghan girls that were "away at college," they'd humiliated their parents. People laughed behind their backs. Every time those parents entered rooms, the whispers kicked up, the gossip machines went into overdrive – the dishonor was dragged into public view. Even if their daughters came back. Even if their daughters repented. Even if they became the most pious girls on earth, they'd always be known as the parents of whores.

Andy was not my boyfriend, but it wasn't uncommon for fathers to go after their daughters, as well as their supposed boyfriends. So many young girls ran away with their lovers – left town, and hid in cities devoid of Afghan communities. One Afghan knows a million other Afghans who know your parents. And if your parents want to find you and exact their revenge, they will.

With every *thwack*, the knuckles covering my head bled a little more. How could I have been so stupid. So careless. *He's just a friend... He's just a friend, I swear I didn't do anything wrong...He's just a friend*. Fists and feet came at me hard and heavy, over and over again.

And then it was over.

There are things you don't like to remember after a beating, hair matted with blood, the color of bruised and swollen skin. The way the body remains in the fetal position long after everyone has left the room.

In the days that followed, I lived in the isolation of my room. I went to school and avoided my friend. I came home. I ate my meals alone in my room. To my family, I was dead. In that isolation, I passed the time by reading, talking to myself, trying to concentrate on homework and

laying under the covers, praying, praying, praying to God, to *Allah*, to be released. I spent nights manically awake constructing escape scenarios. But where would I go? How would I get there? Was this why my father had refused to teach me to drive?

I had applied to several schools up and down the California coast and if I could get a scholarship, I'd be home free. But what if I didn't get in? What if I did and couldn't go? Leaving for college was predicated on trust. Everything in an Afghan girl's life was predicated on trust.

One month passed.

Then two.

I took to having entire conversations with myself – in the presence of my family. Acting out each family member's role and response. No one batted an eye. My madness was not disconcerting. Loneliness can sink you into the ground like an asteroid hitting earth at great velocity. The world goes quiet but your thoughts are too loud. Your body feels like a live wire flailing on asphalt, waiting to hit water and spark an explosion. There is you. And there are those four walls with a door.

At month three my mother broke rank. She instructed me to beg my father's forgiveness.

Beg? But I hadn't done anything wrong.

By *American standards*, my mother countered.

I had ridden in a car with a boy. Not lost my virginity on prom night.

You are not American. You knew exactly what you were doing. Go to your father. Admit what you did.

And so, it was back to that garden where my father always took tea.

Come evening he'd sit contemplatively at a small café table with his face to the sky or fixated on the flowers he'd curated. This particular season it was snapdragons. His table sat in front of a lush wall of green ivy that had me imagining for years that a secret doorway was hidden somewhere beneath the vines just like in, The Secret Garden. I watched him from the screen door as he took in the smell of his roses and watched his snapdragons sway in the wind.

"Go to him," my mother said, quietly handing me the tray of tea. Tea service comes with a good daughter. It's built into the contract.

I walked slowly, careful not spill. But as soon as I saw the blade of the dirty silver object on the table, panic overtook me. I tried not to shake as I set the tray down next to the ax. I exhaled, careful to keep steady. Before my father, whose eyes I felt watching my every move, I set down a porcelain saucer embellished with pink flowers, and landed a tea cup gently atop it. I kept my eyes low.

Every Afghan girl knows never to look an angry father in the eyes.

1. Out of respect.

2. Out of fear.

"*Baba Jan*," I began, my eyes still to the ground. My voice barely a whisper. "I want to..."

"Get on your knees," he interrupted.

He struck the ground in front of him with the ax's sharp edge and lodged it into the dirt.

"Get on your knees. Right here," he said as he dragged the blade toward himself.

I flinched as he swung the ax with a flick of his wrist, catching the neck in his opposite hand. I fell to my knees – unable, unwilling to comprehend what was happening.

Was this real? I could feel my mother watching from the kitchen. Did she know? I tried not to whimper and held my breath as the tears began streaming down my face. This was America. He wouldn't kill me. Would he? *This is a fear tactic. This is a fear tactic*.

We tell ourselves all sorts of things to keep from believing the unbelievable.

"Tell me everywhere you have been with this boy," he said, pointing the ax at my head.

"*Baba*, I swear I haven't been anywhere with him."

"Tell me. Tell me what you have done with this boy."

"*Baba*, please, nothing has happened, I swear it, I swear."

"Has this boy touched you?"

"No. *Baba*, please. I haven't done anything. We haven't done anything. Please believe me."

So much politeness when on the precipice of death. But every Afghan girl knows a god will not show benevolence unless you politely beg for your life.

"You've proven to us that you cannot be believed. You are a liar."

"Please, *Baba*, Please."

"If you lie to me now, I will kill you."

"I swear it *Baba*, we were just friends. In America people can be friends, a boy and girl can be *friends*. He's in all my classes, you can ask my teachers. *Please* believe me."

Though my father had grown up on a farm in the Nangarhar province of Afghanistan, he'd travelled the world, he'd studied in America as a young man, he'd been the go-to doctor in the heyday of Afghanistan's international diplomatic scene. He may not have agreed with the premise of friendship between the sexes, but he knew it was possible. Whether in Afghanistan, or out of it. I refused to believe that my world-weary father would kill me for the sin of friendship, even if it was with a boy.

On and on we went. I swore that I was still a virgin. I swore Andy had not violated my honor. I swore I had invited nothing. I swore the family honor remained intact.

My father laid out a choice: I could marry Andy and legitimize whatever it was that had transpired between us, or I could pursue my education as had been my goal all these years. Of course my choice was college. Despite my choice, he hammered harder and harder for details that just didn't exist, until I finally collapsed at his feet, kissing them and asking, *begging*, for forgiveness.

"I swear by *Allah*, again and again that I am good girl. I am a good and honorable daughter. I will never shame myself or my family again. I'll go to school, I'll make you proud. *Please Baba, please…I don't want to marry Andy, I don't want to marry anybody…*"

I held the necklace low in my lap and ran my fingers over the golden filigree. I'd never held such heavy jewelry. This was not your average 24 karat gold, this was pure Middle Eastern gold. This was the kind that had that deep burnt glow of the sun. The kind parents bought expensive plane tickets for in order to travel to faraway places and procure the specifics necessary for a woman's wedding day. My father had done this. For me.

I had gone to many Afghan weddings with my parents when I was younger, when I lived at home. At every one I'd watched the bride glide in with the groom to Ahmad Zahir's, *Osta Buro*, a romantic song played at all Afghan weddings about slowing down a lover's walk, slowing down the night, prolonging the pleasure of a new flirtation and courtship. I had watched as one bride after another sat before her mother and had her hand painted in henna and wrapped in golden fabrics. I'd watched these brides showered in gold by parents who were sad to see them off – sad to see them become someone else's daughter. They were young women on the journey of a lifetime, from their father's home, to their husband's. Few having ever known anything in between.

I spent my first summer after college back in that old house where I grew up. It had become a time capsule, unchanged. But my experience there had changed me. Leaving had changed me. I learned to drive that summer. And eventually, I drove farther and farther away from that home until I could no longer see it in my rear view. No more tea service. No more good daughter/bad daughter. No more threats of arranged marriages.

"*Baba*," I said, looking at the necklace and then at him. "Are you sure you want to give me this now?"

"Why not?"

"It feels so extravagant. What am I going to do with jewelry like this? I don't even have a place to wear it. Give it to mom."

"It has always belonged to you. Wear it somewhere nice," he said as he kissed my face.

"Maybe a wedding."

GRETCHEN ROCKWELL

Godzilla & I Declare Our Pronouns

in English, pronouns are prescriptive
to call someone by it is cruel
a person is not an it
even if that being
decides they prefer to exist
outside the boundaries
when i came out
raw grit on my tongue
so do I call you 'it' or what?
which devastated / suddenly
all my attack helicopter
fears in the flesh
even a strike can be
alive / a force of its own
a fight is the worst response
deliver your terms
insist they accept
what the body is

in Japanese, Godzilla is an *it*
Godzilla is not human but
Godzilla is still a being &
has the capability to destroy
as we all do / i suppose
in one way or another /
seeing the rubble, the ruination
the first question was
what to call the body
towering against the sky
nightmares roaring overhead
the impossible come true, come to us
without fear or cruelty
meeting a myth / a bomb
i meant meet Godzilla
with respect & acknowledgement
knowing what the body is capable of
everything it holds

MONIKA ZOBEL

Sprachenkleber

Telescopes are certain of what they capture,
know how to bring down the universe in one frame.

Like boiling water, our words rise, evaporate
as a vessel for something that needs softening.

To soften these trees and these ridges, I called
them *Augenblick, Zaubertrick, Sekundenkleber.*

If we glued all the words of one language to one
long chain, would we know how to describe

the whiplash between here and there, *du und ich?*
A master word for each language, like a shot

fired in a forest that meant to be *für sich*. We were
always hell to ourselves, definition and question

in one *Atemzug*, because words could only bring
down what had already stumbled in the dark. I dare you

to write of *Fernweh* and *Fremdsein* before it hurt,
before it grew into the blue of our sentences.

Someone stumbled across the planets and wanted
to say *ich und du*. In a telescope we spot ourselves – deaf

and distant, but firmly stitched to the lining of words.
Whisper *Auge, Blick*, feel the water soar in our throats.

FRANCES PARK

Slow Dancing with Stan

ONCE G and I decided to divorce, I began slow dancing with Stan. Not with Stan the man – whoever he is today – but the golden boy next door back when my twelve-year old heart was spinning like a top. Now slow down... slow down... slow down, girl, and just dance... The end of my five-year marriage was anticlimactic, less traumatic than breaking a crown. That's what happens when love waters down to weak-tea. You end up with a non-love story and maybe a few cryptic notes. The good news? No heartbreak. The bad news? No heart to break.

I'm not saying I'm fine. Got a different kind of heart failure. If I close my eyes, maybe, just maybe, I'll come out of this coma and feel like my old self again and quit beating myself up over how I missed the signs and lost my heart to someone I didn't really know.

But screw all that. I'd rather be slow dancing with Stan.

If I could color in a little background, just to make it real for me again. Feel my heart. The neighborhood was new, four model homes and a mailbox at the corner entrance; green lawns, no trees. Our house was a yellow colonial with forest green shutters. His, a white-split level with black shutters. A bedroom window upstairs offered me a bird's-eye view of his backyard, specifically a patio that often served as a basketball court for Stan and his friends. The sound of thirteen-year old boys laughing and shooting hoops had me – a bookish, bespectacled girl – flying. Adjust glasses, zone in. He was taller and blonder than the others, with the look of a teen heartthrob and the moves and manners of a prince. Naturally, I wasn't the only girl in the neighborhood crushing on Stan, we all were. Did I have a chance? A chance for what? Really, I just wanted to dance.

Notes.

One late winter night, I was put off that G had parked a good five blocks from our destination, a tapas bar. Freezing but couldn't bitch. We were brand new together and he was buoyant, a giddy shadow on the sidewalk as we walked in the lit-up city, swinging my hand like a schoolboy with his first girl. *I feel so happy*, he kept saying. Overkill, but I was charmed.

One early spring morning as I was gathering my things to go home, he caught me off guard by playfully pushing me onto his bed and falling on top of me. While he whispered– *I really meant what I said, I love you, would do anything for you*– I stared back and blinked, taking in his face. He didn't want me to go, but I had to go which made me yearn for him when I drove away.

One late spring afternoon in Barnes & Noble, he took my arm for a dance in the aisle. Normally, I wouldn't put on a show but he was leading, and it was obvious by his moves he favored Burt Bachrach over Stevie Wonder. I thought G would always be this way: light, bright and embarrassingly corny.

That we lived two hours apart didn't stand in our way because we were perfect together – cerebral types who put pen to paper, though my work was soulful, not scholarly. Both liberal, both vegetarian. He was sweet and soft-spoken, just the way I like it. He wrote love letters, which I devoured because words mean a lot to me. He begged me to take a chance, which I did because it felt molecular. Poetic, even. *We were made for each other*, he said a thousand times. *You're the love of my life!* I loved it, began to broadcast it.

My friend Esther looked concerned over sushi at Nooshi, our favorite downtown spot. She knows everything in my love life, as it happens. "So soon? You two just met a couple months ago."

Stop. Take a break. Slow dance with Stan.

Stan's sister and I were the same age and I was often at their house. An upper-level sun-flooded kitchen off the deck set the tone for a happy if not hushed household, always a few degrees colder than mine in the summer, and for some reason, though my crush was four-season, it's always summer. Good vibes. Curiously, under their roof, she, not Stan, was my focus and I recall sitting with my friend at the piano in total awe of her fingers lightly plunking *Mrs. Brown, You've Got a Lovely Daughter*. Stan remained in the background, more her brother than the boy who made my heart do back-flips at the window. When he did come into view, he was unfailingly polite, always greeting me like an equal, not some punk. *Hi, Frances! How are you today?* Then my clouds would clear and I'd see him for who he was and my eyes would dance and dance and...

Notes.

Six months after we met, we got engaged and bought a decorative pink memory box at Home Goods to fill with mementos of our love. Pity the poor souls wandering around Costco and Whole Foods with lesser loves and no poetry and, hence, no pink memory boxes. Our weekends were delicious, every minute of every hour. We slept lip to lip and didn't move all night.

"Let's see that ring," Esther said, taking my hand. Back at Nooshi, catching up.

"It's beautiful," she murmured. But did she hesitate?

Of course she did.

Time to drum up the fantasy, a slo-mo whirl and twirl with the boy next door.

Catch your breath – there he is, right outside the bedroom window. The golden boy. His blond highness. Adjust glasses, zone in. All I feel is the longing in my heart.

Notes.

As it turns out, my husband and I were not made for each other. I'll spare you the blog and draw you a sketch: for me, it had to do with G's emotions, or lack of. His so-called love was more staged than real. When I needed it, it just wasn't there.

Among many turning points: The night I got word my great friend Tess was dying, he did not, did not, did not comfort me. He was a dead tree. Déjà vu: the night before we put Jefferson, my family's beloved dog, to sleep. Deadest tree in the forest.

We could talk politics, food, writing, just fine. Friends and family, too. But soul-to-soul? Dead trees don't talk.

That couple walking in the night, face-to-face on the bed, dancing in a bookstore, disappeared like shadows. I love you gave way to Luv ya. Texts with xos and heart emojis. He still inscribed, You are the love of my life! inside every special occasion card, and I'd smile every time. What fakery – his scribble, my smile – and there were no special occasions. Cards would sit on the mantle for a week before I'd toss them into the pink memory box, never to see the light of day again.

We became the poorest of souls.

More notes.

One winter afternoon G was making the hundred-mile drive here. The weather report was calling for flurries, but I kept looking out my window, praying for a blizzard. Desperate to be alone, I called him and said the snow was coming down heavy now and he should turn around before the roads got worse. He did. Granted, I felt a little guilty for the rest of the snowless day – but my little white lie brought me as close to wedded bliss as I'd felt in years.

Curiously, one not-so-long ago Sunday in Wegmans, we were shopping for the usual: good bread, bananas, his German coffee, etc. As we approached the floral department, I was shocked to get a final glimpse of the old him – youthful, uber buoyant – rushing up to the florist with, *I want to buy flowers for my wife!*

The next time Esther and I met up for sushi at Nooshi, I relayed the Wegman's incident with her. I thought maybe she'd say something like *Oh, he still loves you* or at least, *Aw, how thoughtful* so I could feel better about the marriage, if only for tonight. Instead, she frowned.

"That's annoying."

Yeah, I suppose it was a bit over-the-top.

End of notes. A true yawn compared to the lush capture of slow dancing with Stan.

Watch us, world, we're moving in mist, in moonlight, on a heavenly plane where only twelve-year old girls in buttercup yellow dresses go. I'm in heaven here, safe in his arms where our romantic round and rounds never advance beyond a slow dance, not even to a kiss. Because it was always more the dream of Stan, than Stan. Something pure and innocent to believe in.

One post-note.

There *was* a sign. Last week while rummaging around in my jewelry box, I came across a lone heart-shaped earring. This time the symbolism wasn't lost on me.

In a charming little seaside gift shop in the late '90s, I fell in love with a pair of mother-of-pearl earrings with silver hooks. I wore them every day, everywhere, for years. Not only were they heart-shaped, they

had the swing and the sheen, the look I love. When I wore them, I felt like me.

A few weeks after meeting G, I noticed one was missing from my earlobe and freaked. After tearing my condo upside down with no luck, I called TJ Maxx where earlier that day I'd been trying on clothes. They checked their lost-and-found box – no luck. What about the dressing rooms, I pressed them. They checked – no luck. Two weeks later, I called TJ Maxx again, to see if my missing earring might have turned up in a broom or a snagged sweater. No luck.

To be fair, G did purchase a pair of silver heart-shaped earrings as a replacement. They were exquisite but not the same. When I wore them, I didn't feel like me.

Enough. The marriage died. *Pfft*. The good news? No heartbreak. The bad news? No heart to break. Yet it's not about finding love again, it's about feeling alive again. So give me a gorgeous reverie not-of-this-earth any old day. Who cares if it's too abstract to be true, let me cling to the memory until my heart, for whatever it's worth, circles back to me. Because someday this period of my life will fade like my love for a stranger. But slow dancing with Stan? Oh, man. *That* will last forever.

So dance, girl, dance...

WILL CORDEIRO

Night Swimming

The waves disrobe
a hissing edge; a polished shore
undoes lush sky; one stone

now skips, elopes & skips
a-crux the star-tongued fathoms
curling solid yet unstable –
fabric fraying every lip
each over-spilling wave would fable.

Siren, singer, gull-picked bones,
when the iron strikes, cold fire
shines. Bluer for this moon-lashed
wash, each rueful bottle
fingers gravel; loured, smooth,
the tide-pools slather.

Mucus, mollusk, spine and lapis:
soon a fulcrum tips the atlas –
murex, mackerel, lucifugous
bottom creatures exacting light
from their own inner oxidation.

Ink-dark brindles,
relic-relish,
mermaid trash and jellied spoor – all this
sharking shocking brine-sap scatter
hurries down the sea's trapdoor.

MADELEINE CRAVENS

Notes on an Archive

We made an archive ended it nightly our human hands
awed us as we cut through the darkness
rearranged boxes of sea glass the glass wings
of insects medical instruments proof that we stood
in this house on this line

But I did not visualize each exact copy
I did not maintain the most accurate records
I did not keep the lights on to the bad things in the back room
birds lined flat in a drawer

Now I descend to the wreck of molars and bone tools
bits of wire I needed you and twine I become you
small feathers and you are beside me completely
my love my archive pure diorama
under museum glass and one mounted flower
marking our entrance into the image field
I remember you neatly one piece of red hair

JENNIFER BATTISTI

Rotten

IT'S ME! I am the rotten egg! The last single woman on earth. A window pane without glass. A thick breezy reminder hollows through my four-square heart. I am the lemon wedge never squeezed. It's just me, braless in flannel on my Christmas card. One night stand holds three quarters and a pocket warmed matchbook I've kept from my last round of speed dating. The buzzer kept interrupting right when I was getting to my good parts.

Beavers spend their whole lives trying to wall off a winter surge. They are such solitary and efficient avoiders. I let the silt blast me at traffic lights, I am gravel-toothed in waiting rooms, staring at the blank spot where my emergency contact should be. I fill in my favorite lotto numbers and the name of a woman who makes the best tamales.

My misplaced heartache is a runaway screw from the box that builds the New Improved *You!* Its disappearance holds up the whole assembly. All of my old boyfriends bump into one another looking for it. They roll on their backs under the bed like grief mechanics. Wipe their greasy hands across perplexed foreheads. They ransack my father's work bench for a twin. The grooves are similar, but it's an older model.

Everywhere I go the waiter brings me two knifes and no spoons. I get the message: all of the tasks must be completed with bare hands and plenty of serrated reflection. I feel as phony as a dusty bouquet of fake tulips in a storefront window nobody passes by anymore. I long for someone to drunk dial me, inconvenience me with breakfast preference, dodge my serious questions in ways that include a knock-knock joke and ass grabbing. At a low point I sign up for a dating app called *Which Came First*. Now, I live inside a tiny slot machine and am as lusty as a deviled egg.

EMILY HOLLAND & CRISTI DONOSO

Systems in Space: An Interview with Elizabeth Lindsey Rogers

Elizabeth Lindsey Rogers's debut poetry collection, *Chord Box* (University of Arkansas Press, 2013), was a Lambda Literary Award finalist. Her poems and creative nonfiction have appeared in *Best American Nonrequired Reading, Best American Travel Writing, Missouri Review, Prairie Schooner, The Rumpus,* and elsewhere. A former Kenyon Review Fellow, she currently lives in Washington, DC, with her wife and son.

The Tilt Torn Away from the Seasons, her new collection, imagines a human mission to Mars, a consequence of our own planet's devastation from climate change. Dystopian and ecopoetic, this collection of poetry examines the impulse – and danger – of the colonial mindset, and the ways that gendered violence and ecological destruction are linked.

FOLIO

Picking up on all the different forms that you use in this collection – the Q&A format, a few crowns of sonnets, which are so impressive, and then you even structure some of the poems moving from right to left. Could you talk about how organizing the book with some of these forms in mind sort of framed the type of foreign landscape of the poems?

ELIZABETH LINDSEY ROGERS

This became kind of a signature form for the book in a way. You see it in the first poem, "The Frontier," and then it reoccurs periodically throughout the collection. "The Frontier" is actually the first poem I wrote for the collection, which is unusual in that way. That poem is about the experience of looking at the panorama of Mars for the first time. I wanted something formally that would move across the page and use the full field of the page because I wanted to capture that sense of the openness of that landscape. Something about jamming the poem up against the left margins just wasn't going to do that for me.

With the staggering of the lines, you get a stair step effect and it kind of mirrors the raggedness of the terrain, which is unpolished and harsh. In terms of the right justification – I felt that I needed something formally that would capture the sense of disorientation that one might feel when looking at another planet or being on another planet. The right justification mirrors that in a way – your eyes adjust easily in terms of how to read it, but it takes a minute, and it has a little bit of that floating, unmoored quality that I was trying to capture. What would this landscape do to you physically and emotionally? That's the question that I was trying to answer.

I found the sonnet crown was especially useful for this material because of the way you think of the way space and the universe circles back on itself, which is exactly what the sonnet crown does. You have that last line that gets carried over, so you're not really ending a thing, you're kind of just circling back, in a way. That was one reason that I liked the sonnet crown for this particular book. I'd never worked with them before this book. They're also quite generative, which is helpful as a writer. You get to the end of something and you automatically know the start at the next point. I'm a fan of sequences in general. I'm a big fan of the really capacious poem that can contain everything, that's super long. And that's not something that's super popular in contemporary poetry – sequences are hard to publish, Long poems are hard to publish – everyone wants that 20-line poem that they can fit onto one page. I'm more interested in long poems because of all the things they can contain.

And I'm always trying to give myself new challenges when I'm writing. As I was coming into this manuscript, I needed to force myself to think of what else a poem could be. There are several poems that take the form of an exit interview or an application questionnaire. The Q&A form is really generative, maybe in the same way that the sonnet crown is. I also wanted to mimic documents that could be part of the pseudo-narrative of this book. Who are these people and how did they get to this place? What kind of questions were they asked beforehand? What kinds of regrets do they have later? And that Q&A form was really useful in getting into that persona a little deeper.

FOLIO

And then going through the poems in each section, we're always thinking back to the idea that there are many different voices in each one. It gives that scale of who is included in this new civilization and who, maybe, is left behind. How did you start imagining this other possible civilization?

ELIZABETH LINDSEY ROGERS

I never imagined that it was just one person speaking. To me, the speakers of these poems – I don't have specific narratives for each of them. The book doesn't really work that way. It's not a novel in verse. Some people wanted it to have a single narrative with a through line and characters, but that's not really what's going on here. I do imagine that the speakers are all different and a lot of them are women, I think, just based on some of these experiences that get described.

It's a difficult question – there are poems in which a particular persona comes to front immediately. There's the Lolita character, who is like a pre-teen kind of whining about a bunch of stuff, but also that poem has a darker edge to it. You have poems like "Astrobleme," and to me that's a choral poem with multiple people speaking. And then you even have some poems where instead of the lyric "I" you have the "we" and those poems are more collective. Maybe one person is speaking for a group of people. I still don't know that much about the very specific speakers, it's still kind of a mystery to me. I like asking who are these people, what is it that they are doing here? It's kind of a choose your own adventure I think in that respect.

FOLIO

And that sense of mystery really permeates the poems – thinking back to the questionnaire poem, it's almost like you can sense that the mystery remains for both speaker and author. And it doesn't feel like you're writing anything with definite certainty – the answers in that poem are as much questions as they are "answers."

ELIZABETH LINDSEY ROGERS

Right. And whoever that person is doing the application form, the answers are a little bit off the wall, so you're like who is this person? I definitely imagine that person was dancing to the beat of their own drum, which is perfect in poetry. A poem needs to have that lyric strange strangeness. If all the connections are logical then the poem falls a little flat.

FOLIO

Talking about the two parts of the book, with the first part, The Frontier, we get this sense of space as the "final frontier" and this colonization aspect, and thinking about where humanity can go. In Blueless Bay, we see almost a pulling out and a looking back, in which we get the view from Mars, from this new civilization. What drew you to those two different viewpoints for the sections?

ELIZABETH LINDSEY ROGERS

The way that I see it now, it's very much in line with the things that you just said. The first section is really about the experience of the bizarre landscape, the sensual experience of it. And also then the colonizing impulse which is, as we know, fraught and dangerous – but kind of a reckoning with that colonial energy. It's really focused on the harshness of the landscape and what it takes to make a place habitable. You see that in the long poem, the "Ecopoiesis" poem, where there are a bunch of phases about how to build an ecosystem that feels sustainable.

At the end of that section, the poem "Arcadia, Mars" hints at some of the pitfalls of the colonial mindset. And that poem is also about sexual violence and the way that abuse and trying to control land eventually carries over to the people who live there. I was kind of edging towards the next section in that last poem. That last poem is a lot about the apocalypse that is colonialism.

In the last section you have people talking about their regrets. You have one poem that is about prison – an outcome of any civilization. That Alcatraz poem, for me, is the most depressing poem in that section. But then the end of that section opens up – there's not really a clear answer as to what happens to these people. But you get the sense that whatever they set out to do is not sustainable, because of environmental constraints, because of how evil colonialism is, because of what it means to be human. It's just not possible. I think some people will look to the end of that section and ask what happens? What is the conclusion? I don't really know. That's up to readers to think about.The last poem of

the collection is really focused on the human voice – there's that element of humanity at the end, but we don't really know what happens to these people other than it seems like whatever people set out to do, it didn't work in the end.

In terms of these two sections, the earlier version of the manuscript had three sections. All of the "Backflash" poems were in the middle section as a huge flashback to show what happened on the planet that we know that caused people to start looking elsewhere. It was a long section about environmental ruin. At some point someone pointed out to me that's not how memory works, you can't just have this section in the middle that gives the prequel to this story. Memory is fleeting and associative, why don't you have these backflash poems come up all throughout the collection instead of having them quarantined to one section? I was really resistant at first. I think that that was really good advice – to have the backstory be sort of fleeting and associative, coming up periodically.

FOLIO

You touch on two interesting things there – one has to do with those "Backflash" poems. There's a nonlinear way we get them in the collection, almost as if Mars would have a different sort of temporal sense than Earth. And then with the motif of the human voice throughout, there are a lot of moments that talk about how sound would carry differently in that atmosphere. How did you come up with those ideas of what life would be there? Was there a lot of research involved?

ELIZABETH LINDSEY ROGERS

I wouldn't say it was really research heavy. I did need to do a little research to get a sense of what the atmosphere conditions were like on that planet. I didn't need it to be 100% realistic, but I also didn't want it to be completely made up – it needed to be balanced and rooted in a kind of factual representation of what the planet is like.

One thing you mentioned is that there's a lot of references in the collection to how sounds carry on Mars, you see that come up in multiple poems, especially the human voice. It's a quintessential quality of being a human – having a voice, having language and communication. To suddenly have an atmosphere where that gets muted a little bit, it's kind of like a metaphor for what it means to survive in a really harsh place. My first book, *Chord Box*, was all about the tropes of music and sound. That obsession carried over into this book, it's the one link I can see between my old work and new work. I think of all the senses that we use in poetry, sound is the one that I'm most obsessed with, so lots of images related to sound come up.

FOLIO

And talking about sound and music brings us to the fugue poem, which is a musical form, but we also get this sort of layering effect on the page where you can read the overlap and you get that sense of the multiple voices in one poem, too.

ELIZABETH LINDSEY ROGERS

That poem is a sonnet crown, but I'd already done so many in the collection I was like I need to up my formal game here! I need to turn the sonnet form up a notch. In some ways it was a formal challenge. But I was also interested in not just having the end of the sonnet lead into the sonnet after, but actually having the next voice come in right before the other one would finish. It presents a little tension. Poems need formal tension.

I'm imagining this poem exists in two or more voices – I'm not really sure. It can be read with a pair of people trading back and forth or it can be more people than two. I've always loved the fugue as a musical form because there's this beautiful contrapuntal moment where the next voice is introduced and it mimics what came before but there's a moment of tension, there's a clash between what the first voice is doing and what the next voice is doing. I just wanted to see if I could do it on the page. It was a formal challenge that I assigned myself. Since there are so many sound images and so many references to sound and music in the collection, it made sense to bring in a musical form as kind of a finale.

FOLIO

Thinking now about the theme of this issue, one of the things that's amazing about your collection is that you not only touch on so many individual systems but that you're capturing these epics of movements that are so large and so complex – colonialism, exploration, climate change...

How did you go about figuring out what pieces of each of these systems you would capture, when you couldn't possibly capture the whole thing. What pieces were most important when you were trying to dive into those?

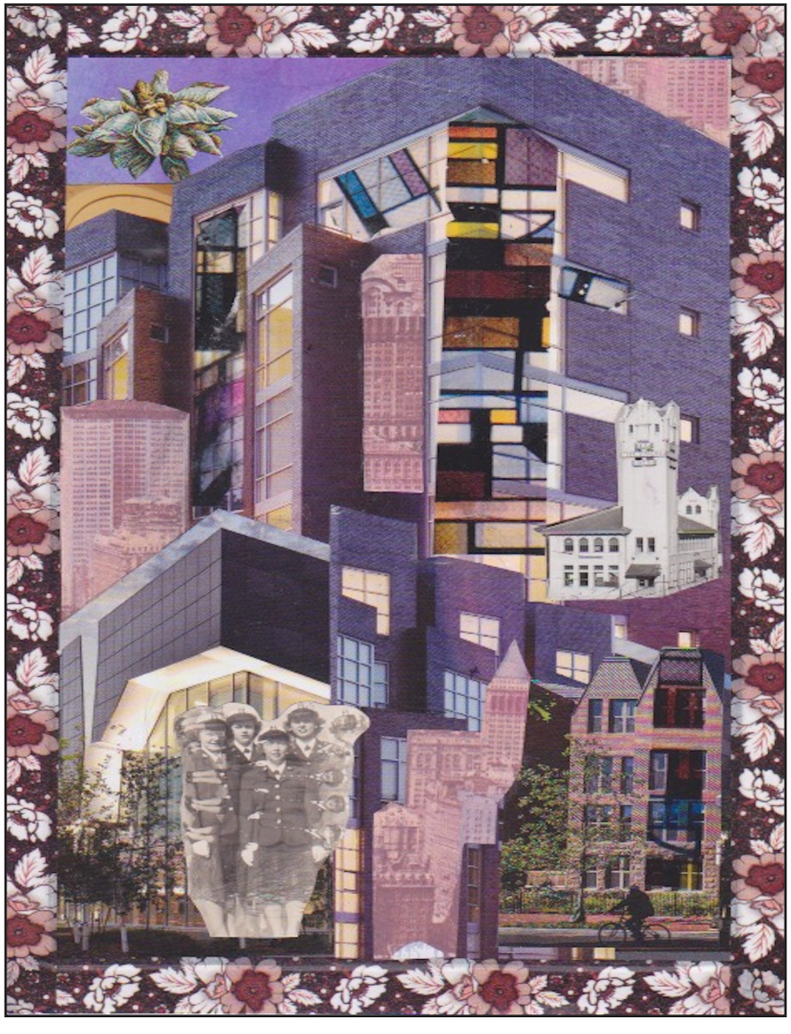
ELIZABETH LINDSEY ROGERS

The real subjects of this collection are not related to outer space or aliens or any sort of surface level subjects. For me the big subjects of the book are all these sort of systems that you're mentioning – colonialism, imperialism, environmental devastation, and patriarchy – all of these come up as part of this civilization that is being built. And civilization is itself a system that encapsulates some of what we're talking about. I had to let those come naturally. I didn't set out to write a post-colonial book or a book that was about climate change. I always start with the concrete – which for me was seeing those very first images of the surface of Mars. And then by association I get "Oh, this reminds me of the American West," so then what is the legacy of the American West?" What did the west look like before we colonized? You get into this colonialism, manifest destiny mindset. We embody that in a lot of our space travel. Through this way, these layers can be built. That becomes how the collection begins to access some of those bigger subjects.

The way those bigger systems are discussed in the collection is subtle – I hope people don't miss it. It's been challenging, for me – I gave my first reading with the book in hand and it became very difficult to explain enough context beforehand so that the audience could understand that this is not just a book about sci-fi. Really, Mars is actually just a metaphor in the whole collection. It becomes the vehicle by which these bigger systematic problems are addressed. It's just the vehicle, it's not the true subject of the book. Because I'm constantly trafficking in metaphor, I'm not taking on this systematic stuff head on all the time. It has to emerge from the language and from the concrete in the poem. Always around every poem there is a sort of layer that has to do with one of the systems that we're talking about. At the root of every poem there is colonialism, there's patriarchy, there's how environmental devastation IS connected to the way in which we control the bodies of women and non-binary people. Those are the real subjects, to me. I hope that that will come through for readers.

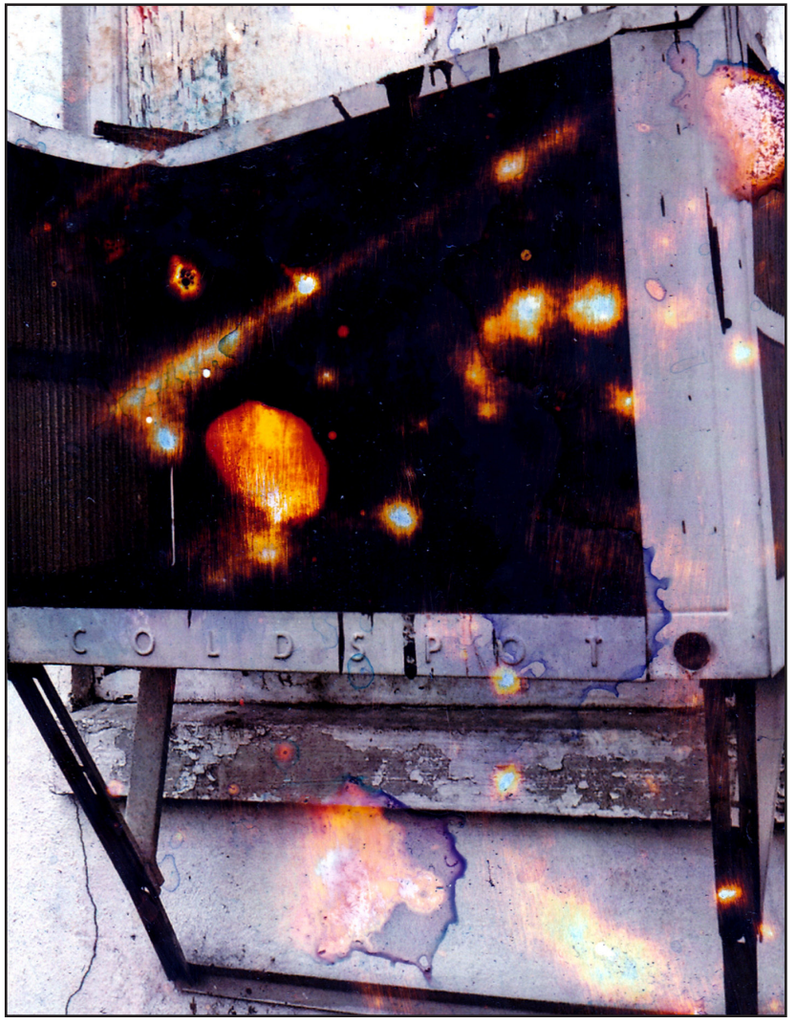
Sometimes I wish I was a little more directly political with the work, it's just not the way I am as a writer. I always have to move into a bigger subject rather than starting with it. I can't sit down and say "Ok, this is an anti-capitalist, anti-patriarchy rant, and it's going to be a poem and it's going to be a sonnet crown and it's going to be awesome." I just can't do that. But I'm also not satisfied with a poem that has one level of reading, really. I think if I had just looked at the landscape of Mars and written poems that were purely descriptive, that would have maybe been an exercise, but it wouldn't be able to make a book. There has to be a deeper subject at the end of every poem that has been moved into, it can't just be purely descriptive for me.

C. R. RESETARITS



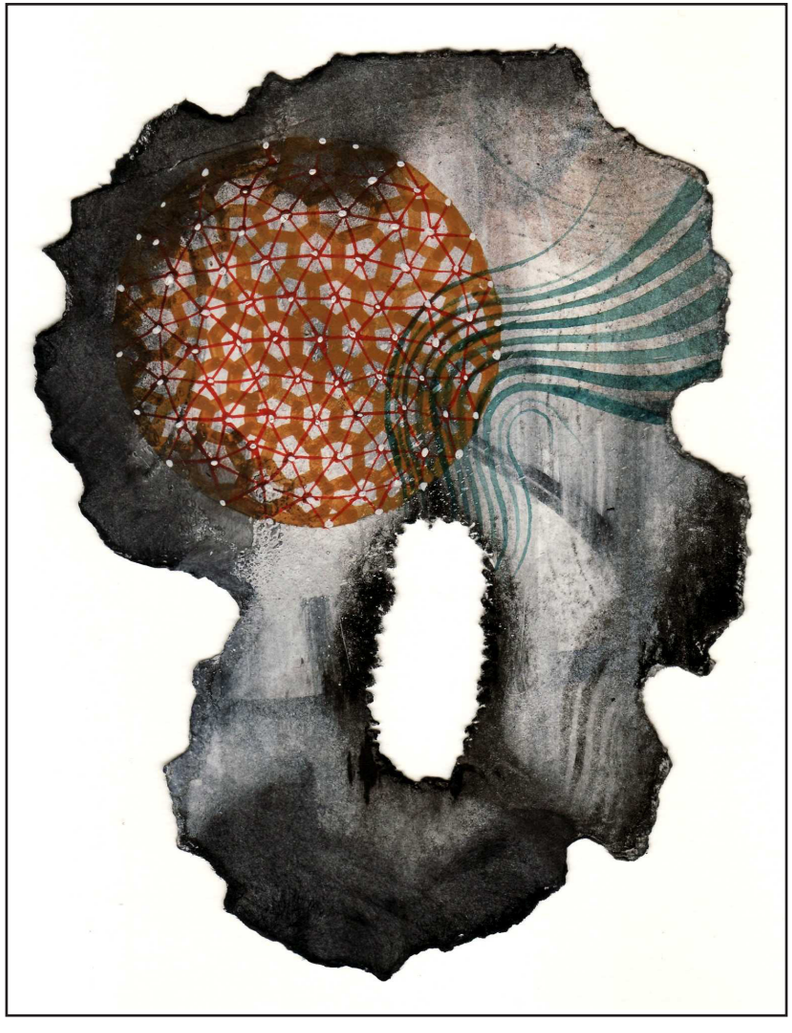
On the Town

BRETT STOUT



Shudder Towards the Apocalypse

KARL LORENZEN



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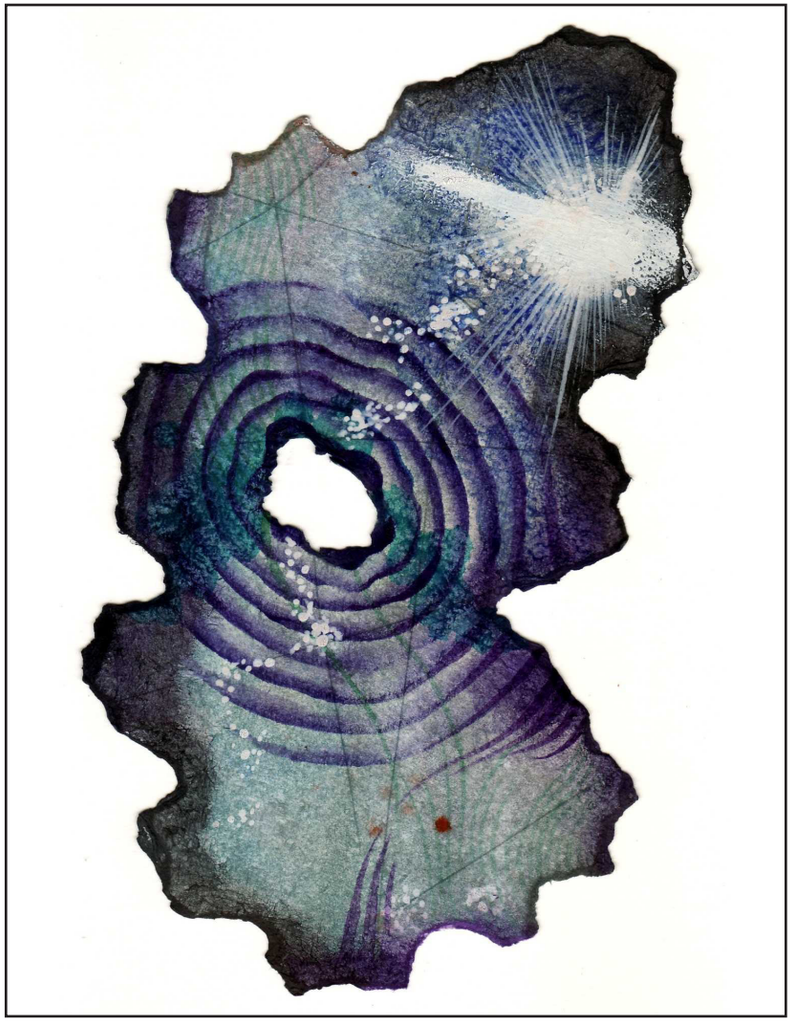

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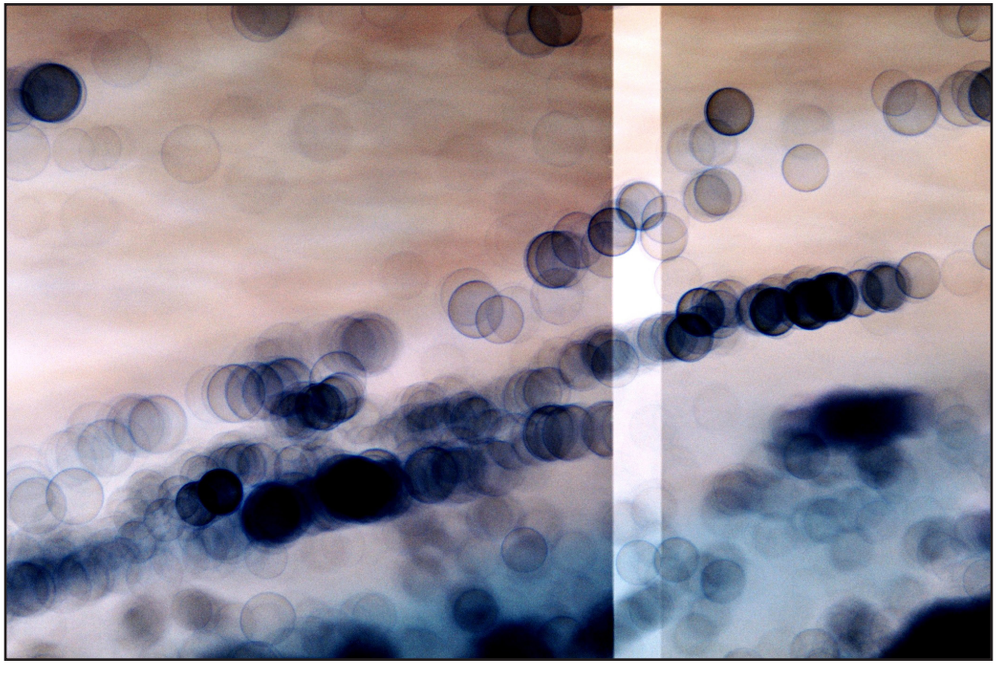
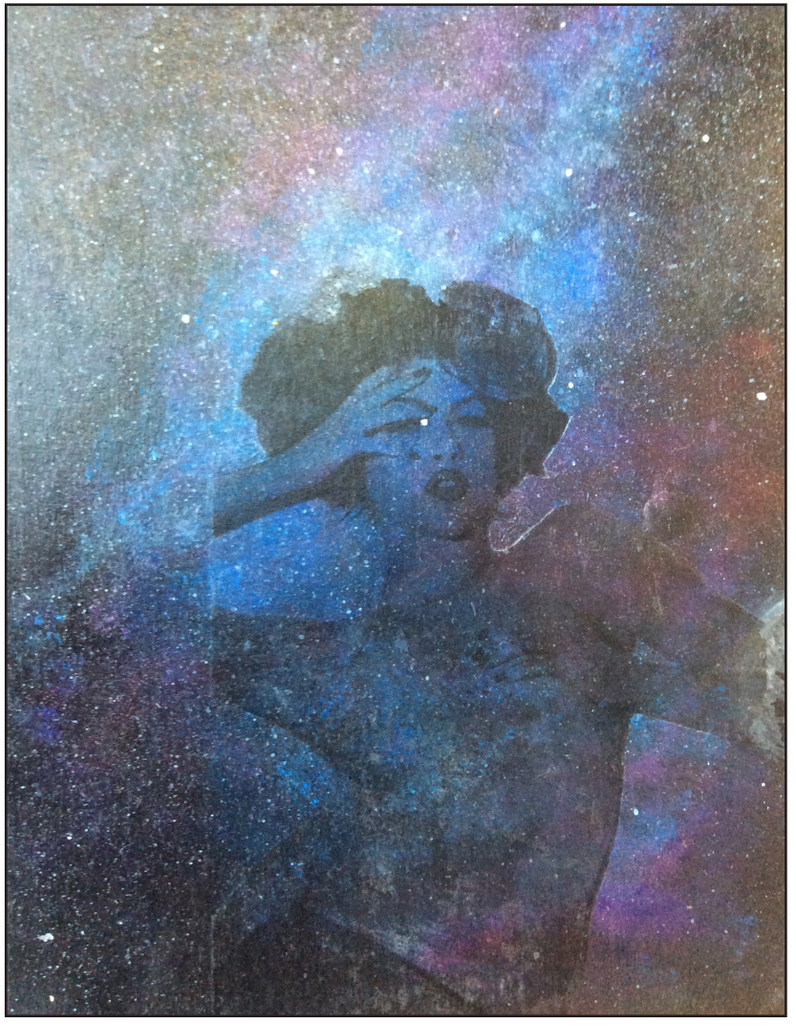


Transitory Space, Nova Scotia, Canada

FIERCE SONIA



Yes

REBECCA PYLE

Bringing Back a Moon Rock

EDITOR'S PRIZE FICTION

KRISTINA GORCHEVA-NEWBERRY

Gene Therapy

SOME WOMEN on my mother's side of the family possessed magic powers – that is they could hear, see, and feel things other people couldn't. For example, in June of 1941, right before the war broke out, my great grandmother, who'd just finished nursing her daughter, stretched in the grass and put her ear to the earth. She remained motionless for some time, but then jumped to her feet, scooped the baby in her arms, and ran through the field toward the village. As she reached her hut, she threw a blanket over the bed and started gathering her possessions, the few that she could carry. She piled shirts and underwear, cloth diapers and crib sheets, a small jar of lard, and a hunk of soap. She was about to tie the ends of the blanket together when she spotted her wedding picture on the wall, her husband's genial face next to hers. My great grandmother lifted the picture off the nail and added it to the hump of clothes on the bed. As she hoisted the bundle over her shoulder, she already knew that her husband, as well as the rest of the villagers, would be executed behind the old church, the village burnt to the ground.

Years later, when I asked my grandmother Grusha why her mother hadn't warned the others, including her husband, who was at work on a collective farm that day, she said, "There was no time. The first German planes appeared in the sky just as she pushed the boat into the river. It was a crippled boat too, the bottom had rotted, and so your great grandmother had to dump the water out with her shoes. She'd also fitted a broken tree branch into one of the smaller holes, tying me inside an old pillow case to the raised end, away from the water. The boat didn't have any oars and drifted downstream while my mother tried to steer it with her hands."

"How long did they drift like that?" I asked.

"Who knows," my grandmother shrugged. "Days, weeks. Until one morning she woke up and found herself on a muddy bank of the Volkhov River, near the great city of Novgorod. Hundred kilometers away from

her village. The boat was beaten to smithereens, all but the place where the tree branch poked through the broken hull, with me still in the pillow case."

While I was growing up, Grusha had told me the story many times, never missing a detail. She also told me that soon after her mother had crawled ashore, she was discovered by a group of partisans living in the underground vaults of Novgorod Kremlin. The Nazis had already occupied the city and were about to bomb St. Sofia Cathedral built around 1050 by the son of Prince Yaroslav the Wise. The cathedral was the oldest structure in the city and probably in all Russia, with its white stone walls and five golden helmet-like domes. Even from afar, starved and emaciated, in a state that was closer to death than it was to life, my great grandmother could see that the towers were missing the bells, the cathedral austere and silent behind the massive bronze gates. Later, as she joined the partisans, my great grandmother learned that the bells had been hidden, along with other monuments and relics of ancient architecture, precious icons and frescoes, crucifixes, birch-bark letters, and the oldest Slavic book. Many citizens would be tortured to death by the Nazis, but no one would reveal what the partisans had done with the bells. Every day, the Nazis would hang five people in the bell towers, waiting for others to confess. But they refused to talk, mute as the river.

My great grandmother was captured late one night when she emerged from the vaults to procure milk for the baby. The next morning, she was stripped naked and dragged across the city by her hair tied to a horse's tail. She had endured hours and hours of interrogations, lost teeth, fingers, skin. In the end, they cut out her tongue and let her witness the bombing of the cathedral, where hundreds of terrified women and children had been herded like cattle. Within seconds after the explosion, the heavy oak doors crashed on the ground, revealing a heap of bodies in a pool of blood and smoke. Yet, the indomitable walls survived, so did the towers, and that was when my great grandmother knew that the Nazis would lose the war and they would never find the bells.

Grusha, of course, didn't remember her mother, who'd died soon after the bombing. My grandmother heard the story from another woman in Novgorod, who'd lived in the vaults with the partisans and raised Grusha after the war. The woman had no idea what had happened to the bells, and no one was left to ask. When I was still a child, I kept barraging my grandmother, as well as my mother, with the same questions: "How could the partisans hide those massive bells, the largest weighing twenty-seven tons? How could they have lifted them? Brought them down?" And the women would shrug and say, "It's a divine mystery, but it's all true."

We've always been close – the three of us – and I could never imagine leaving Grusha and my mother or that someday they wouldn't be a part of my family. They were honest laboring women who'd endowed me with the kind of care and love that felt immortal. I reveled in that love and their ceaseless, heady nurturing. They talked about history and personal experiences, hunger and pain as though they continued living through them, as though nothing ever ended but coexisted in parallel worlds. They didn't joke much, and when they laughed on occasion, they opened their mouths wide, their laughter like a gurgle of water in the back of their throats. They bathed me, dressed me, and fed me, smearing sunflower oil on my skin and braiding my hair, sending me to school every morning. They stuffed coin rubles and knitted toys in my slippers on my birthdays and added chamomile flowers to my tea when I had trouble sleeping, their voices growing soft like yarns of wool. They sewed my first bra that made my breasts poke out of dresses in a sensual adult way, and when I had my period, they fried calves' livers to replenish my iron. Their cooking wasn't too elaborate, yet the meals they prepared agreed with the season and the weather.

We lived in a small log house on the outskirts of the city, facing the Volkhov River, where as a child I spent days swimming until my lips turned violet and my skin was prickly with goose bumps. Behind the house, there was a patch of land, where the women planted anything that would grow, including pumpkins and sunflowers that stretched toward the sky and could be seen from the road, beckoning at strangers. The ardor, the zeal with which Grusha and my mother worked on that land, grooming and combing it with their bare hands. From early spring until late fall, they hovered among the rows, their robust arms outlined by crude cotton shirts, strands of hair like pieces of straw clinging to their sweaty faces. In winter, Grusha fermented kraut in a squatty wooden barrel, and our pantry was stocked with jars of pickles, squash, and wild mushrooms like alien creatures preserved in vinegar. We owned chickens, pigs, rabbits, and one cow that produced enough milk to barter with the

neighbors or sell at the market, along with eggs and pork. We had a small orchard too; the women pruned it every fall and spread manure under the apple trees that had been planted after the war and still yielded bountiful crops. The fruit, though small and crunchy, was nonetheless sweet; it kept well, heaping in baskets, so that even in the dead of winter our cellar smelled like summer.

Until I moved away, I didn't pay much attention to the women's appearances, nor could I separate the two. They were coarse-skinned and rouged from being outdoors or cooking over open fire and had gray hair braided and pinned into heavy nests at the back of their heads. For women, they were tall, with splendid hips and bosoms that instilled comfort in babies and men. Both my grandfather and my father had died when I was still a baby, but the absence of a male figure in our household didn't affect my upbringing or self-esteem, the feeling of happiness and completeness that grew around me like garden vines around the picket fence.

In 2003, when I was twenty-two and about to graduate from Novgorod State University, I attended a science fair in Moscow, where I met my future husband. Fred was tall, handsome, with tan skin and dark roomy eyes, and a kind pure expression of someone who belonged not only to a different country, but a different bygone era of medieval gallantries and courtship. He held doors open for me, warmed my shoulders with his jackets, and listened to me mispronounce English words without a fleck of irritation.He was shy, studious, and trustworthy, if a bit sentimental. He radiated goodness and care, and his moods never depended on food or weather, the color of the sky. He was only two years older but had traveled extensively, ravenous for other cultures. We fell in love so quickly, irrevocably – a karmic gesture, you might say – that I didn't have the time to comprehend my future, what it would mean to marry a foreigner. A week after the fair, Fred returned to America, but we exchanged long letters until my fiancé visa came through, and I began tossing things into my suitcase: books, clothes, CDs and photo albums, household trinkets, years' worth of life to be carried overseas. Neither Grusha nor my mother objected to my marrying Fred, but they remained tightlipped while watching me pack, handing me a birch-wood comb or a faded icon painted on a piece of cardboard.

The next morning, before a bus took me to the airport, Grusha and my mother scurried to the garden, scooped some dirt into an old hand-knitted sock, tied it, and stuffed it inside my coat pocket. "Keep it close," they said. "Always." They didn't cry even though I was about to, and they didn't promise to visit even though I kept begging them and refused to get on the bus until I saw them nod – a vague gesture that, perhaps, in my longing and eagerness to see Fred, I imagined.

Though I'd never before traveled outside of Russia, I'd adjusted to my new immigrant and married status with little difficulty. At the beginning, everything appealed to me: food, people, TV shows, all swept in the afterglow of the honeymoon caresses. I didn't have a language barrier either, although at first, I'd seemed immune to American jokes. And vice versa – they failed to laugh at mine. But I'd taken English classes both in high school and at the university, so I was able to communicate with Fred and his family without much effort, albeit with occasional confusion. For example, I wanted to buy potting soil but mixed up the words "soil" and "land." When I asked Fred, "Where can I buy some land?" He laughed and said, "How much land? And where at?" I looked miserably perplexed, and he brushed the hair away from my cheeks, smiling, tickling my jawline with his lips.

Months passed, and then years, but my mother and grandmother didn't express any desire to travel to America, claiming that they couldn't leave the garden, the house, the land that demanded their labor and protection. I suggested visiting one summer with Fred, but they remained silent, devoid of all curiosity, any urge to meet him. We still talked on the phone, but their persistent reticence became cumbersome; less and less I could relate to their lives, their self-imposed isolation from me and the rest of the world. I complained to Fred, and he tried to assuage me by driving to a Russian grocery store, for black bread and herring.

Five years into the marriage, Fred and I had been admitted to graduate school, both pursuing a degree in biochemistry, with a special interest in molecular biology. Fascinated with genes and gene expression, we studied the molecular underpinnings of the process of replication, transcription and translation of the genetic material, the interactions between the various systems of a cell, including the interactions between DNA, RNA and protein synthesis. At the Virginia Polytechnic Institute in Blacksburg, we found part-time teaching positions and spent countless hours at their research lab.

Our colleagues at other schools kept creating an assortment of clones, with each one expressing a specific protein, in the quest for a particular gene. The cells were cultured and then studied, and the cells which produced the relevant gene were isolated for further study. Gene therapy, however, appealed to us even more as a way of inserting genes into a patient's cells and replacing the preexisting allele to perform some therapeutic function. What had never occurred to us at the time was a simple fact that the cultural environment sometimes behaved like a viral vector, much in the same way normal viruses introduced their own genetic material into human cells.

What Fred and I also didn't know was that by altering one's genetic environment, we altered the cells' inherited immunity, their resistance to cope with new strands of viruses. Sooner or later, the patient's body weakened in its attempt to reconcile the native cells with those being implanted. It began to exile its own cells. Although we would never have any scientific proof, nothing we could test in a lab and compile into a dissertation, but back in our graduate years, we'd been convinced that science held answers to all the riddles of the universe, and we were eager to spend our lives proving it.

We rented a match-box apartment downtown, biked to work, and ate most of our meals at The Cellar, where the chef wasn't afraid to experiment. The setting was simple and even crude, red walls, pale wooden tables and benches.

"Technically, lettuce is alive too," Fred said once at dinner.

"It has no eyes and no mouth and no ears. Its vegetative state is unlikely to evolve into a more sophisticated matter," I said.

"But it can still be genetically modified."

I smiled and raised a wad of salad to my lips. I tasted vinegar, perhaps too much from the dressing, and felt a bit lightheaded; my fork fell on the table.

"What's wrong?" Fred's upper lip puffed out like a mushroom cap.

"Don't know. The salad tastes weird."

"Perhaps it does have ears, and it refuses to be eaten." Fred touched my hand, knitted the skin. His fingers warm, soothing.

The rest of the evening I spent on the couch, Fred a hovering presence by my side. He made me some chamomile tea, which too had an unpleasant, bitter sting. A few hours later, after cozying next to him, I managed to drift off while watching the History Channel, where they talked about natural disasters and how some animals would sense danger and stop eating or drinking.

"Pregnant," my mother and Grusha mouthed into the receiver the next morning. "A boy," they added, with a bit of puzzled reluctance as though I had the choice in the matter.

I felt nauseated and crawled to the bathroom, where I threw up.

The following months became an eternity to me. What the doctors called morning sickness lasted days and nights. I arranged to go on medical leave without pay, but Fred often had to stay home too because I couldn't get up from bed without falling back on it, my body as though pierced with hooks. I couldn't eat, except for a few slices of rye bread. Heat waves ran through my spine, a riot of flesh and muscles under my skin. My face thinned and stretched, my complexion grew sallow. Grusha and my mother phoned regularly, and, for those brief moments, I would feel myself again, not pregnant or living thousands of kilometers away. The women sounded close by, their voices slipping through clouds and brick walls, lulling my weary flesh.

Twice I was about to lose the child and stayed at the hospital, where Fred kept a vigil by my bed, his cautious fingers sweeping the dome of my belly. Then the doctors told me that the placenta had begun to separate, I wouldn't carry the baby to term; after all those weeks of wait and struggle, they would operate, but they couldn't guarantee the baby would live at six months. Fred cried as he leaned to kiss a patch of veins like an imprint of a tiny foot above my navel. He held my hands, and then my face, his lips raw, eyes dilated with tears.

Grusha and my mother called the night before the procedure. "Where's the sock with the dirt?" they asked.

"Sock? What sock?" I tried to concentrate. We had moved several times since I arrived in America, and the sock must've been left behind, thrown away by mistake.

"Come home," they said. "You're too far away. No one can help you there." Their words stung with urgency, and I felt compelled to obey.

In the next twenty-four hours I packed what little I could, and Fred drove me to D.C., where I boarded a plane, despite my husband's protests and the doctor's warnings, the fear of a possible uterine rupture during a ten-hour flight. At first, Fred wanted to escort me, but it would've taken weeks to obtain his visa, and the baby, of course, couldn't wait that long.

Contrary to the dreadful prognosis, I fell asleep almost as soon as the plane became airborne and didn't wake up until it was about to land, my body as though cocooned inside a soft invisible blanket. Once I stood up, however, I was sore, nauseated, and swollen. I wobbled through the airport terminal, hunched, the weight of my belly in my hands. Grusha and my mother met me at the doors, their heads draped with gray-wool shawls. From afar, they didn't look any different than six years ago, the same tall, ample-hipped bodies, with tanned muscular arms and fierce bosoms. They pulled the duffle bag off my shoulder and my purse, draping a fuzzy shawl over my head, just like the one they wore.

"It might get chilly," my mother said.

"The wind is stronger by the river," Grusha added.

As we exited the airport, my surprise escalated when I spotted an old-fashioned carriage – a horse and a buggy covered with hay and old quilts.

"Are you serious?" I asked, shaking my head.

They didn't answer but climbed into the buggy. Grusha grabbed the reins while my mother helped pulling me in. The horse snorted and took a slow step; Grusha goaded it, tightening and wrapping the reins around her fists. Cars and trucks screeched by, hands on horns, while our buggy crossed the two lanes of traffic and swerved on a deserted country road, rutted yet dry.

It was mid-July, clouds of heat and dust rising from the horse's weighty hooves. The sky was blue, combed with feathery clouds. In the distance, the river shimmered, the sunlight trapped in its dark silky folds. Oddly enough, I no longer was nauseated, my body anointed by a thick smell of hay and the horse's monotonous steps. My mother raised a basket on her knees and peeled away the layers of cheesecloth, revealing what was inside: hard-boiled eggs, herring, spikes of green onion, and a head of rye loaf. There was even a piece of gooseberry pie, tucked in a soft cotton napkin, and a bottle of water that somehow remained cool.

Insatiable, I drank and chewed, and my mother kept excavating more food from the basket.

"Eat," she said. "Eat all you can." Her voice came in gusts, tearing through the clatter of hooves and wheels. "And when the time comes, we'll boil you *hash*."

"*Hash*? What *hash*? When will I see a doctor, a gynecologist?" I asked.

"You are not. We'll take care of you and the baby. The land will provide."

My body shuddered and broke in heat waves, from all the food I'd ingested and also the wind that grew rebellious and unyielding as we approached Novgorod. The five golden domes of St. Sofia Cathedral burned in the late-afternoon sun. The bell towers were still empty, still silent, like mouths without tongues. All of a sudden, I began thinking about molecular genetics and how if a gene could be expressed, it could also be suppressed, silenced. My fingers probed the hump of my belly, which in a matter of just a few hours ripened, and I could see an islet of healthy pink skin where the T-shirt rolled up above my belly button.

In the course of the next weeks other transformations began to take place inside and outside of my body. Gone were the pains, the nausea, the feeling of tension and miserable displacement, the throbbing pressure in the lower abdomen. I could sleep through the night, my body in perfect alignment with my spirit. My breasts swelled even more, perched on top of my belly, which doubled its size. My hair was much thicker and shinier, lying braided across my shoulder, the old-peasant way. My cheeks grew plump and magenta-pink, as though rubbed with beets, which the women urged me to eat raw out of the garden. They made me work there too, waking up at dawn, before the heat began to scorch our backs. They allowed no gloves or shoes, only loose cotton garments and large straw hats. The three of us squatted between the rows, the soil cool and dewy underfoot. We pulled weeds, tied and retied tomato bushes disheveled by wind or birds. Plucking radish, carrots, cucumbers, and green onions, we carried the vegetables inside our skirts, hems folded. When I got hot or tired, I dipped water from the well and splashed it on my face and neck, the icy drops stinging my flesh, turning into rivulets.

Sometimes, when my back and feet ached from squatting or bending, I plopped in the grass and watched the women work in silence, the air thick, musty, sweet with pollen. Fields of wheat sprawled around, tall and bountiful; they rustled their silky stalks in the breeze, and nothing else could be heard for kilometers. The longer I sat, the more I could feel the earth sprouting its roots through me, binding me to the place of my birth.

"This soil," Grusha said, "feel how rich it is, how fertile." She patted some into my hand. "Your baby needs it. Just like you."

"But we must return to America. The baby needs his father. I need him." I'd been away for two months, calling Fred nearly every day. I missed him, his quiet assertive ways and soft lips, how he could add a romantic tremor to any rainy evening. Suddenly, I felt a pool of water spreading under me.

"It's time," Grusha said and beckoned at my mother, who carried an apron of wild mushrooms, shuffling through the grass. She paused, releasing the hem, the mushrooms spilled on the ground, but my mother didn't bother to collect them.

I was in labor for three excruciating days, during which the women cooled my sweating body with wet cloth and brought to my lips clay mugs of bitter herbs. I wasn't allowed to eat or drink anything else. Meanwhile, in a large cauldron, the women boiled cow legs, from the knees to the hooves, cleaned from bristle and cut up. The hash had been cooking for the last twenty-four hours, and they kept skimming gray sediment, until the broth became clear and the skin and ligaments tender, easily detached. The smell drifted through the house, swirled up my nostrils; my body heaved and shook. The pain continued to move lower, pulling at my womb with its fibrous tentacles. I felt my bones sever from my flesh, my muscles contracting with the force of a choking animal. The women raised me up and let me sip the concoction, whispering about its healing properties, the power of marrow and tendons. The broth was translucent, pure, without salt or pepper or any spices, but as soon as I swallowed the first spoon, my body convulsed with pain. I pushed up and vomited all over my belly, minuscule red cells regurgitated amidst the liquid mass.

When I opened my eyes again, the baby lay between my legs, purplish, shiny, squirming in a pool of blood and mucus. The women brought him to me – the umbilical cord dragging across the sheets – and pressed his scrunched, fist-like face to my lips. He was no bigger than a lizard, those gluey eyes and lucent body; he writhed and opened his tiny mouth, where I placed my pinkie. He suckled, then spat, then pouted, and finally cried. The women cut the cord with a knife and tied the baby's belly button like they would a balloon, then removed the afterbirth, from which they carved out an egg-shaped piece and ordered me to eat it. They pushed the bloody mass between my lips, their hot hands brushing my head and the baby's.

"He needs your strength," they said. "Now chew, chew."

Six weeks after the delivery, I flew back to America, to be with my husband – the desire to see him and to show him the baby had become unbearable. Fred called twice a day and threatened to leave his job and fly over if I didn't return. The women didn't contradict my decision but accepted it as they accepted thunderstorms and blizzards, the inescapable strikes of nature. They filled another old sock with garden dirt and made potato dumplings for the trip. They were quiet, carrying the baby to the checkpoint and entrusting him into my arms, crossing the air in front of his sweet plump face. Tears as heavy as river pebbles fell from my eyes, but I couldn't reach to wipe them and neither could Grusha or my mother. Slowly the women raised the collars of their weathered coats and trudged in the direction of the exit.

As soon as the plane took off, the baby woke up, ready to nurse. No one was sitting next to me, so I pulled up my gray sweater that resembled a warrior's hauberk Grusha had finished knitting the night before. I brought the boy to my breast, and, while he suckled, peered out the window. The city of Novgorod sprawled below: the churches, the old Kremlin, St. Sofia Cathedral, Lake Ilmen and Lake Ladoga on the opposite ends of the Volkhov river. Boats furrowed the water; from the distance, they appeared like tiny vectors binding to cell membranes.

The higher the plane climbed, the more the imprint of the city resembled a molecular structure of a living organism, the flow and exchange of genetic information within a biological system, the DNA spirals of bridges and groups of ancient buildings like cells collecting into the epithelium, the nervous, muscle, and connective tissues. For a moment, within that complex multicellular system of metabolic pathways, I thought I'd spotted a horse and a buggy on the rutted country road, plodding studiously along the river. The sun was red and low, half-sunken in the water, alloys of copper and tin in the dark bronze current. And just then I knew what the partisans had done with the church bells in 1941 and that the next time I would visit the place, years into the future, the women wouldn't be there. I'd be telling my son about his great-great grandmother, the war, the missing bells, the story of his miraculous birth, and he'd be asking: "How could have the partisans drowned the bells and nobody saw them do it? How could have Grusha and my grandmother saved my life when no doctor could?" And I'd be shrugging and saying, "It's a divine mystery, but it's all true."

ROGER CAMP

My father's butterflies

After my mother died,
    my father,
who deferred to her in life,
    took down the various artworks,
                mostly museum posters

and reproductions
    that decorated their married life.
Nailing in their place
    a brilliant book of exotic butterflies
                in flight,

all forty-two feet
    of its accordion folds
laid open to view
    on his living room wall.
            Reduced

to a one-room home,
    we reinstalled the book for him,
its pages embracing
    all four walls.
            My father

whose shirts spoke conservative,
    whose travels were domestic,
who lived his entire life
    inside a white walled house,
                died in bed

surrounded by a tribe
    of tropical animals
            rioting in color.

XENIA TAIGA

House Guests

SHE ENTERED through the front door and found the deer in the living room. They stared at each other headlights' stance-like. Her shopping bags dropped to the floor. The deer sat in the blue winged-back chair with one leg crossed over the other, reading the novel, *War and Peace.*

She stammered, "What is this?"

The deer flitted its eyelashes. "Well, where did you expect me to go?"

She had no answer to give. Pots and pans clattered in the kitchen. She ran off to investigate.

The wolf stood by the island. His gray fur prickled along his back. His hand was in the Kellogg Corn Flakes cereal box. He spat it out. "You people eat this for breakfast?" he asked.

She didn't respond. All she could focus on was his head. "My what big ears you have," she said. "And what big eyes you have. Your teeth. Yes, oh my, what big teeth you have!"

The wolf rolled his eyes. "Like I haven't heard that before."

Her face burned. "We eat it with milk," she told him.

"What's that?"

"It's in the fridge behind you. It's white. In a plastic bottle."

His head was deep in the fridge, sniffing. As his hands rummaged through the contents, he jerked upright and turned around. "You're still there?" He raised his eyebrows. His yellow teeth were beginning to show. She slowly walked backwards.

Upstairs in her daughter's room, the snakes and ferrets and mice were having tea and trying on her daughter's Barbie doll dresses. In her son's room the turtles and raccoons played with LEGOs and remote controlled cars. In her bedroom was a snowstorm. The grizzly bear was on the bed on his back, staring at the ceiling, smoking a pipe. His legs splayed out upright in the air as his paws moved back and forth among the pillows and comforters, slashing them. Duck feathers filled the air.

"You smoke?" she asked.

The bear sat up and yawned.

"Smoking is bad, didn't you know?"

He took notice of her. "Oh, like what you have done is better?" A

low guttural gnarl vibrated throughout the room. She quivered.

At the top of the staircase, below her, all the animals were crammed into the house. She ran down thinking, *I got to get out of here. I got to get out of here. I got to get out of here*. She was in the entrance hall when one of them raised their nostrils in the air and said, "Ugh, what is that smell!" The owls, woodpeckers, wolves, deer, bobcats, squirrels, moose, snakes, birds, foxes, and rabbits froze. They all looked at her. Paws were raised, teeth bared. Throats growled, tails twitched, and furs bristled. They stamped and pissed over her feet. The birds crapped in her hair.

Poop dripped down her nose and over her eyelids. She smeared them away. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm so sorry."

"Sorry isn't enough," they said. Their tiny paws and hooves pushed her out the backdoor. It slammed shut with a loud click.

She stood in the backyard. The fence was torn down. The flower bed and swing set were uprooted. The lawn was riddled with potholes. The sun went down and the house lights lit up. She was crying now. She didn't know where her family was. She ventured past the fence. Here, the earth was torn up as well. There was no grass. All the trees were cut down for the new development of either malls or houses or warehouses. She wasn't sure. The developers weren't sure, either. Nobody was sure of anything anymore. She stumbled forward. The gravel underneath her feet made her ankles floppy. She was grateful for the moon, but the moon heard her and hid its face behind the clouds. Stones gave away and she fell into a pit hole.

In the morning, the sun found her and scorched her. She pulled herself out of the crater. She sat facing her house watching the animals modify it to their liking. Rocks jutted into her buttocks. Fire ants crawled over her, biting and stinging and she let them. She let them, no matter how much it burned or hurt; she let them all do whatever it was they wanted to do.

MILLICENT BORGES ACCARDI

Related to Longtime

It was old and ancient
And avid. A former, a later
An erstwhile, stalwart
Assistant, waiting, persisting
Long-standing, decrepit,
A veteran, lifelong, staunch
Forever being, a longing, a tightening
A hollowing out of what was
Once fruitful and plump
Now thin as bone, white, dry
Acidic, melting, turning into
Dry powder, soil, ash, ceasing
To be of the living. Becoming
Common and every day, harkening
Back to olden times in the 1970's
A memory of making candles
At the beach, toting raw wax
In a wheelbarrow, a sudden ripple
Of reality bursting through
a loss without an uneasy gain,
a mountain that was a summit,
The never-ending, the ever-lasting
The none-ness of summer,
Caught in a trap of sand,
The numb, the horrible silence
Of not ending without a restart
Button, life pushed endlessly
Onward, as the lights go out
and you squat uncomfortably
over the cold sand, Ten years
old, holding a wick in place.

MERCEDES LAWRY

She Leaves It All Behind

The pale daughter came over the hill.
The rain had stopped. Her boots
were caked with mud, slowing
her pace. Don't think about the dead,
she told herself. Above, a hawk traced
ovals as blue sky emerged in thin strips.
Small runnels of sweat rolled down her neck,
under her arms, beneath her knees.
The morning hours concluded.

She had always been pale, this girl.
She looked ahead, down between pines
as if someone was waiting. The gloss
of rain on the tall grass, a glint on the underside.
The fevered indigo clouds. The suck of the wet
earth as she took a step. Don't think about
the mother, the father, the others, she told herself.
This was leaving, not dreaming.
The air warmed She found a stick and scraped
clods of mud from her boots. She could move
more quickly and she began to notice scrub jays
and the clipped scent of sage.

They fell out of her mind – the gray house, the joyless
kitchen, the upturned chairs, the scarred walls,
the broken glass like a shower of ice
in every damp room. And the wounds,
etched on her back, her wrists, down
her thighs – were red snakes that would sleep now
on her milky skin.

JENNY HEDLEY

The Faces of The Unemployed

I.

KIRI* WEARS her keloid scars like full sleeve tattoos. Even as we crack jokes about absent fathers and laugh as we push our kids up higher and higher on the swings, these scars are a visual reminder of the pain that belies our wide smiles.

Kiri worries that the Department of Human Services (DHS) will take another child out of her care. Her daughter is Koori like Dad and Maori like Mum, who is raising her to be bilingual. The odds do not favor Indigenous children, who continue to be removed from home without consideration to the loss of culture or to the trauma of extricating them from a mother's love.

A social worker reported my baby's injuries to DHS at nine months old. He had experienced multiple contusions to the head while under his father's care. No action was taken. The father is white. We are white.

When Kiri lost the right to see her son, she started using drugs. Because: what is there to live for if not for our children? She acquired permanent brain damage from a violent act that left her for dead. While concussed, the cops got her to sign the paperwork that put her in jail. There were things she might have gone to jail for which they did not catch her doing. She was locked up for a crime she did not commit.

~

While fighting to keep my son safe, it felt like I was driving on a freeway with my eyes closed. I remember spinning across five lanes of highway in the rain when I was three, fleeing domestic abuse with my mum, lucky to survive the crash. Raindrops lit up by headlights from either direction created divots in the water pooled on the oil-slick asphalt as the police arrived. In Axiomatic, Maria Tumarkin interviews a psychologist who describes trauma, which young children lack the language to describe, as receding into our bodies.

**names changed*

~

Kiri is afraid to go to certain neighbourhoods where she "used to." Where she used to deal, where she used to get high. Staying straight means daily NA meetings. Sometimes her path intersects with one of her "used tos." One woman, a "used to," dobs Kiri into DHS with a manufactured complaint. During the investigation, Kiri plummets into deep depression. The stakes are high: one child gone, one at risk of removal.

You take away our blood, you take away our breath.

~

My psychologist helps me fill out a form to access my school's equitable learning program. There are questions regarding the nature of my condition (anxiety, depression), the likely impact on my schooling (occasional absences), and the severity (fluctuating). Where it asks for the expected duration, my psychologist hesitates: if it's temporary, then she must say for how long. "I hate to do this," she says, her pen hovering above the tick box next to permanent. I say it's okay: I've had the same diagnosis since I was ten; it's not going anywhere.

~

Centrelink, the Australian welfare provider, demands that Kiri come up with additional evidence of her inability to work, every 13 weeks, in order for her to receive subsidized childcare. As if 13 weeks in the life of a single mum recovering from trauma is enough to change one's circumstances, is enough to reclaim one's mental health.

Mental illness doesn't look good on paper. The evidence may be weaponized, used against us to take our children away.

~

One of my Facebook friends posts about wanting to donate their designer doona to a homeless person. They refuse to donate it to the Salvation Army, because then it will get sold to someone who can afford it, and where will the money go anyhow? I type an angry response then hit delete. Someone with a hundred-thousand-dollar car won't understand.

You can read statistics on unemployment and single motherhood but you will never know what it feels like unless you, too, are numbered and categorized. Kiri and I met at a single mums' playgroup run by the Salvation Army back when our babes were doing tummy time. My social worker taught me to escape the cycle that I had internalized when I was pre-verbal. I let myself be treated a certain way because it was all I knew.

For my son, I will do everything to stop the intergenerational trauma. I get an intervention order, make police reports, move somewhere safe, enroll in a creative writing program. I would still be looking over my shoulder instead of focusing on the horizon, if not for charity.

When Kiri was a teenager, her stepdad pushed her sister down the stairs. Her sister died. The courts determined that it was an accident. Twice a year St. Vincent de Paul delivers Kiri a grocery store voucher after she's run out of money for food and nappies.

To the person on Facebook: donate the fucking doona, mate.

Kiri and I also met in another lifetime, back when I was selling lingerie in strip clubs, back when she was using. I sold her a pair of six-inch stilettos, her first and only stripper heels. The life I had built for myself was X-rated: strip clubs, brothels, sweaty money sticky with spilled liquor and traces of cocaine. We trade it all in for a life that's rated PG. Still, our scars and our diagnoses betray us.

At the local park, our children play-fight. Kiri spoils our bubs with arts and crafts projects and bubble machines. She outperforms the other mothers by 110%, when she is physically able. Because of this system that was designed to oppress those who are not white, she is not always physically able. Her daughter is always well dressed. My son wears freshly laundered but ink-stained, second-hand clothes.

II.

"Where's your partner?"
"Doesn't your son miss his dad?"
"How do you manage?"
"You don't look like that kind of girl."
"You poor thing."
"I feel like a single mom – my husband's never home."

"So what do you do all day?"

These questions make me dread small talk, meeting new people. *Am I okay?* I wonder.

Does my son need a father? Could I be doing more? My psychologist says that I should let my insecurities float away on a leaf down a river, but I still get mad. What is a survivor of domestic violence supposed to look like anyway? Is she defective somehow? Does she sit around getting high while neglecting responsibilities? Is she setting her children up for failure by raising them on her own?

I still hear an echo of the words my mom spent her life defending against. "What did you do all day?" my stepdad would ask as he slurped his 64-ounce Diet Coke, his top lip curled in distaste. Besides taking care of the unpaid and emotional labor for the household, and in between substitute and full-time teaching gigs, Mom wanted to be a writer. I resented the way my stepdad shamed her on those quiet days when she wrote, the stomp of his heavy work boots letting us know that, yes indeed, he was home from a tough day of real work. Ours was only a happy house – at least when he was at work – because Mom made it so for me, my brother, and our three stepsiblings. Like me, she wrote to heal trauma.

There remains in place a system inaccessible to single parents at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale. There are the parent education seminars held at night that specifically forbid children attending, that offer no child-minding services. There are the weekday classes that I pay for at university which require attendance on random Saturdays, and yet neither my council nor my university offer daycare on weekends. There are the children's books that assume that every child has a mommy and a daddy. These I censor and edit as I read.

When my son asks me in the grocery store whether he has a daddy, how do I explain what was lost?

Recently, a well-off, well-polished woman asked me what else I do. As in, on top of full-time study and full-time parenting. I'd seen that imperious look before – the nuanced condescension – so I just shrugged my shoulders and said, "Not much."

Put that on a leaf and let it float away.

III.

Jane* arrives at her ParentsNext appointment at a tall office building on Queen Street on her one weekday off from school. She has been targeted by the Australian welfare system as a single mother without a full-time job. This compulsory program adds another layer of responsibility to her already complicated life. If Jane refuses to comply, she will lose benefits such as childcare subsidies.

Jane's toddler is excited because they rode a tram into the city, and because later they will visit the kids section at the National Gallery. Jane's handwriting in the notebook where she records the details of her meeting betrays her anxiety: the blue ink won't be contained by the ruled page.

Jane and her child enter through a glass door which is marked with the various incarnations of the job agency that occupies the space: ParentsNext, JobActive, JobFind and Direct Recruitment ("Reliable Staffing"). The perimeter of the reception is lined with desktop computers, but there are no other clients in the building this day, at least not for the ninety minutes that Jane spends there. There is a sign displaying the Wi-Fi password. As if anyone would trust their sensitive data to these guys, Jane writes in her notebook.

Jane lets her toddler play in the kitchen area where they are told to wait. She describes as-yet-unboxed Kmart furniture, deliveries from OfficeMax, cartons of Scott facial tissues, and other corporate labels reflecting the generic austerity of the slapped-together space. She hopes that her child will make a mess of the kitchen, but her child is too mannered for such antics.

R steps into the room, introduces himself as the program coordinator and remarks on how Jane is writing in her diary. He doesn't say, "How quaint," but that is what she feels is on his tongue. She hates being pandered to, so she snaps back that she is taking notes to keep him honest. She lets R lead her into his office, which she is pleased to note is filled with enough toys to entertain her child for the duration of the interview.

She has followed the expose of the ParentsNext program in *The Guardian*, and she has read the fine print on the jobs.gov.au website. She knows she doesn't have to sign the privacy acknowledgement that R slides in front of her, and she tells him as much. The acknowledgement says that the agency may share information with government bodies, referees

and potential employers, persons associated with the agencies and other JobActive members. The questions R asks are deeply personal, probing into her physical and mental health and her home life, as well as her employment history. R notices that Jane is upset, and he offers her an appointment with one of their counselors, which she declines, suspecting a similarly lax approach to information sharing and privacy.

Jane understands that she might be able to qualify for an exemption from the program for attending school full-time. R hands her the 16-page Exemptions and Suspensions Guideline (version 1.1), produced by the Australian Government and ParentsNext. He tells her that unless she can find the relevant legislation for the exemption, his hands are tied. Jane argues that parents who are already enrolled in school full-time should be exempted for doing the right thing.

R tells Jane, who spends $6,865 AUD per year on her degree, "You are making this process more difficult than it needs to be." R says that the system is designed to help her, and she demands to know how exactly. Again, R offers free counseling. "Any system which is non-voluntary and which gives you demerit points for non-compliance is by nature punitive," she argues. He tells her that she's working herself up over nothing.

R prints out a participation plan which requires fortnightly reporting of her income and activities and requires her to attend appointments with their agency, as and when they are set. Jane can't believe that she, a grown up with a 4.0, is signing up to be babysat. R says that she has 20 business days to sign the form, but the form says 10 business days. When Jane tells R that this proves why she can't trust him, he tells her that she came in with a negative attitude looking for trouble. R gives Jane a phone number for complaints and feedback.

Jane's child puts the toys back in place and matches all the lids to the appropriate color texters. She wishes her child would make a mess, just to spite the agency being paid to police her, but her child is good and polite. She carries her child and her stroller down the stairs to use the toilet on the way out. The women's toilets are positioned in between floors, and the handicapped toilet on the ground floor is unoccupied but locked. Everything feels inaccessible to Jane.

She pushes her stroller through the city then crosses the bridge to the National Gallery. When the fire alarm goes off, she and her child evacuate without their jackets. Jane shivers as much from the frost as from her feelings of frustration and overwhelm; her hungry child cries for the scones and jam they left behind in the tearoom. Jane feels helpless to circumstance. She didn't ask to lose everything to domestic violence. She didn't ask to be a single mom. Will her best ever be good enough? She feels the bitterness of the cold seeping into her bones. When the gallery reopens, the tearoom comps Jane and her child their plate of scones. This small kindness makes her cry.

"It's Thomas!" her child exclaims, waving as the tram approaches. Jane holds tight to her second-hand stroller, with its broken brakes, as they journey back to their apartment in community housing. Once home, Jane calls the Centrelink complaints hotline and speaks to a patient woman, who promises to record grievances about what Jane perceives to be a rort of the system. "They are a monitoring program," the call operator concedes.

According to *The Guardian*'s research, the private companies delivering the ParentsNext program receive $600 AUD biannually per client that is on their books. By the time Jane finishes school, the agency will be paid $3,000 AUD for delivering services to her, though what the benefit of that service is, Jane can't tell. R repeats his offer of counseling service when he emails her. By then, Jane has learned that legislation requires him to do so.

MICHAEL ZINKOWSKI

Talons at Times Like These

Viral videos of animals stuck in fences and plastic
coils remind me not so much that humans can
and will continue to be kind when life demands it.

No, more how dangerous we all are when we are
or think we are in danger – like the owl whose wing
catches the needle-edge of the barb we panic, and

somehow able to turn our head 270 degrees
in any direction never feels enough to see everything
potentially harmful, how we might try to pierce

the wrists of the old farmer binding our ankles
because who knows what we might do with talons
at a time like this – who could blame our screeching,

the threats, the calls for help, the stabbing beak and
heinous cackling all while the man's wrinkled face
coos and whispers, Shhh-shh-shhh. *Don't worry,*

even if we're not. *I'm not trying to hurt you,*
he lies, *but you've got to stop thrashing.*

EDITOR'S PRIZE POETRY

CAROLINE X. ADKINS

Notes on carrying my own firewood

Father, your devotion to God sears into me.
        This mountain used to blend into the sunset.
        Up close, it's less divine – weeds in the crag,
        dirty creeks, empty exoskeletons amongst the pebbles.
I want to kick off my shoes
        and run.
As if by running, I can escape. As if by escaping,
        we'll both be released from this.
But in the absence of a lamb, I'll be holy.
        So father, bind me over the wood.
Pour through me with a blade as sharp as your zeal.
        Even as I bleed,
I'll revere you.

PAMELA GWYN KRIPKE

Specimen

IN BED, he fluttered her fat between his thumb and third finger. Jane was thin, 105-pound thin, but he found the places where the flab collected. Everybody has the places, he told her another time when they were not in bed, even people you might think are anorexic. Really, anorexic? He fluttered her fat after they had sex, typically. He fluttered it fast, bee-like. She had the deposits at the top of her thigh, in the back, toward the inside. He knew the exact location, and he could probably gauge the amount. The grams. Or when it was liquefied and sucked out, the milliliters. Fat is measured as volume, not weight, clinically speaking.

Stan gave his patients bottles of their fluid fat to hold for a photo, following its removal from their bodies. He showed the pictures to Jane on a Sunday afternoon when it was raining and they were sitting on his couch. One woman gripped two bottles, clear plastic like for fancy water., by their necks. They were nearly full. The liquefied fat is yellow, tinged with pink, from the blood. The woman smiled a drugged-up smile, standing in a hospital gown with the blue diamonds on it. Stan had a place in the fat-sucking room where the patients he stood up the people once they could get off the table and not faint from the mild sedative. The mild sedative did not make them fall asleep while he inserted the lasers, but let them talk about how they would wear skinny jeans, or how they hated to exercise so they never did, or why their husbands annoyed them. "So it won't come back," they asked Stan while mildly sedated, "even if I eat doughnuts?" Stan had the patients hold their fat as proof that he had taken it out of their abdomens and thighs and buttocks. People liked to complain that Stan hadn't done what he promised to do. He hadn't filled up the lines around their eyes with enough chemical gel or burned off sufficient layers of skin from their jowls or reduced the flapping under their chins to just a wobble, a wobble that they could deal with if they had to, if the totality of the flapping couldn't be obliterated as they had originally hoped. Stan was not a magician, he liked to say. But he thought the people looked better when they left, so much better, exponentially better. Jane couldn't always discern which was the Before photo and which was the After.

"This one?" she'd ask. "No, wait, this one?"

Her inability to instantly and accurately see how much the faces and bodies of Stan's patients had been improved irked Stan. No, infuriated Stan. Made his voice go up in pitch, made his pigeon-feet strut around with speed, made his comments sharp and his own fat quiver around his mouth.

"You're saying I'm bad at what I do," he'd say. "You don't know anything about what I do."

"No, she just looks pretty good in both," Jane would say.

When Stan first fluttered Jane's fat at the back of her leg, they had been dating for about a year. She rolled to her side and lifted her knees up to make it hard for him to continue. She thought it was an odd way to be touched, but she didn't say anything. It was late, and she had a lot to do the next day, and Stan was a good guy, in the ways that mattered to Jane.

"Good night, Jane Jenkins."

"Good night, Stanley Ross."

The fifth time he fluttered her fat, she sat up and turned on the light.

"Why do you touch my leg that way?"

"What way?"

"You fiddle with the fat. Do you do that to your patients?"

"Of course not, that's crazy."

The following weekend, Jane and Stan met for dinner. Jane felt like dressing up a bit, wearing a ribbed black top and platform boots. She spent extra time on her makeup, experimenting with a chisel-point eyeliner and mascara that she had read about in Vogue. A painter, she knew color, form, proportion, and light, and was adept with a brush. She used one always for her lips, that night a teaky red. The mascara required two steps; the results would be dimensional, sumptuous. Mega-sumptuous.

She whisked into the restaurant, a stony storefront Italian. Her cape flew in behind her, charcoal, edged in black velvet., a nice contrast to her lips. Not a dramatic personality, Jane liked looking that way. People noticed. She knew it, but she wasn't a snoot. People had noticed since she was a child. It was just how it went. Jane, the pretty girl. The Pretty Girl.

"I don't want to sit near the kitchen," said Stan when he saw her enter. "Last time, it was so noisy."

"Okay, sure," said Jane. "And hello, Stan."

Stan took off his coat.

"Do you want to check that?" he asked.

Jane unwrapped herself and gave Stan the cape. She bent to gather it up so it wouldn't drag on the floor.

The hostess led them through the center of the narrow restaurant to a table toward the back. Jane felt festive in her platform boots, ribbed black top, and chisel-point eyeliner, walking that way, the party way. They sat and ordered a glass of wine. Jane had spent much of the day sending photographs of her paintings to galleries, hoping to spark interest. She had gotten some positive feedback, but nothing more. One day, her work would hang and people would come, she believed, or had to believe, and they'd tilt their heads and nod, talking about the color and form and proportion and light, pointing, turning their palms up and back. For income, she taught art at a high school, a job that, combined with her frugality, had supported her and her two children for sixteen years, even sent them to college. Stan offered a lifestyle that she couldn't afford herself. He had asked her to move in with him, but she said that she wasn't ready, that she needed her own place to paint, her own furniture, her own quiet, all of which Stan said he'd provide. Jane had said that she loved Stan, even though she didn't want to grab his shirt and kiss him. So, when Stan asked her to share spatulas and fingertip towels, she didn't know what to make of her immediate refusal. She thought that maybe she didn't love Stan after all, but she also thought that she simply preferred living without a man in her house, whether she loved him or not. She was confused, and because she was confused, she did nothing.

Stan jerked his head around and shot a look at the chair behind him.

"Can you move back a little?" he asked Jane, pushing the table toward her. Quickly, Jane grabbed her drink.

"Forget it, let's switch," he said. "Can't deal with getting slammed." He popped up and found the hostess at the front of the restaurant, leaving Jane at the table and knocking into the man behind him. Stan waved for her to come. Hurry, he mouthed. Jane apologized to the man.

"I want to see you suck out the fat," Jane told Stan when they sat down again.

"Really?"

"Something about it," she said. "It's so primitive."

"What do you mean? I have to be highly trained, you know."

"I'm not saying that you're primitive," said Jane. "But the concept is so...I don't know...crude. Primal."

"That makes no sense. It's a technical medical procedure."

"It's not the procedure. It's the notion of it," said Jane. "But forget it."

"I have to be accredited, you know."

"I know. You're not understanding what I mean."

"So, you don't want to come?"

"No, I do."

That week, Stan checked with a patient, Eileen, to see if she'd allow Jane to watch when Stan melted the fat out of her lower abdomen. Eileen said that she didn't mind. Two weeks later, Jane arrived at Stan's office and changed into the scrubs that were waiting for her at the reception desk. Eileen had been prepped, drawn upon with a black magic marker, given the mild sedative. Jane waited for the nurse to retrieve her from the consultation room, where she sat on the chair the patients sat on, imagining what they might say to Stan – Dr. Stanley M. Ross – upon first meeting him.

Maybe: "I hate my knees. And I hate my eyelids, and I hate how I look in everything. I can't get dressed."

Or: "My husband cheated on me with our son's violin teacher and now I can't stop eating. Look at me, I'm disgusting."

Or: "You have nice skin, Dr. Ross, but I'm sensing that you could be short-tempered and judgmental."

Wait a minute. They wouldn't say that. Would they say that?

The door opened.

"Jane, come with me," said the nurse. "He's ready."

Eileen's lower abdomen was centered on the operating table. She wore bikini underwear, socks, and the robe with the blue diamonds, rolled up to her breasts. The rest of her body was exposed. Jane had painted many models, in a variety of positions. She had painted many "reclining nudes," like Eileen. "Reclining Nude With Limited Will Power." People look better when they are lying down. Gravity pulls their fat into the surface beneath them and stretches out any lines or bulges in their skin. When they stand, gravity doesn't work in the same way. It doesn't eliminate the lines and bulges for some reason. Gravity is gravity, and it shouldn't matter which way a body is positioned, so this is perplexing. It's also why women who think they're fat lie down a lot on the beach. They don't play frisbee.

Jane stood quietly against a countertop near the door.

"I'm going to be making a small incision now," Stan told Eileen, pressing the tip of his scalpel into her flesh. "And another."

Eileen's lower abdomen didn't look so flabby to Jane, though she saw it only in the recumbent position. It appeared that a few solid weeks of jogging, maybe two miles a day, would do the trick. And the carb thing, of course.

Stan reeled out yards of clear tubing from a machine, the end of which was outfitted with the laser. He looked happy, holding the rod parallel to the floor and inserting it into Eileen. One of his hands pushed down on her belly, and the other maneuvered the wand, sliding it forward and back, like a cellist. Suddenly, the tubing stiffened and gurgled. Sputters of the liquefied lipids made their way first, followed by full blasts, at times pure yellow, at times stunningly pink. Jane had seen the photos, so she was prepared, as prepared as an abstract painter mom could be, but the gush of red into the tube unsettled her. She had left her sweater on underneath the scrubs, thinking that an O-R could be chilly. She pushed up the sleeves and pulled at the neck. Stan continued to rake Eileen's insides with gusto, forward and back, unaffected by the blood spurting into the bottle on the floor of his operating room. The nurse, Dawn, sopped up the incision site with gauze. Eileen winced, and Stan told her that everything was going well, that she was looking beautiful. She was looking beautiful now. He glanced down at the bottle to see how much fat he had collected. Jane felt sweaty, on her forehead, under her arms, between her toes. With one hand, she held onto the counter behind her and forced herself to breathe in deep. Chills. Sweat. Chills. Next would be the fainting part, so she bent forward and dangled her head upside down, pretending to fix something on the hem of her pants.

"Just a few areas left," Stan said, pulling the laser out of the hole in Eileen. Jane rose to see him pause and flutter Eileen's fat between his thumb and third finger. He fluttered it fast, bee-like, determining where to direct the heat, where to correct the imperfection. Where to eradicate the flaw. Dizzy, Jane slid her back on the counter towards the door, felt the knob in her hand and slipped out. In the bathroom, she stripped off the scrubs, her sweater, and her bra. Naked in front of the mirror, she cupped cold water from the sink onto her face, her neck, her lower abdomen, and her thighs, the tiny rivers hugging the contours of her body as they dripped to the floor.

ROMANA IORGA

Conjugal Postage, Serves Two

A dash of wisdom folded into
temporary bliss, to keep it
from curdling. Undiluted,
it tends to stick in your throat.
Throw in the bones
of yesterday's rage to give it
texture. Nothing is less
appetizing than mush.
Do not puree each day to bits,
lest you spend your evenings
mostly solo. If you're
daring enough, add argument
chunks – rows, spats, squabbles,
and tiffs, their origin
a tantalizing mystery.
Regret and disappointment
to taste. Don't overseason,
though more often than not
you will. Simmer on low heat
for as long as you wish
to stay married.

CONTRIBUTORS

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Frances Park is the author or co-author of ten literary books – novels, memoirs and children's books – published in seven languages and praised by *The Times Literary Supplement, Newsweek, USA Today, NPR, Radio Free Asia*, and *Voice of America*. Her short fiction and essays, often inspired by her Korean American heritage, have appeared in *O*, *The Oprah Magazine*, *The Bellevue Literary Review*, *The Massachusetts Review, The Chicago Quarterly, The London Magazine, Arts & Letters*, and many others. She was short-listed for the 2019 Dzanc Novella Prize and earned a spot on the 2017 Best American Essays Notable List.

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Fierce Sonia is a mixed media artist. She builds a substrate with acrylic paint and collage. A narrative is constructed by the tension between the lush layers moving to dreamy feminine mindscapes with a brighter palette. If you listen closely her work has a soundtrack, a rhythm, a pulse that will give you a magic carpet ride to a fairytale that restates your own heartbeat. She has a public studio at Torpedo Factory: 105 North Union Street, studio 5 Alexandria, VA 22303. Follow on Facebook (fiercesonia) or on instagram (@fiercesonia).

Alison Stone has published six full-length collections, *Caught in the Myt*h (NYQ Books, 2019), *Dazzle* (Jacar Press, 2017), *Masterplan*, a book of collaborative poems with Eric Greinke (Presa Press, 2018), *Ordinary Magic*, (NYQ Books, 2016), *Dangerous Enough* (Presa Press 2014), and *They Sing at Midnight*, which won the 2003 Many Mountains Moving Poetry Award; as well as three chapbooks. Her poems have appeared in *The Paris Review, Poetry, Ploughshares, Barrow Street, Poet Lore*, and many other journals and anthologies. She has been awarded Poetry's Frederick Bock Prize and New York Quarterly's Madeline Sadin Award. She was recently Writer in Residence at LitSpace St. Pete. She is also a painter and the creator of The Stone Tarot. A licensed psychotherapist, she has private practices in NYC and Nyack. www.stonepoetry.org www.stonetarot.com

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