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# DEFUNKT MAGAZINE



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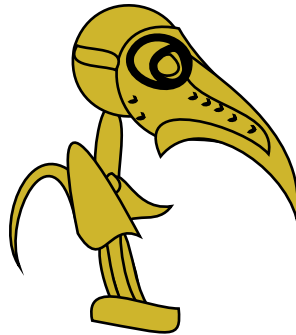
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# DEFUNKT MAGAZINE



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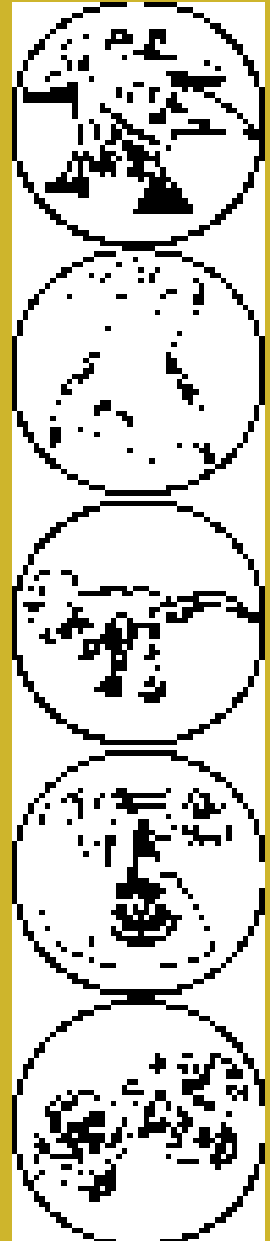
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# Re-Weaving the Matriarchy

Johanna Porter



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**Johanna Porter** was born and raised in Miami, FL. She holds a BFA in Graphic Design from University of North Florida and is a self-taught digital artist. Her first Macintosh computer, purchased in 1984, was her first “laptop”. She would carry it into ad agencies and work on-site. Her career includes over three decades of working in the realm of graphic design and art direction. In 2019 she moved her studio, PICTURESWITHIN, from South Florida to the Pacific Northwest. At that time Johanna returned to her roots as a visual artist, creating work that is more relevant to her personal growth.

Enjoyed Johanna’s work? Send a tip straight to her PayPal: [pictureswithin@gmail.com](mailto:pictureswithin@gmail.com)

# No Cosas

Sarah Rodriguez

Andy hated feeling stuck. The bus was late, it was raining, she was sure she forgot to put on deodorant. Her arms mirrored the lackluster sheen of the summer shower, sticky. Andy was only joined by Gloria, an older regular on the 236. Gloria waddled up to the benches, her envelope sized purse pinched delicately between forefingers and thumbs. The tired-faced crowd of Houston Metro riders kept to themselves, trying to distance themselves from known talkers.

Gloria's usual signal was settling onto a stone bench with a tiny wiggle that morphed into a squirm until she was *much* closer than was appropriate for strangers at a bus stop. Gloria launched into her latest overtelling the moment Andy made polite eye contact.

"So, I told Esther she needs to tell her son enough is enough. There's only so long you can be without a job, right?" Gloria sighed, clacking her nails against her purse. She glanced at Andy. "You at least have something stable, Andrea. You went to college, didn't you?"

Andy flinched at Gloria's pronunciation of her full name. The heavy first syllable burst into her ears, popping somewhere near her vestibulocochlear nerve. Andy had memorized a diagram of the inner ear in high school to impress some aspiring nurse.

"I didn't. I got my cosmetology license," Andy said. She'd told Gloria that before.

"Right, right," Gloria chortled, "Maybe you can come over and cut my husband's hair one day!"

"I could." Andy rose to lean against a thick,

glass-tiled barrier. She was always asked for haircuts like this. The neighborhoods around the Port of Houston ran on tabs of begrudging Latino reciprocity.

"Aye, sí," Gloria heaved a heavy, drawn-out sigh, "My Scotty...he's really let his hair grow out. Parece un perrito, you know?"

"I don't really cut men's hair," Andy said, trying on an apologetic wince.

"Hair is hair." Gloria's wrinkled hand wafted through Andy's excuse. "That's what Scotty says. He also says no one's hiring mechanics anymore. Can you believe that?" Gloria tsked. Her fingertips kneaded into the pleather of her purse. Andy could see the raisin dark imprints, oil stains like pressure points.

"I...I just—," Gloria was revving up and the rest of her words flowed out of her, superfluous. "I go to work. Everyone's so nice there. They *like* me. And when I get Scotty's unemployment coming in, I can even take some time off. But—" Gloria gulped. Andy could see the older woman's jaw shifting around, like Gloria was tasting her next thought. "There's pinche tire shops and car lots all down I-10 he can work at! He's just there on that sofa morning and night. When I get back, he goes, 'Ah, Glorie, can you get me a beer?' Like he can't get up."

The sky grumbled with a roll of thunder, as if it were annoyed by Gloria's husband, too. Andy watched the littering of rain turn into a heavy flashing onto pothole puddles. The bus was never going to come if the weather got any worse. Traffic from Baytown was bad enough on an early weekday morning without rain

scaring drivers, either driving too slowly or zooming over the freeway as if racing the planes in the sky.

When she was younger, Andy rode a few flights in the rain. She hated the way the aircraft jerked and shook. Raindrops slapped onto the windows and lingered for a minute, clinging a ride. Her second oldest sister, Luisita, bet on which drop would fall first and made gruesome fantasies about their crash to the ground. She would unfasten Andy's seatbelt and pretend to push her into following the rain's path.

The last time Andy was a rider on a storm, she was older — just out of high school, eighteen — and the plane's shuddering and the thunder's growling and the lightning's white-hot flashing and the engine's unshakable tremoring were the last sense of excitement Andy would have for years.

She was returning from a Veracruz summer for the last time. Andy remembered gulping through tears at the thought of never having her grandpa's cooking again. His steaks were always ready on the break of dusk, tickled pink in a perfect medium finish. Over the summer, the Morenos had communed in courtyards of fawny dirt and ant hills for birthdays, or full moons, or funerals. And at each table, there were mangoes. Grandpa molcajeted mangoes into salsas, sizzled them atop dying flames in spontaneous plate adornments, squaring and squashing them. Andy liked to trap lakes of spiraling limón and tamarindo and beer salt and ancho, weaving them between the avenues of crisscrossed mango cuts until they glowered golden in the light of the grill.

The weathered round tips of Gloria's Skechers poked into the side of Andy's vision. She blinked away from phantasmic puddles, shaking out thoughts of aircraft and thunderheads and mangoes and heartbreak.

Gloria slumped against the tiled wall. The mumbling rain around them was left uninterrupted. There was no sign of the bus, and the sky was a thicket of slate as if night had fallen at six in the morning. Andy narrowed her eyes at the clouds from the dry safety of the bus shelter. Despite the surface view, she knew the sky was bright up there.

Gloria's life sounded like a bog, dark and upsetting — a life trapped in a single moment. A geologist Andy dated once called bogs nature's museums. They trapped and perfectly preserved any lifeform caught lingering in the muck and mire. Andy didn't think there was any point in wanting to escape something like that. Gloria's next sigh, a light breath of surrender, told Andy the old woman knew it was useless, too.

"But that's the price we pay for loving men, right?" Gloria smiled up at Andy, as if sharing some timeless secret.

"I'm gay," Andy said.

The surprise on Gloria's face reminded Andy of a rousing pinball machine, music slowing to a start as the lights wobbled awake. Andy was always reconsidered after small coming-outs like this. The snapping, springing eyes from one feature to another. Gloria's thoughts were practically visible in the humid rain vapor. First the hair — *that's why she keeps it short* — then the outfit — *slacks every time I see her*.

"Oh." Gloria nodded, shifted on the bench. She flashed a quick glance at Andy. Andy watched her play with the buckle of her envelope purse, tempted to make some sort of comment. Gloria coughed and sputtered out, "Bus is late."

Andy laughed. "Yeah."

As far as coming-outs went, Gloria didn't react too badly. Andy found the awkward sidestep of coming out to strangers more satisfying than her family's first response.

Her script wasn't different then. "I'm gay" got the message across perfectly. Fifteen-year-old Andy spent a year with the two words — "I'm" and "Gay" — clinking around in her unfinished prefrontal cortex (learned from a med student in a party house bathroom) like a pair of gambler's dice. They spilled out onto her mom's tablecloth after she poured a second helping of beans into a styrofoam bowl.

Her stomach fizzed in her family's unsurprised silence. Andy remembered Luisita yawning and the way the twins, Matt and Celeste, kept digging through their bowls like Andy hadn't spoken. A loud smacking of lips around a chunky bite of carnitas preceded her dad's, "When's Pride?" Her mom snorted. The conversation turned back to Matt's girlfriend's kid — paternity pending.

If there was a conference of repressed teenage years for queers — Andy was convinced there was, and she'd missed the invitation somehow — her coming out ranked last. The anti-climax didn't leave much of an impression on Andy. If anything, Andy felt like the biggest part of her life had been solved in that moment. She often thought, alone and drunk in her room, her life lost any mystery or interest then.

Andy wondered if that was why her love life was dead, too. She stockpiled chronologies of girlfriends and partners and let's-not-label-this-yets and



one- to five-night-stands. Andy never brought anyone home. She didn't see a reason to, not when she knew they wouldn't last.

And because nothing around her lasted, Andy never had dreams in the aspirational sense. Her REM-induced visions were filled, instead, with memories of summers on her grandpa's ranch in Veracruz. When her romances reached a dissolution — empty, gray, a little sad — Dad dumped ice and beers into a cooler. They drank and listened to Morrissey until Mom kicked them out of the sala. Andy's mom always wondered (out loud and right after another break up) why Andy even bothered dating if she wasn't serious about relationships in the first place. Mom was focused on the *long run*.

Sylvia Espinoza-Moreno wanted a British Empire of grandkids, the sun always kissing the kiln-fired brown cheeks of an Espinoza-Moreno *somewhere* on the globe. Andy's older siblings had kids already. Manuel, the oldest, had a shutter-shocked picturesque life in California. He taught at the same elementary school as his wife. They had three girls. Andy went to San Francisco Pride with them two years ago. The whole time she wondered if *this* was the life she was supposed to aspire to. A wife and kids. Going to Pride each year. Out on display for the people who couldn't be, with the grandkids Andy's mom was waiting for.

Andy never had dreams — *passions*, her mom called them. Andy graduated high school, winced at the thought of four or more years at a desk, got her cosmetology license, impressed her way into an upscale salon in Montrose, took the bus downtown every day.

It was still raining. The bus was still late. Gloria still wanted to talk. Andy's underarms were still sticky. Everything was sticky. Andy hated the eternal summers of Houston, the way any liquidity in the air bound itself down on a cellular level. If Andy feared commitment, like one of her psych major lovers once suggested, the weather here was enamored with it. Like a haunting. Like the air around her wanted Andy to stay. Andy wasn't sure she agreed with it anymore.

Andy wondered how her grandpa was doing, a thousand miles away, maybe in the same chair as before. The chair next to the table where Andy set down her futures and a plate of mangoes.

*I should call*, Andy thought, *see if anything's changed*. She doubted it. There hadn't been a change in five years, but Andy picked her phone out of her pocket anyway. Her thumb slid over the screen to mark a reminder into her calendar. She jumped a little at

the sudden buzz of a notification. The first few lines solidified at the top of her screen, ...*emailing to confirm your interview time at...*

"...are there?"

Andy dismissed the notification. "What?"

"I asked if there are many gay hairdressers,"

Gloria said.

Andy started to say her salon was in Montrose and that should say everything Gloria needed to know. "As in queer people or lesbians?" She asked instead.

"Lesbians."

"I guess there are," Andy said. "I think just me and Joanna are at my salon, but I'm sure there are others. I know the colorist at our other location is bi for sure."

"Because you dated her?" Gloria asked. Andy shifted against the wall. She didn't want to describe her sex life to a random old lady at the bus stop.

"I'm sorry," Gloria said. "Was that too much?"

"A little." Andy was surprised Gloria asked at all. Andy's mom didn't ask. Maybe Mom thought there was no need to, not when Andy couldn't get anyone to stay.

"There's not much you can do with hairdressing," Gloria said.

Andy's cheeks dropped. "What do you mean?"

Gloria bobbed her shoulders, straightened her back. She looked like a lector stepping up to the pulpit, ready to cut free her Damoclean gospel into the crown of Andy's head. The rain shifted tunes, hammering a marching beat to herald in the Word of Gloria.

"Well, once you become a hairdresser, what else is there to do?" Gloria asked.

"You could manage your own salon." Andy's practiced response. She gave it to herself on late nights scrolling through travel sites, when her only company was a deep serving of añejo. She muttered it while winding her fingers into the same patterns of hair and scissors she'd been performing for years now. Her fingers twitched into action at the thought, trained in the motion so well that Andy didn't have to think much at work. She never really had to in the first place. There was a time when she was okay with that, existing without much thought. It was easier.

"Do you want to?" Gloria asked. Andy must have looked confused because Gloria smiled up at her in an almost maternal way. *Grandmotherly*, Andy thought. She never had the grandmother experience. They died before Andy was born. She only had summers with Grandpa.

Andy's grandpa told her he had always wanted to sell mangoes at the flea market, but he was dispatched to a life as a *carnecero* instead. It was a tradition passed down from Moreno to Moreno. Andy imagined Grandpa like a character in *Night at the Museum*, a living antique with anachronistic skill. His love for fruit cultivation wasn't as profitable as meats. Mangoes were left to cart runners on the side of copper grass-lined roads or in the maize-shadowed market. The Mango Man, for all his soft words and promises, lived at a dead-end stop.

Andy watched her tios teach Matt and Manuel how to build a table once. According to them, the sanding was the most important part. If you went along a grain with an unfitting grit, you created a splinter in waiting — a miraged smooth surface only exposed with a lacquer finish. Grandpa's finish came when the Mango Man died.

Andy pictured herself pressed under the same sticky gloss. Her job — her *life* was fine. It was easy. But a single splinter had begun to stick out, a repeated record scratch in the back of her mind.

"Do you want to start your own salon?" Gloria asked again.

Andy's answer resounded from the far corner of her interiority she'd been stuffing with haircuts and hookups and memories of Grandpa.

Andy always thought she got off easy in the — *Shit, it's been five years* — she'd been a hairdresser. Styling hair wasn't mindless. It could be hard to translate what clients said and what they wanted. A disconnection between external and internal desires Andy had to piece through.

It wasn't mindless, but Andy had started to feel like her grandpa's old Chavela Vargas vinyl. Midway through the record, the needle skipped into the lyrics, *Paloma negra, paloma negra dónde, dónde andará*. Fourteen seconds repeated. Andy used to count them down the way she now counted every twenty-four hours.

When people like Gloria asked her if she was ready for that next step, to get off the predestined route she was on, Andy could hear the answer she wanted to give them in the back of her mind.

No.

"I have an interview," Andy gulped, maybe to stop herself from voicing it out, "To be a flight attendant. Stewardess." She wondered if the wording mattered. "Whatever." The fragments yanked into the air like darts. "It's Friday." Andy dug out her phone again. "I don't think I'll get it. No experience." A nervous giggle tapped out her throat. "Fuck. I haven't even told my mom."

Because telling Mom would make her application more of a choice and less of a vague action Andy took because she was drunk and bored. Andy knew that was why she didn't talk to her mom about her hook ups either, asked about them or not. They weren't real relationships, no future there.

Gloria nodded. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Andy said. Her voice caught up with her ears. That was the first time she'd heard the words out loud, together. She filled out the application on a travel site last night. Andy couldn't say why she sent it in. She just wanted the record skip to stop.

"Thanks," she said again. Andy wilted onto the bench next to Gloria. A flash of lightning illuminated through the square tiles of glass behind her. Andy watched the light flicker onto gray concrete like rows of TV screens. Rainfall fizzed like electronic noise in Andy's ears. She had deflated like this before. A crash of emotional awareness she'd only felt on the flights home from Grandpa's ranch when she compiled the summer into flashback.

Andy remembered waking to the base beat of knives on wood tables each morning. The air in the state of Veracruz didn't stick like Houston, it lingered like a first crush. Andy would sneak out of the kids' room, bare feet over cool concrete floors the color of mourning doves, and play audience for her grandpa's histories. She and her siblings, in their scattered Spanglish, called them *cuentames*, the stories of adults' past lives.

Grandpa only *cuentamed* when he plucked at the slick, fatty fibrous muscles of beef and cabrito and pork and veal like his fingers were leaving calluses on his memories instead of someone's next meal. He sprinkled *brujeria* in scarlet spices, *curanderismo* greened with leaves of basil and bay. Grandpa would scrape a chair to the counter's edge and lean Andy over bubbling bone broth to study the magic herself, telling fortunes in the surface fat.

He told Andy about his loves and hates — his passions. Those stories always led to the market, to Grandpa's mango man.

On Sundays, Andy's mom would let her skip church so she could follow Grandpa in the market. He took Andy on a meander under kaleidoscope tarps frayed through with sunlight like fire opals. At the end of this canopy was the Mango Man, who knew Andy's grandpa well enough to always have freshly cut fruits for him.

The Mango Man was exiled to the very end of the furthest stall in the market. Andy remembered each turn and curve on the winding path Grandpa took to him. Grandpa had known the Mango Man his whole life, he said. *Maybe longer*. Andy didn't know what that meant, but she thought she could see it in the gentle way the Mango Man passed his fruit to her grandpa. Grandpa held the mangoes close to his nose like he could find fine-tuned marbling amongst the amarillo flesh.

The Mango Man let Andy play around his stall and patted her head, calling her nieta even though they weren't related by blood. One day Grandpa said they were all related by something bigger than blood. Andy was thirteen then, cringed at the word *love* that lingered at the sidewalk end of Grandpa's sentence.

Sometimes, Grandpa and the Mango Man would sit at the back of the stall, silent and hidden from sunlight. Andy wasn't supposed to say anything about the way they held hands or how Grandpa rested his head on the Mango Man's shoulder. The other vendors turned away from the Mango Man and Grandpa. Andy watched their polite disapproval linger across the sawdust-colored street. The Mango Man didn't seem to mind. He always held Grandpa's hand, firm and open and still. As Andy got older and "I'm" and "Gay" beat stronger in the back of her mind, she understood the quiet of those Sunday mornings. What was between the Mango Man and Grandpa didn't need to be said. And Andy never needed to explain herself to them. They were and they weren't, a half existence neither out nor in.

Andy and her grandpa always finished market visits whispering their secrets to hummingbird-kissed clusters of cempasuchil. The petals were the first to hear Andy's fears, Grandpa the second. He said most people never wanted the life they had. Andy thought that sounded like death. Grandpa disagreed. He said death was to be nothing and they — he, the Mango Man, and Andy in their strangeness — were No Cosas, No-Things.

All the nothings and never-nots voided Grandpa

up in the end. Andy hadn't returned to his ranch since she graduated. The last time she saw him, he was vacant, unoccupied. His eyes were dulled down. He wasn't cooking. The chair he'd waned into was as good as a grave. He didn't blink when she offered him a plate of mangoes.

On nights she let herself think of him — usually a bottle of añejo down and two Natalia Lafourcade songs away from watching *Frida* again — she pictured him in that grave chair. Empty and gray. A little sad.

Her grandpa was a man gone. His body was there, continuing its work without directive. And if his body could carry on like that, Andy used to think she didn't need dreams or passions. She could just keep rattling along until the void she inherited from Grandpa came to make her a No Cosa, too.

Andy was becoming a woman of muck and mire, sinking down into a perfect preservation. Like Grandpa. Like Gloria.

A bus brake squeal bobbed Andy out of her vignette memory. She still had her phone clutched in her hand, and mimicked Gloria's quick opening of the Metro app. Andy shuffled up the short stairs of the bus behind Gloria and scanned her phone to pay the fare.

Andy passed Gloria to take a seat at the very back, secured out of view.

Andy didn't know why she told Gloria about the interview. Maybe it was the way Gloria had looked at her like they shared something in common while complaining about her shitty marriage.

Andy sunk into the weathered stiff fabric of the bus seat and fiddled with her phone until the email lit the screen again. Licking her lips, Andy let herself fall with the storm outside and clicked Confirm. She and Gloria didn't share anything. Gloria was stuck. Andy wasn't. She was in the process of unsticking. She was peeling herself up from Grandpa's grave chair. Andy was coming out.

---

**Sarah Rodriguez** is a queer, non-binary Chicanx born and raised in Houston, and living in Austin, Texas. They graduated from the University of Houston, where they earned a BA in English, Creative Writing. She can often be found listening to BTS and playing Pokémon. When not working as the marketing and editing fellow at the University of Texas Press, she writes short fiction with a focus on queer and Latinx narratives.

Enjoy this story? Send Sarah a tip to her **Venmo: s\_r\_rodz** (The magazine does not take any percent of tips.)

# an open letter to the south jersey repo company, 1995

Dina Folgia

to whom it may concern / concerning / slow burning felt for the man left weeping  
broke / broken / brakes newly fixed under cherry red aluminum / all new / call to god  
in tantrum / tandem / a near-tantric shocked embrace tears falling from cheek to street  
a wife and her grown man / manly / ma'am please sign here we have other places  
to be / behave / between a rock and a debt place / fret place / wet face turned into  
the crook of her neck begging money from thin air / thinning hair / twin bare  
palms coated in sweat and painted in mechanic grime / whine / time to greet  
ten years of missed car payments / pay rent / in layman's screeching terms  
we were never destined to look poor always gilded / tilted / willed into  
existence a life without the repo man licking / nitpicking / sticking to the  
bumper of my father's defaulted car / salt-laden tar / on par with his father leaving  
a garish empty house for a mother of three / see / repossessed an entire family  
beginning a chain of claiming / reclaiming / explaining how easily trees can burn  
from the very root / the very brute / the very route from father to father to daughter  
fumbling money all the way down / downward / crown her the winner of the great  
jones race keeping up / and sleeping up / and creeping up from the poorest garden soil  
to the thinnest shaking leaf / brief / thief in the night except he's the thief and his dad  
is also the thief so there's no one to blame / defame / stake their claim but the flower  
who tries to grow her bud from a shattered branch / battered branch / no chance  
in hell she'll grow enough to feed her own roots / that slow-grown fruit / suits her well  
pinching pennies until she can shake instability from her forest / flourish / no more rest  
only green diligence and restlessness here / money-barren frontier / sincerely yours

---

**Dina Folgia** is a poet based out of southern New Jersey. She was an honorable mention for the 2021 Penrose Poetry Prize, and was a 2020 AWP Intro Journals Project nominee. Her work can be found in *Glassworks* magazine, and forthcoming in the *South Florida Poetry Journal* and *Sidereal Magazine*. Follow her writing journey on Twitter: @dinafolgia

Enjoyed Dina's work? Send a tip straight to her **Venmo: @dina-folgia**



# Cabin Fever

Ashley Gilland

**From the Artist on “Cabin Fever”**

I wrote this song about my cabin fever during a low period of my summer depression, pre-Covid, but the song and video have had renewed relevance from the pandemic and remain poignant for even more people than before. The video, filmed while home alone, attempts to show my day-to-day activities trying to get myself to do something, anything. The song was later released to all streaming services in 2020 on my first EP, *Robin’s Egg Blue*.



---

**Ashley Gilland** is a writer, musician, multimedia artist, and student from Missouri. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Currents*, *Boats Against the Current*, and *Dishsoap Quarterly*. When not writing poetry and philosophical flash fiction, she also loves composing and recording music, embroidering mixed media art projects, and helping with the campus radio station. Find her music on Spotify and Bandcamp, her art on Instagram and Etsy (@pocketsnailart), and her tweets at @earlgreysnail.

Enjoyed Ashley’s work? Send a tip straight to her **Venmo: Ashley-Gilland-1**

# Dolabela Engineer

Guilherme Bergamini



Reporter photographic and visual artist, **Guilherme Bergamini** is Brazilian and graduated in Journalism. For more than two decades, he has developed projects with photography and the various narrative possibilities that art offers. The works of the artist dialogue between memory and social political criticism. He believes in photography as the aesthetic potential and transforming agent of society. Awarded in national and international competitions, Guilherme Bergamini participated in collective exhibitions in 50 countries.

Enjoyed Guilherme's work? Send a tip straight to his **PayPal: [guibergamini@gmail.com](mailto:guibergamini@gmail.com)**

# naked limits

Marc Huerta Osborn

dew and frost condense my window view—  
rain and consciousness cross at  
    blighted angles  
before shooting off into separate rooms. sleepwalking,  
I skip across mushroom caps  
    toward the fog of my grandfather's dream—  
    water flashes,  
passengers board the angler  
fish, which can't see past  
    her own lovely lure, light-  
    -at-the-end-of-the-tunnel type of sight:  
cataracts, flatnesses  
flow down a stone cold reservoir, dumping  
final freshness upon a numb-blooded  
    nerve—nothing  
stirs beyond the glass, nothing  
    robs the morning of its miracle, nothing  
robs the moment of its static.

---

**Marc** is a writer and educator living in Alameda, California. His poetry appears or is forthcoming in *Rust + Moth*, *The Acentos Review*, *Ghost City Review*, and *Juked*. His biggest creative influences are pelicans, music, cartoons, and dreams.

Enjoyed Marc's work? Send a tip straight to his **Venmo: @Marc-Osborn-1**



# A Queer Indie Game Gave Me Carpal Tunnel - Just One More Way The Body Keeps The Score.

## Tenacity Plys

*Content Warnings: trauma, addiction, mental health issues.*

There aren't many things in this life that I've done for more than 250 hours. Mostly it's the activities at the core of my being: writing, wandering around Prospect Park, social media stalking people I don't talk to anymore. And now *Hades*, the game that gave me carpal tunnel and filled my Twitter feed with X-rated fanart.

It took me about two months of playing *Hades* before I developed carpal tunnel syndrome from the wrist-mashing action of the game's combat. The flow state I enter during the game makes me immune to physical signals like thirst, having to pee, and the tingling or stabbing sensations associated with carpal tunnel. Instead of stopping, I now play with braces on my wrists.

For a sense of proportion, there have been times in my life when I wrote 10,000 words a day for the jigsaw puzzle of freelance gigs that made up my income, and I never got carpal tunnel from that. It took fighting the Minotaur to blow out my median nerves that hard. And actually, during a full run of the game you usually have to fight the Minotaur twice.

Carpal tunnel is just one repetitive stress injury associated with gaming, along with "gamer's thumb" and the flamboyantly named "de Quervain's Tenosynovitis." These injuries are the mark of enthusiasm, like a ballerina's feet, or (more dangerously) the concussions that come from playing football. Medieval monks lost their eyesight from reading by candlelight; history's first short-sighted nerds. The body is a plant twisting itself toward light, or it's clipped like a bonsai tree.

Engaging with something physically (or tricking your brain into thinking you are) makes it feel more real to you. Books metaphorically take you to another world, but games literally do. When I play, I am Zagreus. I'm not literally holding a sword, but it's my body's movements that control his sword. I don't call it his sword while I play; I call it *my* sword. I don't even refer to the Zagreus on the screen as Zagreus. I'm fighting the Minotaur, I'm entering Tartarus, oh fuck oh shit *I'm* about to die.

Since just imagining something happening affects your brain in almost the same way as the real thing, a simulated world in which you have clear physical agency



must psychologically register as real. That was the whole point of *Spy Kids: 3D*, and also of Marshall McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message."

Carpal tunnel happens when you chronically irritate your median nerve with the same movements and positioning—it's called a repetitive stress injury. Physical repetition doesn't just erode your body's more fallible parts, it creates muscle memories and intuitive knowledge by wiring both your neurons and their activation patterns. It's like getting calluses on your fingers from playing the guitar. As you may or may not know from experience, usually your fingers are raw and red for a while first.

The way you spend your time becomes part of you; it molds your brain, which is part of your body, and which controls the rest of your body. It becomes one of the physical clues an alien archaeologist might use to reconstruct your lifestyle.

*Hades* is just the latest experience to become part of my physical fossil record, one more bit of debris in the very crowded geology of my bodymind. I experience acid flashbacks every now and then, my body reacting to the traces of trips that happened years ago. I'm told my pinky is kind of fucked up because of my phone, too—or maybe that's just from the weight of my copy of *Infinite Jest*.

Quitting drugs altered my body as much as drugs did. Sobriety is like pulling the plug of a desktop computer and restarting it—everything goes black. Starting up again takes time, and you can lose everything you were working on before. I lost weight, but that's because I was too anxious to eat a lot of the time, and I noticed my handful of white hairs were multiplying much faster than before.

After restarting my nervous system from scratch, my body almost couldn't tolerate being out of the house all day for work; I got home and had no energy left. It felt like I couldn't get enough sleep no matter how much time I spent in bed, and socializing for more than two hours made me feel like my face was stretched so taut over the bones of my skull that I could barely make "normal" facial expressions anymore. It has taken the whole five years for me to be okay again, and I am not okay again.

Next to all the other ways my past has hurt me, carpal tunnel doesn't even make the top ten, since I can basically make it go away by wearing wrist braces when I type.

I wonder if I would prefer not to have been hurt. I wonder what that might feel like, to just...not be hurt. I don't know if I could really choose that though. Most of my life would be gone, after all.

If my physical being is a record of my experiences, *Hades* is now written on my body. I have literal writing on my body, a tattoo designed by someone I loved who went on to hurt me. I have experiences written in my memory with the stark ink of trauma, less faded over time than that tattoo. At the end of my life, all I will have is this collection of physically or mentally inscribed experiences, along with my "I Survived The Human Condition And All I Got Was This T-Shirt" t-shirt.

I always see people posting "this destroyed me" or "brb, emotionally recovering" about artwork that has physically affected them by creating emotional responses in their nervous systems. I see people make those posts about *Hades*! People say these things when they've deeply resonated with the art in question, so is it actually good (or at least not bad) for art to hurt? Is writing something on your body in a painful way bad, if you choose it? That's what a tattoo is.

I know people who have used tattoos to cover up their scars from self harm. Sometimes new wounds can cover up old ones. Maybe that's what it really means to heal through stories? Though maybe that doesn't apply to carpal tunnel—just emotional wounds. Maybe fetishizing my own woundedness doesn't help me heal either my body or my brain (which is part of my body).

When I read *The Body Keeps The Score* this year (I know, how did I not read it sooner; everyone read it a hundred years ago and I am a full century late to the party), I learned that fixating on one's trauma is a trauma symptom. Trauma fixes you in place and time, making the story of your life seem like it begins and ends with your wounds. In fact, most of the characters in *Hades* have some major loss or wound that Zagreus has to help them move past—he's not just the Underworld's greatest warrior, he's also the Underworld's only shrink.

When you meet Orpheus for the first time in Hades, he's refusing to sing for Hades because he's too devas-

tated by the loss of Euridice. You can talk to him as many times as you want; you just get different one-liners about “ah, my sweet Euridice, forever lost!” or “how can I give song without my muse to inspire?” He’s a broken record. My poor goth son.

Since every *Hades* character’s problem is basically that they’re estranged from someone and need to reconcile with them, it’s not so hard to solve their problems. Zagreus finds that everybody actually wants to start talking to their ex again, and plays go-between to make it happen. It’s harder when what you’ve lost is more intangible, more irretrievable, than a person—or just as intangible and irretrievable as a person.

Sometimes processing emotions is an excuse for wallowing in emotions, and that’s basically the story of my life. If I’m so determined to both escape my emotions and forever dwell on them through story that I’m burning out my median nerve, maybe I should have told my therapist about this instead of writing an essay, or playing this gay roguelike game. My therapist might say I owe it to myself to write care on my body, instead of half-gleefully chronicling all the times when I and others have written worse. Since re-memobering old pain is re-living it, it may chronically irritate those wounds rather than healing them. (Forgive my Anne Carson-style word dissection.)

Since I started writing this essay, I actually found out that my eyesight is degenerating faster than average for someone who wears glasses, because I look at my phone too much and read for long periods of time without looking away from my book. To keep my eyes from straining, I’m supposed to look out my window for twenty seconds, every twenty minutes or so. This makes my eyes use their far-away-things muscles and rest their close-up-things muscles. Maybe that’s what my irritated nervous system needs—a change in focus every now and then. It may be hard to make myself do that for 250 hours, but maybe by hour 10 I will already inhabit a body that’s more willing to heal.

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**Tenacity Plys** (xe/xir) is a nonbinary writer based in Brooklyn, with previous publications in *Alien Buddha*, *WordGathering*, *Pif Magazine*, and *BlazeVOX*. Xir short story “I Love My AI Son” will be included in *Alien Buddha’s* Best of 2022 anthology.

Enjoyed Tenacity’s work? Send a tip straight to xir **Venmo: @Giorgi-Plys-Garzotto**

# What Girls Think About

Angelica Esquivel



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**Angelica Esquivel** is a Xicana writer and artist from Fostoria, Ohio. She received the 2021 Zocalo Prize in Poetry. Her work has appeared in *America Magazine*, *Chestnut Review*, *Cream City Review*, and *Great Lakes Review*. She lives in Ypsilanti, Michigan with her husband and two dogs.

Enjoyed Angelica's work? Send a tip straight to her **PayPal: [esquivea@umich.edu](mailto:esquivea@umich.edu)**

# Mountain Pose

Sarah Louise

Vertigo: benign, positional. I'm thirty when it starts, one September morning when I'm walking home from the public swimming pool. The carbon monoxide and diesel fumes I inhale along the way, together with the chlorine I've been swallowing for the last half hour, add up to a dizzying combination. I get as far as the metal fence that runs along the far end of my backyard when I'm pulled off to the right as sure as if that side of my body is magnetized or the hand of God has reached down and yanked me over for a chat. The whooshing sound inside my head is all I can hear. I manage to hang on to the fence, chanting "you'll be OK, you'll be OK" under my breath and looking like a broad daylight drunk to the Asian neighbor lady in the next yard. I can tell from the way she goes on watering her parsley patch the size of a welcome mat, as desperate to avoid eye contact as I am to make it.

Ten or fifteen minutes pass before I can let go and meander across the lawn to the kitchen door. I go to bed for three days, which is how long it takes to get my equilibrium back. That was a few years ago. The neighbor lady is probably a grandmother now. No doubt she's aged well, partly because of the parsley, which must have proliferated into enough welcome mats for every house on the block. Instead of lemonade, her grandkids sell dime bags of the healthy green garnish and use the money to buy boxes of frozen corn dogs at WalMart. Their mothers serve them with pickles and soy sauce and pray at the family altar for the first killing frost, though they love their own mother very much and also

pray for her long life.

I don't know. I left town to go to cooking school. Japanese: \$5000 sushi knives, blowfish. That didn't last long. When you drop one of those knives it shatters like a porcelain vase.

\*

Or maybe it starts when I'm 11. One minute Mom is hauling me around the kitchen by my hair and the next thing I know I'm sitting in the middle of the oval dining room rug wondering how I got there. That scared her and she was nice to me for almost a week, until it happened again and she decided I was faking it.

\*

I'm crouched on the stone floor near the front door, tying the dirty laces on my Reeboks. Strips of setting sunlight coming through the half open blinds of the window behind me are full of dust. Minnie the cat is watching my feet, muscles poised to spring out of my unpredictable path. I'm about to take a short weave to the park. Weave instead of walk makes me smile. I swivel slowly to face the door and pull myself up by the knob. So far so good. Some days I'm as well balanced as the next person. Other days, I have a whole different perspective on life.

It's Halloween and there's a party at the Park for the kids. Trick or treaters never come to my street, since most of the houses are empty and for sale, so the only way I get to see them is finding a bench in the Park and watching them bob for apples or ride the merry-go-round. The place is packed. A lot of witches, vampires,



and cheerleaders are milling around. A tiny turkey wearing a lobster bib and drooling rides by on the shoulders of a man dressed like Ollie Dragon – the turkey’s grandfather, I figure. My favorite is Dolly Parton, especially after one of her foam boobs drops into the apple barrel and floats away from its owner. Friends tell me my sense of humor was arrested in early adolescence. I don’t remember laughing at all when I was a kid.

My dad was a baker. Every Halloween he came home with big trays of chocolate eclairs for the event. In those days people didn’t worry about razor blades in the goodies, though we did get skeptical looks from a few parents. Eclairs weren’t the kind of thing you could toss in with the rest of your loot. They required thought and resulted in some hesitant little hands. That was dad all right, planted in the doorway dressed in his spotless bakery whites, a let’s get down to business look on his face. Good times came with a price.

\*

I’ve been doing yoga again. They say it’s good for your balance, all kinds. The teacher’s name is Renee. She’s serene, sixtyish with snow white hair and perfect posture, but lithe, flexible. She moves through the positions as though she’s made of warm wax. Mountain Pose, Downward Dog, Warrior, Child, Cat. A soothing CD plays in the background, a cross between Gregorian chant and Enya.

The yoga class is in a spare room at the community center, next door to Poncho Villa High School. Outside our windows, the marching band is practicing for the homecoming game on the football field. Instead of being annoyed by this, Renee asks us to invite the sound into our yoga experience, the way we’d welcome good friends into our homes. A few months ago I would have snickered at such a suggestion, but love changes things.

\*

I move a lot. That’s always a mystery to the friends I leave behind. They wonder why a person who has so much trouble walking a straight line would want to go be a stranger someplace. I don’t tell them it gets harder as I get older or that I cry a lot when I get where I’m going.

When I move to this town I cry enough to replenish the depleted reservoir. It’s New Year’s Eve, the sun has set, the hotels are full, and all I can see from the driver’s seat of my yellow Datsun are fast food joints and discount auto part stores. Where are all the centuries old adobe buildings I’d seen in Ansel Adams photographs from the forties? I’ve been lusting after the Southwest since I took an anthropology course in college about the

Hopis and Zunis. Have my romantic impulses gotten the better of me one more time?

I wind up at the Blue Cactus Motel and Pottery Emporium, ringing in the New Year with the TV set on mute and a pint of tequila. It’s a sorry night but by mid-afternoon the next day things are looking up. I find the old center of town, St. Francis’ Cathedral at one end and the Coyote Café at the other. I buy myself a coffee and take a seat at a table on the roof of the Café. The sun is bright and even though it’s January and there’s snow on the foothills behind the Cathedral, I have to peel off my jacket and the sweater underneath. People are walking around the streets in shirt sleeves, posing for pictures, and browsing the sidewalk vendors for turquoise jewelry that matches the color of the sky. Home at last, my every nook and cranny is shouting.

Within a week I’m renting an adobe casita with stone floors and inlaid tile in all three rooms. I land a job at a bakery on Burro Alley, owned by a couple of women with big plans. They put me in charge of the bread and don’t care how many batter scrapers I drop. If there’s a place more heavenly, I don’t think I’d be able to stand it.

\*

Renee came to the Southwest from central New York State. She was used to big bodies of water, tall trees, and flat land. The contrast threw her permanently off kilter. She likes to say that the red rock canyons, flowering cactus, and cold mountain streams set her at a 90° angle to her old self. Any time she wants she can wave at who she used to be while keeping on with who she is. Along with yoga, trout fishing has become her passion and her livelihood. I’ve been to the workshop behind her house. She spends hours there every day when she’s not teaching, tying flies that are famous in these parts for their beauty and complexity. I want to tell her I’m in love with her for those very same qualities but I can’t get the words out. It’s like each one is stamped on a tiny self-adhesive square of vinyl stuck to the inside of my throat.

\*

There are two dreams I’ve been having ever since I can remember. In one of them the faces change according to where I’m living and who I know, but the action is always the same. Since I met Renee the dream goes like this. She and I are having a relationship whose exact nature is unclear. We have a fight, she calls an old partner and asks, “Do you

still love me?" The answer is a slice of deep fried potato shaped like a cupped hand and covered in something red. I have no idea what this means. Is the red stuff blood? If so, whose? Has the hand been abusing Renee or does the red stuff indicate what torture it's been for the partner to be without her? Maybe it's just ketchup. I mention this dream to Renee. She says she's just had one where she asked a former lover the same question. She also says, "If there was something between you and me, you can bet I wouldn't be calling somebody else."

\*

Mountain Pose looks like this: stand tall, legs together, arms over your head reaching for the heavens. Suck in your stomach, stretch your torso, breathe deeply. Your feet should feel rooted in the earth, the energy rising through your spinal column and radiating from the top of your head and the tips of your fingers should make you feel as holy and imposing as Everest. Your purpose is clear, your motives are pure, you do not waver.

I practice this position every day. I can usually hold it for two or three minutes. Once I held it for five, out behind my casita at sundown. The smell of sage is especially strong in the early evening. In the waning light, the Sangre de Cristos look purple, the snow on the peaks a pale rose. The sight makes me want to genuflect.

\*

The Corn Dance Bakery, where I work, supplies bread to most of the big restaurants in town. We start baking at two a.m. and we're finished by eight. I spend the morning delivering – I drive and Diane unloads. Diane's one of the owners. She's a black woman from Atlanta, a rare bird in these parts and she loves it. Sometimes we talk about what a change this is for her. "My mother taught me to be a very careful little black girl," she said once. "Polite was good but invisible was best, specially when it came to little white girls." The bane of her existence was a blonde who lived on the next block. For years Diane had to walk by her house on the way to school and the girl was always waiting for her in the middle of the sidewalk, arms and legs stuck out, so that Diane had to step into the road to get around her. "Keep your eyes down and don't say a word," Diane's mother said every morning. To this day Diane hates anything yellow.

"I can't blame Ma," Diane says. "She was scared and she wanted me to live through my childhood."

Once in a while Diane comes to yoga class. She tells me it's obvious Renee has the hots for me. It's her

way of telling me it's O.K. to go after what I want, even if I list a little to one side on my approach.

\*

The second dream I keep having is about watching myself float through space with my arms around an enormous white pillow. It is, of course, completely silent. There are no other objects in the darkness, which is also complete, though I have no trouble seeing myself. The biggest impression the dream leaves on me has to do with the texture of the pillow. It feels like nothing else I have ever touched, nothing that words can describe, and I know that as long as I hold onto it I'll be safe.

\*

It's nearly Christmas, my first in this other-worldly place. Renee has gone to New York to visit her boys – one's a cop and the other's an interior designer. Before she leaves I give her a card and tell her not to open it until the 25th. On the front is a warmly lit adobe house. A cat is sitting on a corner of the flat roof, two dogs are playing in the snow. A gibbous moon draws the eye toward the far horizon. The message inside is *Happy Holidays – Looking Forward to More Special and Surprising Time Together in the New Year, Love, Me.*

The folks from the bakery are coming to my place Christmas Day for a few hot toddies and a Star Trek fest. None of us have family in town and twenty four hours of commercial free Trek reruns is just the cure for the blues. All the best episodes will be on, including my favorite, the one where Captain Picard loses consciousness and lives an entire lifetime in the twenty minutes it takes Dr. Crusher to revive him. Diane's a real sucker for the Captain – British accent, impeccable manners, brains, charisma. If she could find the likes of him in black skin she'd die a happy woman, or so she says.

\*

Sometimes I wake up dizzy. It happens less and less as I get older but it usually means a day or two in bed without turning to the left or right because that makes the spinning worse. It also means, hard as I try to resist, an overwhelming urge to pack up and move on, as though the vertigo will disappear if only I can find the right geographical location.

I could learn a lesson from Minnie, my cat. Occasionally she gets an abscess at the base of her tail. She spends a few days growling and running away from herself, but then she's better and goes right back to feeling at home again.

\*

Before Renee goes to New York I invite her to my casita. We're sitting on the floor, between the couch and the coffee table, eating popcorn and drinking hot cider. There's a fire going. Joni Mitchell's *Blue* is in the CD player.

We talk about family, not the ones we have but the ones we wished for as kids. My dream was that I'd turn into an orphan and be adopted by the big Irish Catholic family down the street. There were six children. Bobby, the oldest girl, was a cheerleader at St. Patrick's. We were friends for awhile, until she found out I wasn't really a cheerleader too. Our schools used to play basketball against each other, and one afternoon I ran out of excuses for not being at the game. Bobby asked a girl on our squad where I was and that's when the jig was up. I can't remember why I thought she'd only be friends with me if I was a cheerleader. At the end of that school year, I decided to run away from home. I went to Bobby's house and her mother, a tall blonde wearing a shirt dress and a pearl necklace, took me upstairs to her bedroom. We sat down on the bed and I told her my story. She gave me a good long hug, then told me she was sure my mother loved me and was worried about where I was. That made me cry because I knew I'd have to stick it out at home for another six years, until I was eighteen and old enough to move out. The loaded gun under Dad's pillow made me wonder if I'd be lucky enough to live that long.

Renee's parents weren't bad, just indifferent. What she wished for was some excitement in her life, a father who yelled NO once in a while, a mother who cheered her on and told her it was important to play the violin or learn how to spell. Parents who knew how to hug and kiss each other like they were in love when she was peeking through their bedroom door. Real feeling of any kind.

*Blue* came out in 1971. Renee and I both remember hearing it for the first time. I was with my best friend, who taught me everything I know about music and food. Renee was already a mother. "That record used to make me wish I could have my twenties back, or at least play the piano," she says.

"I was in my twenties when the album came out," I

say.

Renee smiles. "Play it again," she says.

I walk over to the CD player on my knees and push the repeat button, then back to the coffee table. I sit on my heels and admire her profile. The fine lines at the corners of her eye and mouth begin to deepen the way they do when she laughs or has something big on her mind.

"What are you thinking," I ask, topping up Renee's cider from the warm carafe and adding a cinnamon stick.

Minnie jumps onto the table and rubs the side of her face on Renee's chin.

"That things take me by surprise lately," Renee says, petting the cat's arched back.

"Like what?"

"Good things mostly, except for this maybe," she says, pointing to the bandaged index finger of her left hand. "I was tying a fly when the phone rang and the hook went right through."

"Let me see," I say.

"I thought it might be you," she says, as I close my hand over her finger, careful not to apply any pressure.

"That must have hurt," I say, lowering her wounded hand to my knee. *I could drink a case of you*, Joni sings.

Renee slides closer slowly. She extends her legs on either side of me, making me feel uncommonly steady. We look at each other for a long while, as though we are getting used to a new and fine idea.

---

**Sarah Louise** and her two kitties live in northern Colorado by way of New York, Canada, and New Mexico. She teaches college writing classes online, writes, hikes. Her stories and poetry have been published in magazines, journals, and anthologies, including *Quarry*, *The Fiddlehead*, *Prism international*, *Contemporary Verse II*, *Descant*, *The Canadian Forum*, *Canadian Woman Studies*, *The Cimarron Review*, *Vestal Review*, *Sixfold Poetry Summer 2018*, and *Epiphany*.

Enjoyed Sarah's work? Send a tip straight to her **PayPal** [sarahlouise@cybermesa.com](mailto:sarahlouise@cybermesa.com)



# Axiomatic: Music for the People

Rafael Rosa

## From the Artist on “Axiomatic: Music for the People”

“Axiomatic: Music For The People” is a composition that came about a few years back when another musician asked me if I played music as an artist or as a plumber. I made this tune so hopefully people could access a type of originality and organicness lacking in some of today’s “Perfect” music. It explains itself if it makes you move!



**Rafael Rosa** has been performing and teaching for the past 12 years in Brooklyn. He has performed with the likes of Ben Rosenblum’s Nebula Project, Luba Mason’s Mixtura, Cody Geil’s Bon Musique, and his own original band amongst other collaborations. He is currently part of the Faculty at LIU’s ROCNATION, and has taught at other colleges like NYU, CUNY, Saint John’s University, The Brooklyn Music School, Stevens Cooperative and his private studio: The Brooklyn Rock Academy, helping students graduate to colleges like Berklee College of Music, Wells College, Indiana University, etc.

Liked Rafael’s work? Send him a tip straight to his **Venmo: @therafaelrosa** or **Paypal: @professorrosa**



# Ancestras

Miriam Damaris Maldonado

Me parezco a ella  
y no quiero,  
pero tampoco  
quiero deshabitar  
y desterrarme de mis gestos  
Me parezco a ella  
más que a mi abuela  
que guardó el ashé en mis cabellos  
el aceite de coco  
desenredando miedos  
y malas costumbres.

Me parezco a ella,  
desnuda de privilegios  
guardando caracolas  
en mi sonrisa  
mientras diente por diente me contaba  
de todos los amantes que nunca tuvo.

Me parezco  
a ella que rechazó el incienso  
que respira en la mirada  
que esconde además a la otra abuela  
la gitana  
de mirada corta

nariz un poco ancha  
un poco puti-aguda  
fosa que conserva los olores de esas dos abuelas  
una, con sus collares, que Yemayá le ayuda a enhebrar,  
delantal manchado de amores para nietas enredadas  
con olor a libertad de aceituna  
en el centro de la masa-  
pastel amarrao,  
porque sí.

Sí, me parezco a ella en cada línea  
que no escribo, en las pausas, en las sombras  
en los silencios, en ser hija de la violencia.

Es porque ella, huérfana de mí, huérfana de la hija  
de la herencia, de los sabores y olores  
que habitan en mis labios  
entreabiertos  
insiste en olvidar las recetas, hechizos, cuentos  
donde los jugos convergen  
y se vuelven pócima  
cundiamores,  
Me parezco a sus labios  
dónde mis abuelas  
van sanando.

---

Award winning poet, **Miriam Damaris Maldonado** is an active promoter of cultural events in Houston and founder/member of Colectivo Colibrí. Besides writing and performing her poetry at literary festivals, she is also an essayist, narrator, dancer and activist. She also serves the community as a Social Worker and as a member of the Colectivo de Grupos Puertorriqueños de Houston.

Enjoyed Miriam's work? Send a tip straight to her PayPal: [mirdamy@yahoo.com](mailto:mirdamy@yahoo.com)

# Looking Through Another

William Michael Day



**Michael Day** is a combat veteran of the United States Marine Corps and an alumnus of both Northwestern University and Columbia University. He is a writer, producer, spoken word poet, cinematographer and photographer, having worked on feature films, documentaries, short films, and commercials with companies such as Universal, NBC, and BBC. Michael has produced his own short film called *Tango on the Balcony* and has a forthcoming voice driven war narrative entitled *Deathnotes*.

Enjoyed Michael's work? Send a tip straight to his **PayPal:** [william.michael.day@gmail.com](mailto:william.michael.day@gmail.com)

# In Transit: Identity, Frankenstein, and Patchwork Princesses

Acadia Currah

*You are a messy, melting-candle-wax amalgamation of everyone who has ever loved you.*

When you read Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* you thought about how to be a puzzle piece woman. To feel the cool metal of an assembling-table against your back, glacial and detached as a behind-the-counter "Would you like fries with that?" hospitality stare. How to dissect each part of you separately, where is your father in the way you hold eye contact a second too long, your mother in the way you lean against walls even though it's colder that way? Where is Ottawa, Ontario in your too-big voice and broken doc martens? See the stitches connecting your fingers and hands and wrists, would they break with nothing to hold them together? Can something be fixed without glue? Without industrial strength bonding to keep it from cracking open to the molding marrow of your heart? How to have one piece of you fit seamlessly into another. You might have to break off things, you might have to put them away.

Your room has always been the coldest in the house, even when you moved. It's like you take it with you. You carry it in your hands, keep the cold deep in a fist you haven't unclenched since you were thirteen. You try to find individuality in the frostbite but come out the other end with split knuckles and wind-burned cheeks.

You're on a subway and everything smells like city and you want to go home, want to belong to something, more than you want to be from somewhere. The barista is smiling "What can I get for you?", an Americano, it's disgusting. You are trying to be a bitter-coffee-girl, a black leather jacket mystery, a glacier stare at the guy who cuts you off in line, but you say "excuse me"

too quietly and you ask the barista how her day is going. You are still volatile. "Firecracker" "Livewire". Too much. You wish someone would press a hand to your forehead and give you a cool cloth. To say "You do not need to be a fuse, I will hear you even if you do not blow." Your skin is too warm to touch, the cosmetics woman says you're an autumn. You wear winter colors anyway.

Name, age, date of birth, eye colour, sex, place of birth. "Where are you from?". And you're from Ottawa, Ontario except for when it rains and you think "Typical." Then you're from Vancouver, or your dorm room, or the sidewalk outside of the thrift store. Your heart, a scarf, and three photo ID's from schools you don't go to anymore are jangling around an OC transpo lost and found bin. You're from there then, you must be. You are from your mother when she puts chocolate in the fridge and reminds you to wear a scarf, and you are from your father when you work too much and bring your friends to the grocery store when they are upset. You're from a middle school guidance counselors office, face in your palm and thinking about God. You're from a bus seat, a confession booth. An amalgamation of girls in rooms wishing they were somewhere, anywhere else. You wonder if you can be from somewhere you've never been, if being from somewhere means you have to have cataloged each faded street sign, memorized the way autumn breaking smells in the air, or if you can belong to somewhere without anything tangible. You belong to Paris when you smell cigarette smoke, New York when you forget to say thank you to the bus driver, You belong

to the stitches in your legs holding you together, you are a Frankenstein girl, who put them there? Is birth the ultimate creation, or is it the constant, ever present redressing of wounds. To create something bigger, to be from a stitch connecting your heart to your ribcage. To be from somewhere else entirely the second you get on the train and look out the window, you are from wherever you are going. The same mentality that drove your crooked twelve-year-old grin to say “Whoever’s winning” when asked which hockey team you were rooting for. You are a study in a practiced, maintained ability to assimilate. Do not check google maps, don’t take pictures, eyes straight ahead, shoulders squared and fixed. Your voice should sound measured and practiced when ordering at a coffee shop, you’ve done it a million times, even if you’re just passing through, there’s a need for the order to melt on your tongue, to hit their ears as “My usual”, though you’d never actually say that. You have never frequented anywhere long enough to have a usual, always a “hand in the cookie jar” guilt tied to familiarity, always “This is not yours”. Still you say thank you when they hand you the coffee, and head off like you’re someone very busy, like maybe you’re going to a job, like you make this walk every day, and it isn’t such a big deal to you. Caught in a sick purgatory between a need to adapt and a want to be seen, to be observed by someone and have them think “I wonder if I will see her on my walk home tomorrow”.

You can be from “Pretty” and “Girl” If you are those things. And maybe you’re from a stage, delivering a monologue trying not to sound too much like your first acting teacher, the one who said you were better suited for aggressive roles. You have an artificial-spotlight-warmth blush, bright lights seek to drown you if you do not pack on too-heavy mascara and too-porcelain foundation, anchor head with a different-colored neck. And you, the performer, the narrator, taking personality quizzes trying to find some origin story a-la-Spiderman. Can you be the super-girl? The wonder boy with an uncontrollable knack for pyrokinesis. Are you from ENFJ? From Enneagram Type Three? The debater or the achiever? You need to be both envied and ignored. To be seen only as an apparition,

to be a “I wish I was her.” Followed by a “Where’d she go?” You are still walking through unfamiliar streets trying to look like you are walking home. Trying to look like there’s some string with a warm familiar place at one end and you at the other, tied around your waist tugging you forward.

You are trying to be from something new. You are trying to be a coffee-scented-library brown heeled boots girl with wire rimmed glasses and a razor blade tongue. She can read yellowed pages and drink mulled wine and look up from under her eyelashes. You want to be her, and her, and red-lipstick pencil-in-mouth quipping back and forth with someone important. Elusive and witty and “How does she do it?”. You want to be a new person everywhere you go.

You are a grotesque mosaic of everyone you’ve ever loved. Your mother raised a sweet, well-mannered girl, so you are a bullet-mouthed, thorny-core grown-up with a mango pit heart. Fleshy-sweet around, hard and inedible, gutli girl. There is a cliché, you think, in opposition, in rebellion. You want to be from nobody but yourself, want to be your own. But you are, despite yourself, hip-checking cabinets closed like your mom, picking up texting-lingo from your best friend. You are a Russian nesting doll girl, doomed to love and be loved, doomed to hear a “Just like your father”, an, “Hey, I showed you that song”, again, again, and again.

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**Acadia Currah** (She/They) is an essayist and poet residing in Vancouver, British Columbia. Their work explores her relationship with gender, sexuality, and religion. She is a leather-jacket-lavender-latte-toting lesbian, her work seeks to reach those who most need to hear it. They have been published in *The Spotlong Review*.

Enjoyed Acadia’s work? Send them a tip straight to their **PayPal: [acadiacurrahcane@gmail.com](mailto:acadiacurrahcane@gmail.com)**



# Untitled Poem About This Body

Jae Eason

I.

On a day, during a month that I will forget, I ask my mom for a hysterectomy. In her Long Island accent, which I believe she sometimes overplays, she responds, "Are you crazy?" And maybe I am crazy, and maybe I am trying to disconnect myself from the things that don't feel like mine.

II.

This cunt is not mine. Did you know, the last time I masturbated, I sobbed. Hadn't touched myself in months, but forced myself after multiple glasses of wine. Wanted to remember what pleasure felt like in this body instead of fear, but I trembled on my bed as tears drenched my skin and my dildo lay limp beside me.

III.

Let me find the knife and amputate these tubes. I never want to be engorged with life. And maybe I am crazy, but I want my womb to be the thing that is solely mine. When they one day cut this body open, I want them to only see guts.

IV.

When thinking of all the babies I do not wish to have, I think of all the people who wish to have babies, but cannot. Sometimes I see this urge for sterilization as selfish. But I think about it more than I think about fucking.

V.

And maybe I am crazy. But there is something foreign in here and it has possessed a key for too long. How do I plead to the doctor to take out what isn't mine? I can no longer pretend that I am okay with this.

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**Jae Eason** is a poet from Long Island, New York. They studied English Literature at Arizona State University. While there, they won a Swarthout Award in Poetry. They currently work as an Office Manager at Brooklyn Poets and an English Teacher in South Korea. If they are not up to all the normal things people usually do, they're most likely having an existential crisis.

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# A Cordial Haunting

Kayla King

Kyle's ghost drops into the kitchen through the ceiling. It's seven-thirty in the morning, and Natasha is eating a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch soaked in black coffee over the sink. Kyle doesn't usually come down for breakfast. It's a nice surprise.

"This is a nice surprise," Natasha says.

"Why are you eating that stuff? It's disgusting."

Kyle's nose wrinkles. His skin is opaque, pearly, but flushed with color. He looks as alive as the day he died.

"Tradition," Natasha says. Her mother had eaten it that way all her life, effectively carving the habit into her daughter like a lump of mangled scar tissue.

Natasha lifts the bowl and drains the gritty coffee down her throat.

"Mom, please," Kyle says. He rolls his eyes. "We don't have traditions in this family. Unless you count dying early."

"Don't talk like that."

"Honesty is the best policy or some such bullshit. Remember?" He stands on the kitchen table and stretches until his fingertips sink into the ceiling.

Natasha rinses her bowl and then walks to the bathroom. She brushes her teeth – three times – and takes a shower. Kyle sits on the toilet and reads the newspaper.

"I've been dead for three years, five months, and seventeen days," he says, thumbing through the sports section. Natasha towels off in front of the mirror.

She's thin – always has been – but the last few years have hollowed her even further, making her knees

and elbows stick out at awkward, jutting angles, and her ribs press against her skin like smooth, white hills. Her hair hangs down below her shoulders, thick and tangled. She hasn't cut it in four years. She's still not ugly, though, not after all these years, and the thought sickens her.

"I know," Natasha says because she does. There's a clock where her heart should be, and it's been ticking inside her since the moment she got the phone call from the hospital; since she ran barefoot down the driveway with her skirt on backward and her blouse unbuttoned, leaving the man that she'd only met the night before naked and confused in her bed.

"The sex wasn't even that good," Kyle complains. "Not worth dying for, anyway."

Natasha pretends not to hear him as she begins brushing her hair.

"Irony, isn't it?" Kyle laughs. "Mother and son both getting fucked at the same time. That's gotta mean something, right?"

Natasha flinches, and the brush snags painfully on a clump of her wet, matted hair.

"Shit!" she cries, slamming the brush against the marble sink. The handle snaps off in her fist, and the top bounces off the faucet and lands, spinning at Kyle's feet.

"Shit," she says again, softly.

Kyle sighs. "You're still not ready to talk about it."

"I have a headache," says Natasha. She walks out of the bathroom and closes the door behind her.

On the drive to work, she calls Rico. He picks up

on the second ring.

"Did your sister pack tamales today?" she asks.

He says she did.

"I'll save you some if Jamie doesn't want any," he says.

"Jamie hasn't eaten carbs in fifteen years."

He giggles, and Natasha hangs up.

"I like that boy," Kyle says. He's sitting in the passenger seat in his boxers, waving and blowing kisses to the oblivious occupants of passing cars.

"He reminds me of you," Natasha says. She's sipping milk through a straw. It's pink milk. Strawberry. The sweetness is thick and buttery and makes her tongue feel like velvet. She licks her lips and grins, and the woman driving the powder blue Lexus in the lane next to her rolls her window up.

"Why? Because he's young? Or because he's gay?"

"Both."

"That explains a lot," Kyle says. He leans forward, and half of his body sinks into the engine. Natasha feels the car sputter, and a jet of steam shoots into the air from the hood, clouding the windshield. She jerks the car to the side, and the woman in the Lexus lays on the horn.

"What is that supposed to mean?" Natasha asks.

He doesn't answer. She glances at his seat, but he's gone.

Jamie is hungover and less pleasant to look at than usual when Natasha arrives at work. He's not uglier exactly but smudged as if someone's rubbed their fingertips along all his edges. Natasha wants to be that someone. Rico notices, too, and he offers Jamie one of his sister's tamales at lunch, but Jamie politely declines and disappears into his office.

"I should bring something else next time," Rico says. He sits down beside her in the breakroom. "But I like tamales the most. They remind me of home."

"Mexico?" Natasha asks.

"Arizona," he says flatly.

A shiver of guilt settles around Natasha's shoulders. Rico had told her he'd moved from Arizona at least three or four times in the last year, just as Kyle had told her more than once when he was alive about the tingling in his chest every time he ran or worked out.

She passes Rico her last diet coke.

"Thanks," he says. "Did you see Jamie's hair?"

"Hard to miss."

The back of Jamie's head was greasy, his hair caked in round, flat ringlets against his skull. The front was a little better, still slick with oil, but not as matted,

like he'd run a comb through it once or twice. He was also wearing slacks stained with little white bleach splotches around the crotch and knees, topped with a horrible salmon pullover.

"He's had better days," Natasha says. Rico has finished the tamales and is sipping diet coke through a straw. "Melina must be out of town."

"I heard him on the phone this morning. She's gone to Milan and won't be back for six months. He's a wreck about it."

"Makes sense," Natasha says. "Losing people is hard."

She wonders how sad Jamie would be if she told him about Kyle – an absent wife is better than a dead son, after all.

"Don't you dare," Kyle says. He's sitting on her desk when she gets back from lunch, his legs folded neatly on top of her keyboard. "People are allowed to be sad. Your suffering is no worse than anyone else's."

"Including yours?" she asks quietly.

He grins at her, and his teeth are as white as fresh bone. Natasha sits down at her desk and stares into his eyes. It looks like she's looking at the computer – ready to call the next patient, to check their demographics and confirm their upcoming surgery – but she's staring into her dead son's eyes. They're a deep-sea green with yellow fragments like broken glass. She thinks he got his eyes from his father. She'd only seen him once, at a party two towns over, in the basement of some cheerleader she'd met through a friend of a friend at a high school football game. She was sixteen, and there'd been a lot of tequila involved, so everything looked hazy and airbrushed. He'd passed out almost immediately after finishing with her, and then she'd cleaned herself up with his shirt, slipped her panties on, and left without looking back.

"He had blue eyes," Kyle says softly. "My eyes must have come from grandma."

"That's even worse," Natasha replies.

Kyle was fourteen the day Natasha discovered she knew absolutely nothing about him. She thinks the other boy's name might have been Jacob. Or Jackson. She remembers feeding them sticky buns and diet coke and hearing their screams and cussing as they crushed each other in World of Warcraft. She remembers Jacob or Jackson had blonde hair the color of cottage cheese and that he was polite and always asked permission to use the bathroom. He was over at the house a lot. He spent a fair few Friday nights with

Kyle holed up in his bedroom, playing video games and listening to music, but was usually gone before Natasha got up for work on Saturdays.

When she walked into her fourteen-year-old son's room in the middle of the night, it was because she'd heard a sound – a whine, a whimper, a groan of pain – and she was afraid someone was hurt. Kyle was on his knees facing the door with cottage cheese boy's dick in his mouth. His palms were on the carpet, and there was spit running down his chin, and the other boy, Jacob or Jackson, had his head tilted back, gasping breathlessly at the ceiling. Natasha didn't shout but folded her fingers into a fist and tapped on the wall. Kyle jerked in surprise and accidentally clamped down. Blondie yelped, and both hands went to push Kyle back onto his ass.

Mother and son had a different relationship after that. Natasha didn't mind having a gay son, but she wished he didn't enjoy doing *that*. She tried to explain that most women didn't bother with it, and he said, "I'm not a girl, mom. That's the point."

"I never did that with anyone," she said.

He shrugged. "Maybe that's why none of them stuck around."

They didn't talk about sex again.

Natasha works the rest of her shift in mostly silence. Around three-thirty, Jamie comes out of his office with swollen and bloodshot eyes, tells Natasha and Rico that he's leaving early, and then walks out the door. Rico goes after him, and two hours later, Natasha and Kyle go home alone.

"I never loved anyone, you know," says Kyle. He's standing on the living room table in socks and a Kiss t-shirt. He's nine this time. He has little boy eyes and large, wide lips that seem to fit oddly on his face, like pink slices of cantaloupe. Fists on hips. He watches Natasha.

"That's sad for you," she says. She's picking things up and moving them around. She calls it cleaning.

"No, it's sad for *you*. I'm dead. Nothing is sad for me anymore."

Natasha takes his picture off the fireplace mantle and runs her fingers through the dust. He was nine. He'd just come back from a Kiss concert with her boyfriend, Sam. He was angry because Sam bought the wrong shirt. His mouth twisted into a scowl, and he didn't stand close to anyone. In the morning, the shirt was in the trash, and he wouldn't talk to her, wouldn't tell her what was wrong, but she thought Sam might have hurt

him, might have touched him, so she ended their relationship and spent the next three months watching for signs of PTSD.

"He didn't," Kyle says. He looks bored, looks sad. "I just hated that shirt."

"He was a good man. A nice man, and he loved us."

"He loved *you*," Kyle says. "But he might have loved me. Eventually. If you'd given him a chance."

"I was protecting you."

"No. You were protecting yourself."

It's an argument they've had before, but today it feels particularly true. When Natasha thinks about Kyle, she thinks about all of the things he's saved her from. Her abusive mother. A string of bad boyfriends who would have stolen her money and broken her heart. An empty house. A lasting and unhealthy taste for codeine and red wine. The nagging and constant urge to take a long walk off of the tallest building she could find.

Kyle protected her over and over again, from herself and from the world, and in the end, she was helpless to return the favor.

Natasha leaves the house. She gets into her car, and Kyle sits beside her. He's twenty-four again in his boxer shorts. He smiles at her, but she ignores him.

"I didn't mean to upset you," he says.

"I hate when you do that."

"Where are we going?"

"Jamie's."

"Again? That's twice this month."

"He gets lonely without Melina."

Kyle nods. "Are you going to sleep with him this time?"

"I don't know," she says. "Maybe."

"Why today?" He asks. "Why now?"

She shrugs. "Maybe I'm just tired of you."

"You wish that were true," Kyle says, laughing.

He taps his fingers against his thigh, a steady pitter-patter that matches the ticking of Natasha's heart. She turns the radio on, and he taps on the dashboard. She cranks the volume, and he laughs. When she turns to yell at him, he's nine again, with his bottom lip peeled forward over his teeth. She faces the road.

She's been to Jamie's a handful of times in the last year. They've kissed twice. He's had his fingers in her hair, under her dress, splayed across her stomach. She's tasted the skin on the back of his neck. It was very drunken, very innocent. He was head over heels for Melina. Natasha's son was always dying over and over again



in the corner of the room. It just never seemed right.

It's been a long time since Natasha has slept with a man. Three years, five months, and seventeen days to be exact. She estimates she'd been enjoying her third orgasm around the time Kyle's frantic, thrashing heart was giving out.

"It's not fair, you know," Kyle says. "I didn't even get to cum *once* that night."

Natasha doesn't have a response to that – it is unfair. All of it. Everything. Every miserable day he was forced to spend on earth with a mother who couldn't even be bothered to take him to the hospital when he was sick or ask him the name of his fucking boyfriend. If it wasn't for how much it hurt, how horrifying it was to see her son die, she would have slept with Jamie on her first try almost a year ago. She would have done anything to make Kyle disappear, to free him from an eternity bound to her side.

She parks in the street about thirty yards down the road from Jamie's condo. The walk gives her time to breathe, think, and shed Kyle off her back like a peeling sunburn. She loses him somewhere between the magnolia bushes and Mr. Gleeson's shiny new hummer.

Jamie answers the door in a robe.

"Back again?" he asks, smiling. "I was just getting ready to jump in the shower. But come in. Come in and have a drink."

Natasha glances over her shoulder. Kyle is nowhere in sight, so she follows Jamie into the house.

"Rico was here earlier," he says as he leads her down the hall, "but he left when someone named Manuel called. Maybe a brother?"

Natasha says, "No, probably a lover."

Jamie looks slightly scandalized, then a bit fascinated.

"Is he gay? I had no idea."

They reach the living room. It's a small space with a couch on one side and a loveseat on the other, both cherry red and made of tacky faux leather. There's a small coffee table in the center of the room and a wet bar in the corner. Natasha sits on the couch, and Jamie sits across from her on the loveseat. He offers her a glass of wine, and she takes a polite sip.

"I have no problem with it," Jamie says, settling back into the cushions. "I just think it's a little strange. I mean, a bit unnatural. But it has nothing to do with me."

Natasha swirls her glass. "My son was gay."

Jamie's eyebrows peak. "Was he?"

"Yes." She pauses. Takes a mouthful of wine. "He's

dead now, though."

"Oh, I'm sorry." Jamie's smile is small, sympathetic. "Was it AIDS-related?"

Natasha sets her glass down. Then she laughs. It's only a tiny bit hysterical, but it still makes Jamie shift uncomfortably, and he swallows the last of his wine in one massive gulp. Natasha presses her palms to her chest as though pushing the laughter back into her lungs, then she stands and walks to the wet bar. There's a framed photo that Natasha has never seen before. The picture features Jamie and Melina holding the hands of some small girl who looks like she'd rather be anywhere else.

"Who is this?" she asks.

Jamie takes a sip of wine. "That's Melina's daughter, Nelly. She lives with her aunt. Melina is – not exactly the mothering type."

Natasha goes back to the couch and lies down.

"My mother wasn't the mothering type either," she says.

Kyle walks through the door. He's still in his boxers. He looks between them but doesn't say anything. Jamie drinks, and Natasha turns her head to face the cushions. She doesn't want to see it again, the way her son looks when he's dying.

"Did you love your mother?" she asks.

"Yes," Jamie says. "She died in a car accident when I was fourteen – but yes, I loved her. A lot."

He picks up his glass and drains it, then sets it on the table between them.

"My mother died too," Natasha says, "when I was thirty-four. Cancer."

"Did you love her?" he asks.

"It's complicated."

"What do you mean?"

Natasha turns her head to watch Kyle pace around the bar. His arms are folded, and he's shivering, his eyes jittery inside his head. It's the same as last time, and the time before that. Natasha can't get close to a man without killing her son.

"She was selfish," Natasha says. "She was mean. My dad died before I was born, and I think she blamed me for it. She used to hit me sometimes. Not a lot, but sometimes. I got pregnant when I was sixteen, and she kicked me out. I barely spoke to her after that. She only met my son once when he graduated from high school. She was sick then, and she tried to make up for – everything – for her entire life. I told her to go to hell."

Kyle cringes and bends over with his arms folded around his stomach. His face is sweaty, and his mouth opens and closes like he can't breathe. He's saying something, but there's no sound, and he stays in that position, folded over in misery while his mom watches. She wonders – not for the first time – if this is how it had actually happened. If he was really in that much pain. Her guts quiver at the thought.

"I need coffee," Jamie says, standing up. There's a full pot already prepared in the kitchen, and Natasha wonders if Rico is the one who made it.

"Gotta clear my head," Jamie says. "Gotta start thinking straight. Want some?"

"Do you have Cinnamon Toast Crunch?" she asks.

"What?"

"Nothing, never mind." She smiles. "No coffee for me, thanks."

Jamie fills his empty wine glass from the pot and swirls it around and around. Kyle is on the floor now with his fingers clawing at his chest. They leave red lines in his skin. Natasha wants to kiss them.

"Rico wants to fuck you," Natasha says.

Jamie sits on the floor beside her head.

"Do *you* want to fuck me?" he asks.

She doesn't answer. She looks into his eyes, and they're not on her but fixed somewhere over her head. Kyle has stopped moving. She wishes he would roll over, stand up, and start snarking at her again. But she knows he won't until she leaves the house, and she can't leave without dooming him further.

Jamie sighs and brushes the back of her hand with his knuckles.

"She's gone for six months," he says. "Six months."

"Imagine how Nelly feels."

He shakes his head and takes a swig from his glass. Natasha can smell the bitter clouds of coffee as they rise into the air around her head. She lies on the couch for a long time, watching him breathe. He seems delicate somehow, like a paper doll. He's vulnerable in a way she hasn't been in nearly four years. He's never looked that way before, and Natasha is confident – more confident than she's ever been – that she could easily fuck him now. She imagines plunging her hands through his skin and scraping the walls of his chest until they're raw and glistening, ready to receive something beautiful.

"I miss my son," she says, and she's not really

saying it to Jamie; she's saying it to herself, to the frightened sixteen-year-old girl who paced with her newborn baby in front of the local fire station every morning for a week before ultimately deciding if they were both destined to suffer, they were going to suffer together.

Jamie raises his head to look at her. His eyes are soft, amber fire, and they bleed heat into the air around them.

"How long has it been?" he asks.

They don't usually talk like this. They typically talk about Melina, about Jamie's unconditional but inconsiderate love for her. They usually kiss until Natasha can't stand it anymore – the sight of her baby boy dying on the floor – and then she leaves.

"A little over three years," she answers. "He had a bad heart. I didn't know. No one knew. He was having sex with someone – some boy he met in college. And his heart just – stopped. Just gave up."

"I'm so sorry," he says, and she believes him.

"The boy – his name is Nathan," she continues. "He's lovely. I only met him at the hospital and then later at the funeral. But he's a very nice young man, and he cared for Kyle. I don't think it was long enough for anything deeper, but there could have been. There might have been."

Jamie takes her hand. The touch threatens to warm her, so she sits up and reaches for her glass. She takes a slow sip.

"Do you still talk to him?"

"My son?" Natasha asks, panicked. She looks at Kyle, and he's motionless on the ground, his eyes open but cloudy and lifeless. She wants to hold him but already knows what that feels like – cradling a magnificent shell.

"No, of course not," Jamie says, horrified. "The other kid. Nathan."

"Oh. No, not anymore." She sets her glass down on the table and lays back against the couch. "He called for a while—a few months. The last time I heard from him was on the first anniversary. He said he still thinks fondly of Kyle. *Fondly*. I asked him to stop calling after that."

Jamie tilts his head until his breath brushes her ear, and it feels silky and hot, a stream of feathers against her skin. He looks like he wants to say something, but she doesn't want to hear it. Nothing he can say is as important as what she wants from him.

"He's not in a better place," Natasha says.

"No," he agrees and then touches her cheek with

a fingertip. “The better place is here. The better place is with his mother.”

She shakes her head, and his finger slides across her cheek and touches the corner of her mouth. It traces the seam of her lips. He opens his arms, his body ready to receive her, to take her apart piece by piece and reconstruct her in the likeness of a God. She sees Kyle lying on the ground over Jamie’s shoulder, silent and still, his skin soft and white like fresh seafoam.

She closes her eyes, but her son’s image does not fade. He’s nine and twenty-four and a newborn with colic, and he’s eighteen, awkwardly holding his mother’s hand while she screams and cries and throws an armful of wrapping paper at his grandmother. He’s crying and laughing and shouting and singing – her head is reverberating with all the sounds of her dead little boy.

She opens her eyes, and Kyle is leaning over them both. He is older now, older than he ever was or ever got to be, and he’s crying with his face tipped down, his tears all over everything – cresting the table, souring the wine, burning the corners of her eyes – they’re soaking through her skin and flushing out her veins.

Natasha thinks – I love you, I’m sorry, I hope this doesn’t hurt – and then she threads her fingers through Jamie’s hair and pulls him close until her breath is in his lungs and her teeth sink into his skin, and she can’t hear anything over the relentless ticking of her heart. It doesn’t take long – about half the time it probably took Kyle to die – and when they’re finished, Natasha looks around, and all she sees are their two breathless, sweating bodies clinging to each other in a quiet and ghostless room.

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**Kayla King** is a coffee-addicted, makeup-obsessed, hair dye enthusiast who has been making up stories since her freshman year in high school. She graduated with her Bachelor’s Degree in English from Boise State University in 2013 and is currently working on her MFA in fiction at Texas State University. She is a daughter, sister, auntie, and friend. Her work has previously appeared in *Voidspace Zine*. She can be found on Twitter @kaylaisshining, where her tweets are sometimes as surreal as her fiction.

Enjoyed Kayla’s work? Send a tip straight to her **CashApp: \$writerkaylaking / Venmo is @writerkaylaking**

# Spring Cycle

James W. Wyman



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**Jim** is the last full-time resident, on a single lane dead-end dirt road, at the end of a long peninsula, in the middle of a large lake. His passions are digital nature photography and writing poetry. Often, these two loves are melded on canvas using a process known as giclee. With his cabin as a base camp, Jim can be found biking the roads and kayaking the many rivers, and lakes of Northern New England in the summer and wandering the woods in the winter. He lives *with* and *in* nature.

# More Than One Hand is Too Much

Robin Kinzer

Her fingers are slithering through the long lilac snakes  
of my braided hair, when they begin to quiver. She goes still  
for a second. Her hands spasm and she grips the back  
of my neck. Her skin, damp and clammy against mine.

I swing to face her as soon as I realize what's happening.  
She looks like a wax statue: frozen, mute. Pallid.  
Her skin is two shades whiter than usual.  
Her knuckles, as pale as the bones beneath them.

I know the routine by now. She does not trust herself to speak  
but wants to be touched. Wants one firm hand to rest  
at the base of her spine. Does not want to be pulled close.  
She needs human contact, but more than one hand is too much.

Her breath rattles on the inhale and wheezes, ragged, on the exhale.  
She swings her eyes to the dresser, focusing on a small orange bottle  
filled with tiny blue pills. I know she wants to avoid the emergency  
room, know sirens and starched coats have not gone well for her

in the past. I keep my right hand anchored steadily at the base  
of her tightening spine, and reach for the medicine with the left.  
Her cheeks are marbled with tears now, and the wheeze of her breath  
sounds like a teakettle about to boil over. I pry open the pill bottle.

She sticks out her tongue. I place one small blue circle on its surface,  
where she will let it dissolve. In thirty minutes, it will be much easier  
for her to breathe. Until then, I keep my hand at the small of her back,  
and match my breath to hers. We listen to the sound of falling rain.

---

**Robin Kinzer** is a queer, disabled poet. She was once a communist beaver in a PBS documentary. She's now an MFA candidate at University of Baltimore. Robin has poems recently published, or shortly forthcoming in *Little Patuxent Review*, *Wrongdoing Magazine*, *Fifth Wheel Press*, *Gutslut Press*, and others. She loves glitter, Ferris wheels, and waterfalls. She can be found on Twitter at @RobinAKinzer.

Enjoyed Robin's work? Send a tip straight to her **PayPal: RobinKinzer@gmail.com**



# That Summer When

James Morena

Last spring I purchased a longboard skateboard. I woke each morning, checked the weather, then slipped on my Adidas shell tops. I wore short shorts - my white, upper thighs fading into a caramel tan - so I looked hip on my eco-friendly bamboo board. I never skated as a kid. My best friend skated. He halfpiped. He kick flipped, ollied, fakie bigspinned, and all those other sick moves that attracted the grungy girls. And we loved the grungy girls. I wanted to drop in and tail stall and noseblunt. I wanted to go shirtless on summer days, building ramps from stolen wood and reused nails. I dreamed of growing my hair over my eyes and saying, what up, bruh. But I couldn't. I was too busy clowning around with my white father.

My father was a shriner. He went to homes for the sick and ailing. He went to Ronald McDonald Houses to entertain children. He drove one of those little, battery-powered cars in parades. He dressed in a rainbow-colored, vintage clown costume and painted a permitted frown upon his face. His clown eyes drooped. His shoes twenty-one inches long. His curly hair bright blue.

When I was ten, he had forced me to join his troop. Forced me to wear a bright-red clown suit. Forced me to wear size fourteen shoes and to wear white paint and a red nose. I was comic relief for his comic display. I ran through crowds with a bucket of fake water filled with glitter. I chased him around corners and over steps. The crowd laughed then roared. Little fingers pointed. Kids crumbled with joy, unable to sit up right

as we zagged by their extended legs. The climax of our routine involved him stopping in front of a chosen few, him desperately searching for his escape as I wound up dowsing water all over him. But he always seemed to thwart me, my splashes, as I glittered everyone within ten feet of our routine.

For some reason when I was eleven, Father bought a unicycle. I had never seen him ride a bike or go for a jog or play a sport. In our civilian life, our non-clown life, he ambled along. He often lounged in front of his TV. If he needed another cup of coffee or can of soda or third helping of food, mother, my sister, or I were at his beckon. So when he bought a second-hand one-wheeled contraption, we three side-eyed him. Father wore a twenty to thirty pound spare tire around his waist for as long as I could remember. He often quarterbacked from an armchair. He had two left feet so he avoided dance floors. And I had never seen him once stretch his arms wide to fake balance-beam a curb or painted line or a crack that might break his back. But still he bought a unicycle.

That summer he woke at five in the morning. He pulled tube socks to his knees and laced his New Balances. Sometimes he sipped coffee. Sometimes he ate a breakfast bar. But mostly he rose early that summer, waking me too, to go for a jog. We ambled around one block, then two, then walk-ran a mile, then signed up for a 5K. In the evenings my father took out his unicycle to practice, forgoing his hot dinner.

"You need to keep the tire a bit flat at first," he

had said to me, though I didn't ask questions. "It helps maintain balance."

He compared the tire to an elephant's foot and how more surface area and this and that provided for a better whatever. I watched as he leaned against a wall for support. How he tried mounting his seat from the front then the back. How he inched along the garage wall in the grass then inched, palms and knuckles grazing bricks, in our driveway.

"Once I get good," my father said, "maybe I'll buy you one."

"No thanks," I said.

"Come on," my father smiled, "You can be just like me. Besides, the kids would love seeing us chase each other."

The thought of learning to ride a unicycle was daunting. I had just learned to ride a bike. I was a late cycling bloomer. Instead I played football and basketball and baseball, so I had little time for riding around. I went to camps and after-school athletic programs that required me to lift my knees high, spring-up from supine position then run past some imaginary line, and hone my dexterity with both hands and feet. Also, I felt stupid as a ten year old having my insistant, tiny Filipina mother run along side me, being my human training wheels.

"It okay," she had said, "I no let you fall."

"No," I said. "I have to practice \_\_\_\_\_. " I would fill in that blank with whatever sport was in season, until that summer when I became Father's little Pierrot, his standby joker, his fool.

I soon noticed that my father's jeans became loose. His ass drooped. He had to take-in his belt. I noticed that his tight-fitting shirts flowed. His shoulders seemed broad. He had to take-off his T-shirts whenever he was inside or outside the house. Without his spare tire his balance stabilized. He became nimble and agile and beautiful to watch: his strong arms extended, his rippling core making sharp turns and corrections, his expertise in coming to a full stop after having achieved max speed. Up to that point I had never seen Father give his full attention to anything for an extended period of time. He often channel surfed. He read the comics in newspapers. He never attended a school play or sporting event or participated in a parent-teacher conference. But that summer, Father mastered, with tire fully aired, the unicycle.

"They loved the performance," Father had said after introducing his new routine.

This time he chased me. I was prey to his bucket of fake water and freshly painted unicycle. I darted and

dodged. I sprang and swiveled. Fleeing Father was a difficult task because he could bunny-hop legs. He could spin 180, 225, 360. He could reverse on a dime. He too had taken-in his clown costume. So there was little friction, little wind resistance, nothing to tangle or snag.

After shows people stopped Father: "That was great," "You were amazing," "How long did it take to learn all that?" He showed his pearly whites. Sometimes he blushed. Other times he bathed in their admirations.

"I appreciate you coming out," Father had said.

"It wasn't much." Father's newfound modesty showing.

"With a little dedication," Father preached, "anyone can achieve greatness."

That unicycle-summer was the catalyst. I didn't learn this until adulthood, but that summer ignited a spark in Father. I thought nothing of it, but Father had started to linger around corners. He leaned into tall, blonde-haired mothers. Fixing his brown eyes onto their baby blues. He bent to whisper into brunette-haired, older sisters' ears. Brushing away hair strands that might hinder whatever amazing words trickled from his lips.

He started commanding, "Wait here. I'll be back in fifteen minutes."

"Pick up all the props. I have to \_\_\_\_\_. " He would fill in the blank with some excuse that freed his time.

I was left sweeping glitter. I had to gather fake hammers and cork guns. I stuffed duffle bags with wigs and rubber balls. I dragged boxes to and fro. And, I gently rolled his unicycle, our money maker, to the trunk of his car. I never questioned him. What's around the corner? Who's that mother? What did you say? I just waited, leaning against the passenger door, sitting on a curb, tossing pebbles at lamp posts. I too was a late bloomer to identifying philandering, cheaters. I needed my Filipna mother to guide me, to say, "It not okay," but Father never invited Mother to watch his clowning.

As summer browned to fall, Father stopped waking me. We no longer trotted around the neighborhood. Sprinted on high school tracks. He began to work late. He needed to spend time with Shriners. Go to meetings. Book more shows. Critical tasks had to be addressed. Assignments that demanded his full attention that kept him away from home.

I ignored his late returns. His staggering through the living room. His deflecting Mother's questions. Besides, my time was occupied with school and football, then basketball practices. I had homework and new friends to gossip with on the phone for hours. But, I could not ignore Father shouting at Mother. I heard their cuss words, their blamings, their slaps. I listened to glass shattering and doors slamming. I cried when Mother whimpered or spat angry words through gushing tears.

"Who that women?" Mother often yelled. "You liar."

As fall whitened into winter, Father's unicycle lay dusty in our garage. The tire had deflated. Things were piled on it. Father's chisel began rounding. His belt was readjusted to its original loop. Whenever he was home, he no longer walked about the house shirtless. Years after I had moved away from home, Mother and my sister told me about Father's women: The ones he had traveled miles to see; the ones who had lay in their bed; and the ones who I had spent time talking to, getting to know, laughing and joking with. During their reveal I remembered that unicycle summer and how it triggered the cycle from weight gain to weight loss, the cycle of coming home later and later.

"When he lost the weight," my sister had said, "he was dating another woman."

Mother and my sister had kept me in the dark. They feared that I would retaliate, take Mother's side, and fist father like he had fisted all of us. They saw the fury in my confrontations when I grew tall enough and weighed just enough; I shouted that I would never be anything like him as I stood in the way of his beatings. So, they didn't want to take the chance of telling me.

Nowadays when I am on my longboard cruising along the riverfront or down moderately sloped city streets, I meditate on the feeling of freedom and peacefulness that comes with gliding and body control and utilizing tendons and ligaments that I ignore on a daily basis. When I first bought my board, I wondered: Did Father think about his freedom and body control that came with his unicycle? But, I no longer think about his thoughts.

Instead, on my board I take-in parts of my neighborhood I would have never ventured. I see young parents playing ball with their teetering toddlers. I see big and little dogs chasing and barking at passersby. Delivery drivers waving or giving me a thumbs-up. I smile at them, nod my chin, then say, what up, bruh. When I'm cruising and meditating on my longboard, I try my best to forget about that summer when my father made me his fool.

---

**James Morena** earned his MFA in Fiction at Mountain View Grand in Southern New Hampshire. His stories have been published in *The Citron Review*, *Orca*, *Forge Journal*, *Pithehead Chapel*, *Rio Grande Review*, and others. He also has published essays and poems.

Enjoyed James's work? Send a tip straight to his **Venmo: @jpseals3**



# Twilight at the Tattoo Shop

Barbara Candiotti



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**Barbara Candiotti** is a former High Tech Worker who now focuses on photography, art, and writing. *Star\*Line* and *Eye to the Telescope* have published her poems. *Litro Magazine* has accepted an essay. *Reservoir Road Literary Review* has accepted her photography. Her digital art pieces have been accepted by *Phantom Kangaroo*, *Zoetic Press*, *Utopia Science Fiction Magazine*, *Invisible City*, *Star\*Line* (Cover Art), *Evocations Review Electricspec* (Cover Art), and *The William and Mary Review*.

Enjoyed Barbara's work? Send a tip straight to her **PayPal: [imagine007@msn.com](mailto:imagine007@msn.com)**

# Maria Antonia to Jeff

Michaela Mayer

hands clamoring for my throat  
    then the blade's sharp descent—  
it was not intentional, neither  
    the toes nor the people, that they  
should starve or be stepped upon  
    by my little leather slipper, but  
they will say what they will  
    say. pay attention, *monsieur*:  
another killing hour hums  
    a lilting tune in ears made ready  
for revolution. yet you will not  
    listen. this is the difference  
between us: you know what you do,  
    and i was an eleventh daughter  
before smallpox pitted  
    my sister's hold on the throne—  
my life a symbol  
    more than anything, yours  
an unkindness in motion—  
    mark me, *monsieur*, it doesn't  
end well. i tell you more for the sake  
    of your people than you,  
but i fear it more useless  
    than my many powdered wigs.  
do you recognize me now? yes,  
    you see, your ears are stopped:  
what could a woman tell you,  
    and one from so long ago?  
well then, we shall see what dark  
    mirror i hold up to you, how  
they stream in to sever  
    that pendulum of indifference  
from your feckless neck.

---

**Michaela Mayer** is a 26-year-old poet and educator from Virginia. Her works have previously appeared in *Claw & Blossom*, *perhappened mag*, *Q/A Poetry*, *Barren Magazine*, *Feral Poetry*, *Olit*, and others. She has a forthcoming poem with *Monsterring Mag* and can be found on Twitter @mswannmayer5.

Enjoyed Michaela's work? Send a tip straight to her **Venmo: @Michaela-Mayer-3**

# Come Back to Mississippi (Emily's Song)

Keith Morris

**From the Artist on “Come Back to Mississippi”**

The song's character, loosely based on my friend's daughter, believes she can escape the rigmarole of small-town life simply by moving out West. Once there, she remembers the love and beauty she failed to see in her small town, and she learns that problems are not bound by geography and geography does not define beauty. Meticulously crafted and painstakingly recorded by trial and error sometime in the summer of 2021 at EMI West; i.e., my home office.



---

**Keith Morris** earned his BA in English and Psychology from the University of Mississippi and earned his MA in English from Mississippi State University. His poems appear in *FishFood*, *Sonder Midwest*, *Cathexis Northwest*, *The View from Woodall*, and *The Louisville Review*. His music appears in *Tenth Street Miscellany* and *Hare's Paw Literary Journal*. He teaches English at Itawamba Community College in Fulton, MS, and lives in Tupelo, MS, with his wife and two sons.

Enjoyed Keith's work? Send a tip straight to his **PayPal: mo\_morris@comcast.net**

# Doll

## Nora Sun

Doll has round blue eyes and wide pink lips like Jane. She has chubby red cheeks and thick brown hair like Jane. She's the length of Jane's forearm, just the right length for Jane to tuck into her chest, just right for Jane.

Jane loves Doll.

Jane carries Doll everywhere she goes. After Jane hunts for Mama, she gives Doll half of her beetle shells even though Doll can't eat. They sit together with Mama by the roadside, and Jane talks to Doll even though Jane's voice annoys Mama. When Jane is scouting the road for Mama, she carries Doll on her shoulders because Doll likes to be high up so she can be the first to see all the pretty views. When the sun is too bright, Jane covers Doll's eyes so they don't ache like hers do. When Jane is washing clothes for Mama, she also washes Doll's dress. The blue of that dress has faded into white after being tenderly scrubbed so many times. Jane sleeps with Doll at night. When there are stars, she makes sure to lay Doll on her back so Doll can see them too. Doll loves the stars.

Mama hates Doll.

The first time Mama saw Doll seven years ago, her face became scary. Her eyes narrowed. Her gums flashed. Spit flew. Mama slapped Jane. Called Jane "idiot girl" over and over. Asked Jane who gave her Doll.

Jane told her that Boy gave her Doll. She doesn't know Boy's name. She thinks Boy felt sorry for when he saw her sitting alone at the town market, and that's why he gave her Doll.

That made Mama slap Jane again. Then she

made Jane leave that town even though Jane liked not having to walk all the time. When Jane asks Mama where they are going, Mama gets mad. When Mama gets mad, she wraps her fist around the locket she always wears around her neck, and her cheeks turn beet red. Jane and Doll like to laugh about it in secret.

It's alright if Mama doesn't like Doll because Jane knows that all the love that she gives Doll has been building up inside Doll. One day, Doll will have enough love to be reborn as a real girl, human in every way. Then, Jane and Doll will be best friends forever.

\*

Jane and Mama spend the day walking like they always do. They follow the main road that all the Nomads follow, but they walk into the woods when they see City people coming. The City people don't like Nomads. Once, a group of City people walked behind them on the road. They rode carriages and didn't like that Jane and Mama walked too slowly on foot.

A few of the men got out of the carriages. Mama tried to offer them Jane, but they weren't interested. Some of Mama's fingers fell off that day.

Jane doesn't like the City people. They are weird. They live in houses instead of moving from place to place. Jane hasn't seen a house in years.

When night falls and the air grows cold, Jane and Mama make a place in the grass by the road to sleep.

But then, Mama points at Doll and says, "After tomorrow, you won't have that stupid thing anymore."



"What?" Jane whispers, unbelieving. She's always had Doll. She does not know what Mama means.

"We're going to the Doll Deconstruction Factory," Mama announces. "That thing is coming too close to being alive."

Jane has heard of the Doll Deconstruction Factory. They take apart little girls' dolls so that they can never come alive. They are Jane's idea of evil.

Jane shakes her head, tears streaming down her face. "I'll take care of her when she comes alive!" Jane pleads. "I promise! I-I already give her half of my food. She won't bother you!"

Mama spits in Jane's face. The wet glob rolls down Jane's cheek. Mixes with her tears. "You can't take care of anything," Mama says.

"Mama, please," Jane says, because she doesn't know what else she can say, "Mama pleaseMamaplease...." Mama has never changed her decision, no matter how hard Jane pleads, once she's made up her mind. Jane tries her hardest to convey every ounce of desperation she feels in those three syllables anyway. Mama just turns away.

"Go to bed," Mama commands emotionlessly.

Jane screams. She runs away from Mama, clutching Doll to her chest. She runs deeper and deeper into the woods. She runs until her lungs burn. Until her tears are dried up by the wind. Until the world goes dark, and Jane's body swoops towards the ground.

\*

Mama can smell Jane. She finds Jane in the early morning when the sky is still dark blue. Pours a bucket of cold water on Jane's head. Calls Jane a parasite. Commands Jane to do her chores. Forces Jane to give Mama all the beetle shells she hunts.

Mama only gives Jane her small portion after Jane apologizes until her throat is dry and agrees to follow Mama.

Mama drags her off the dirt road, away from the other Nomads, into the forest. She makes Jane walk through thorns that make her ankles bleed and streams that soak her cuts in grimy water. Slaps her back like she's a horse when Jane moves too slowly. Jane walks without food until she can only see black and purple stars.

"Look!" Mama screams when they finally stop. Her nails dig into Jane's face. Force her eyes wide open. Makes her look at the mountain before her and realize that it's not a mountain at all.

It's a nest of starving bones in the landfill. It's a mass grave.

"This is what happens to dolls who are loved too

much by little girls!" Mama screams.

*These are the mounds where dolls that come alive and become unwanted are discarded,* Jane thinks. This place is a whisper among Nomads. Jane didn't know that it was real.

Jane looks closer and realizes that some of the limbs on the mountain are moving. One girl, her face so emaciated and her eyes so green that she looks alien, is trying to crawl out. Suddenly, she tumbles downwards from the mound, past a stack of bodies several meters tall, before landing in the grass.

Jane automatically moves forward. Mama grabs her wrist and curses at her.

The girl's neck is bent at an awkward angle. There is a trickle of blood from her thin lips. Her green eyes are wide-open, and Jane thinks they are looking straight into hers, but Jane knows that she is dead.

Finally, Jane understands. Mama doesn't want another mouth to share the beetle shells Jane hunts. If Doll comes alive, Mama will force Jane to abandon her here like the green-eyed doll.

\*

Later, when Mama is asleep, Jane whispers, "Am I bad?" *Am I bad for loving Doll too much? For wanting, just a little, to bring her into a world where she will only suffer? Just so I can meet her?*

Mama doesn't answer, but Jane already knows what Mama will say: selfish, stupid, sentimental girl. Then Mama will slap Jane for waking her up.

\*

The Doll Deconstruction Factory is a metal expanse in the northern country. A sea of smokestacks pumps out gray clouds in front of the pale blue mountains.

The inside smells sterile, and the air is cold. Jane sits in a waiting room with dusty white walls while Mama talks to a lady behind the front desk. It's been so long since Jane has been indoors.

Jane cradles Doll close to her chest. She has been holding Doll here for seven years now. Doll has soaked up her tears and listened to her lullabies. Doll has survived Mama's angry words and the Borderlands' harsh winters with Jane. She's had Doll when she's had nothing. What will Jane's hands feel like without Doll's weight?

Jane focuses on the only poster on the bare walls. It has a picture of a faceless doll with a red cross through it. Messily written above this are the words:



“REMINDER - WOMEN WITH ANDOs & ANDOs ARE PROHIBITED FROM ENTERING THE CITY.” In smaller text, the poster says: “Is her cotton body really worth your life?” Jane knows that ANDOs are animated dolls. Dolls that come alive because the girls who own them love them so much. She knows that it’s all because of overpopulation in the City. Even with all the new factories, they couldn’t make enough food to feed humans and ANDOs. Law 132 discourages the creation of ANDOs by banishing all ANDOs and the girls who created them to life as Nomads.

Jane realizes that life is better in the City. That must be why girls would abandon their dolls so they could stay there.

Mama is done talking. Two women wearing thin colorless robes open a side door. They have shadows under their eyes and calluses on their hands. They don’t seem evil. They just seem tired.

Jane walks silently into the room, holding Doll tighter. This room is a smaller version of the last. It is empty except for a metal slab on the other side of the room and a white plastic bin beneath. Jane takes a deep breath.

“They make you watch,” Mama told her. “They say watching helps you let go.”

Jane expects them to at least ask her name. But they don’t. One woman just stands by the door. The other extends her hands.

Jane stares at those hands. They are pale yellow with scarred palms and long fingers. She knows that she will remember them for a long time.

She lifts Doll to her chest. Feels Doll’s surface against her beating heart for the last time. Looks at Doll’s eyes and Doll’s dress and Doll’s smile. Tries to memorize every bit of Doll. Each time she moves to give Doll away, she hesitates and pulls Doll back to her.

After an eternity, she finally puts Doll in the woman’s hands.

Immediately, cold air rushes into the places where Doll used to be. Jane shivers violently. Her hands move idly around her. She’s not sure what to do with them now that she no longer has Doll to hold.

The woman puts Doll on the metal slab. Pulls out long, skinny scissors. Cuts off Doll’s dress. *Snip, snip, snip.* Tosses it aside. Digs a blade of those scissors into Doll’s hair. Cuts down Doll’s face. *Snip, snip, snip.*

Doll’s face bursts into cotton.

Suddenly, she realizes that she has forgotten how Doll’s legs look. It is just a small detail—were there

stitches at the knees?

Jane lunges towards the table. The woman by the door is faster. She holds Jane’s arms. Jane thrashes in place. Words and saliva fly out of Jane’s mouth in a jumbled mess. She tries to explain that she’s not stopping them; she just needs to see. See Doll one last time. Hold Doll one last time. Even if there’s only half of Doll left. How could Jane forget so quickly after seven years?

When her words don’t make the woman’s grip loosen, Jane screams over and over. Her mouth opens so wide that she is more monster than girl. Her teeth are sharp. Full of wolf and lion. Her shrieks are carnal. They vibrate through the thin walls. Cut across the smoke-stacks. Send rifts into the dirt. Shake the villagers in the mountains. Makes earthquakes in the City.

Then her voice dies with a broken sound.

Jane’s mouth is still wide open, but nothing comes out. Her throat burns like it’s been torn open and painted with salt.

There’s nothing left of Doll on the table. All the cotton inside Doll is in the bin. The woman with scissors must’ve pocketed Doll’s cloth face somewhere.

Jane’s tears blur her view of the scene.

The woman wipes away Jane’s tears with rough hands. Says Doll is just a cotton, cotton and Jane’s dreams, and cotton can’t feel. Says it’s very silly for a smart young girl like Jane to ruin her life over a face woven from threads. Says Jane’s only spent twelve summers on this earth, and there are many more ahead of her. Says maybe one day Jane can get a new doll.

Takes the bin of cotton out and leaves Jane collapsed on the floor like another emptied doll.

\*

A week later, Jane finally works up the courage to ask.

“Mama, let me see it, Mama, I wanna know, Mama, Mama, Mama, I love you, Mama,” Jane says over and over again, her small hands curled into fists on the front of Mama’s dirty dress. She makes her voice soft and small. Widens her eyes so they are round like a doll’s. *I love you* are the words that disgust Mama most.

Mama grips her wrists. Tries to rip those little fists away. Her yellow nails sink into Jane’s skin. Ugly red blood wells up everywhere. Jane’s hands shake violently, but she doesn’t let go.

“Fine!” Mama yells. “You want to see?” She rips the locket from her neck. The hook bursts against Mama’s neck. A few rusty iron links fall into the grass. Mama throws the locket onto the hard dirt, where the

top of the locket cracks.

“Take it,” Mama yells. “Take it! God damn me if I want it!”

But Jane knows why Mama keeps it. She picks up the broken locket from the ground. Cradles it in her hands like it’s her life. Inside is a picture of a girl just a little older than Jane with pale hair and warm brown eyes. She’s wearing a shiny black dress with a slender waist. The girl is holding a fabric doll. The doll has round blue eyes and wide pink lips. It has chubby red cheeks and thick brown hair. It is the length of the girl’s forearm.

Jane barely recognizes Mama because the girl is smiling, and Jane has never seen Mama smile.

“Mama,” Jane says sweetly, “you looked so pretty.” Jane knows that all the City girls take pictures with their dolls. These pictures are used as proof to banish the doll and the girl if the doll comes alive. She also knows that Mama stole hers from the Collection years ago, and Mama keeps it close to her as proof of what Jane is in case Jane tries to run away to the City instead of serving Mama.

But Mama doesn’t know that Jane knows this.

“Oh Jane,” Mama says, and she’s crying. Fat translucent drops slide down her ruddy cheeks.

“Mama,” Jane whispers, “Mama, why didn’t you take it”—because it looked like her, but it wasn’t her yet, it was just a doll, it was just cotton—“to the Factory?” If Mama never wanted her, she should’ve destroyed the doll. Then, maybe Jane’s soul could’ve been born into a human girl’s body. Maybe she could’ve been a happy daughter in the City like Mama once was.

But Mama doesn’t give an answer. Mama just cries and cries like a big baby. Jane knows that those tears are not for Jane; they are for the life she lost because of Jane.

Jane thinks of Doll. She wonders if Mama once loved her like that before she came alive and got Mama exiled. She must have loved Jane a lot to make her come alive.

Jane sees the City on the horizon. She no longer thinks that it is strange. Instead, she finds the metal towers and the glass buildings and the idea of a home rather charming.

Mama can’t enter the City. She’s dried and hardened like a prune, anger lines like scars on her face—a Nomad at first glance.

But the Factory woman was right. Jane is still young and pretty. She can enter after she destroys Mama’s locket.

---

**Nora Sun** is a Chinese-American writer from Chicago. She loves language, iliac crests, and brevity’s talent for breeding mystery. She occasionally exists on Twitter @ortolons.

Enjoyed Nora’s work? Send a tip straight to her **PayPal: [norasun9@gmail.com](mailto:norasun9@gmail.com)**

# Hand Jive

Howie Good



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**Howie Good** is the author most recently of *Failed Haiku*, a poetry collection that is co-winner of the 2021 Grey Book Press Chapbook Contest and scheduled for publication in summer 2022. His previous poetry collections include *Famous Long Ago* (Laughing Ronin Press) and *Gunmetal Sky* (Thirty West Publishing). His collages have appeared or are forthcoming in *Mayday*, *Sulphur Surrealist Jungle*, and *Otoliths*.

Enjoyed Howie's work? Send a tip straight to his **PayPal**: [goodh@newpaltz.edu](mailto:goodh@newpaltz.edu)

# antigone of the south

Danté Émile

Swarms of angels circle my ripe apple-heart.  
Moth to a flame,  
match to the skin, cardinal red.  
I wear my cloak-like grief  
draped around my shoulders.  
I carry the screams of my dead  
like a wooden cross. Splinters of recognition  
under every single one of my nails. Chorus of  
old gods narrating the tragedy of my survival.  
A vault brimming with all the gold they promised to give back &  
a half-buried brother. Antigone of the South.  
Blood on my hands, on their hands, on your hands,  
& not a single drop of rain anywhere.

---

**Danté Émile** is a Mexican, gay, transmasculine author based in Barcelona. They write both in Spanish and English about topics such as love, death, God, horror, and the overlap between them all. You can find more of their work in their upcoming chapbook *MISPLACED ORGANS & VARIOUS SAINTS*.

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# O Passado

## Felipe Chagas

### From the Artist on “O Passado”

The song “O Passado” was composed for the album *Selva Oscura*, released in 2018 by Felipe Chagas and Douglas Sousa. The album was inspired by Dante Alighieri’s work, *The Divine Comedy*. The instruments were recorded by Chagas and the bass by Sousa. The music is based on rock and blues inspirations. The album is available on all streaming platforms. The video was recorded in 2019 and includes several references of inspirations, such as Ingmar Bergman and Robert Johnson.



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**Felipe Chagas** started studying guitar at the age of 13. After studying classical guitar and electric guitar, he dedicated himself mainly to the study of the blues. During this period, he also studied singing. At the age of 18 he started teaching in a conservatory and never stopped. He developed several projects with jazz and blues bands. He is part of the Rockin’ Band, considered the biggest band in the world, where he helped to break the record and entered the *Guinness Book Of Records*. He released the album *Selva Oscura*, on which he played all instruments, and recently released the single, “Lumière.”

Enjoyed Felipe’s work? Send a tip straight to his **Paypal: [felipef\\_chagas@hotmail.com](mailto:felipef_chagas@hotmail.com)**



# To Whom I Was Too Afraid to Love

Wren Ashenhurst

Dolly Parton plays on the battery radio  
I am laid out under an oak tree  
the sun sits hunched low painting the sky  
blue fading to orange  
just at the horizon line it's grey  
I tell him I'm that grey; he laughs,  
fiddles with the sunflower I brought him  
he finds me in sonatas  
somehow we live forever

They take me to an aquarium  
hold my hand;  
tucks the clasped mass into their pocket  
they're so warm  
they take me to the place where it feels  
like we are the things the fish have come to see  
where we can breathe underwater  
at least we pretend  
believing by breathing in each other's air  
we can never drown.  
we don't kiss

She reads to me  
in the hushed hours of the late night  
her voice articulating how to identify fissures  
I ask her what fissures are; she tells me  
she used to be a singer before she discovered microscopes  
even when she tells me horrible things  
her voice carries that note of music  
of calm

I ask her to stop telling me things from her anatomy text-  
book  
she doesn't understand

They teach me how to paint  
I start to see their colours in my poetry  
I teach them how to read the stars  
how to have them lead you home  
they say they are home

He was a dancer  
so light on his feet you would think he was flying  
he lived for the thrill of the performance  
I asked him his favourite dance once  
he smiled, heavy handed statements  
lead on his tongue

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**Wren R. Ashenhurst** is a writer and artist from the Canadian West Coast, currently an undergraduate completing their Bachelors of Fine Arts with a double extended minor in creative writing and theater. Their work explores themes of queer identity, existential dread, and the melancholic, addictive horror of being known. When not writing, they often find themselves painting. This is their first publication.

Enjoyed Wren's work? Send a tip straight to their **PayPal**: [wren.r.ashenhurst@gmail.com](mailto:wren.r.ashenhurst@gmail.com)

# Metamorphosis

Quinn Valentine



**Quinn Valentine** is a queer, autistic artist from the Bay Area who makes work centered on their personal ideas about the power of transness. They enjoy taking the homophobic, transphobic and queerphobic myths perpetuated by hyper conservative Christian propaganda to flip them inside out into something new that empowers instead. They work with other witches like themselves to generate new pieces to embody the divine rebels they see in their loved ones.

Enjoyed Quinn's work? Send a tip straight to their **PayPal: [demonshornofplenty@gmail.com](mailto:demonshornofplenty@gmail.com)**

# Catholic Girl Draws Boobs

Elle Warren

One time, at one of my brothers' hockey games, my mom, sister, and I sat at a small cafe inside the rink. Note: this is an old memory. By the feel of it, I'd say I was five or six. It's possible we were not at the rink at all, but I think so. Around that time is when I'd started drawing. I liked to draw people. I liked to make characters. Crayons and paper at the ready, I started to draw our waitress, a lanky brunette. On her torso, I drew two half-circles sloped downward. Mom saw and said, "Danielle, you're not supposed to do that." The place inside that holds shame yawned open. I didn't know what was wrong with drawing someone's body as it is. I'm not sure if this was before or after I'd asked Mom about her boobs. About why she had them and what they did. I do know it was soon after Jenny, my childhood friend who lived across the street, and I stopped kissing. We acted out scenes we saw in the movies our brothers and sisters watched. She usually made me be *the boy*, which I didn't prefer, but I did want to be someone who could enjoy kissing a girl. We were, of course, just children. Just curious and exploratory. Nonetheless, when she told me we had to stop, I wished I could go back in time. More shame, this time with the added stab of rejection.

The afternoon at the rink was a few years before Mom handed me the American Girl Doll book about my changing body that I stuffed in a cupboard and didn't look at for weeks. After she asked a couple times if I'd opened it, I took it out of the cupboard and leafed through in my room. There was this illustration of the stages of boob development. I remember her asking

what stage I thought I was in and feeling squeamish. I did not want the secrets that my body seemed to represent. Didn't want the weird air of hush-hush and demureness. The old man at church telling my friend and I we were the prettiest girls in the room. I wanted to play animal at recess (you and your friends pick an animal and run around pretending to be them) and arm wrestle the boys.

I wanted No-Skirt-Wednesdays, where my friends and I made a pact to not wear skirts on Wednesdays. I wanted camouflage and the kind of sneakers my brothers wore. Pinks seemed to carry a connotation I didn't fully get and didn't want to. Seemed to mean I was supposed to like baking and learning to do laundry. Be okay with giving men some kind of free pass. To what I didn't know yet.

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The Catholic church I grew up going to stands high, a stone monolith. It's at least twenty stories tall. There are no stained glass windows. There are no windows at all except a few skylights at the very top, a couple football fields away from the pews. A 1970s-esque orange runner paves the path between pew sections and covers the platform where the altar sits. We went to church every Sunday. Until I was four or five, I made myself a throne out of hymnal books during each mass. I put one under my butt and stacked a few on either side of me to make the arm rests. In retrospect, it's a wonder my parents let me. My dad was a stickler for church etiquette. Whispers or laughing earned scowls. This was

a sacred place that deserved our utmost respect. Genuflects. During mass, right before communion, all the children—those younger than second grade who hadn't had their first communion yet—were invited to leave with a catechist teacher. The teacher would stand at the front of the behemoth church while the priest recited a blessing. I didn't always go. I didn't like the feeling of reentering the church afterward and not being able to find my family. It was like losing my mom at the grocery store except for it smelled like old women's perfume and there was no fluorescent lighting. Hardly any lighting at all. I did, however, love the feeling of finally spotting them. One of my siblings would be leaning out the end of the pew, smiling and waving. It made me feel like I belonged somewhere. I belonged to them.

Beginning in first grade, I attended catechism on Tuesday evenings. It was on one of these nights that I first learned of God's wrath. The story of him sending fire down a mountain or something. I could do research and find the exact story. Could quote the bible. The truth is, though, I just don't want to because I know I've got the gist right. I learned the concept of a vengeful God. I know I raised my hand and asked, "I thought God loves us no matter what? I thought it was unconditional?" Disclaimer: I'm not sure if I used the word "unconditional" or not, but I did read fervently and live with three teenagers, so it's possible. I can't remember what the catechist teacher answered. Some explanation that was supposed to make sense. Maybe something like, "Yes, but God also wants us to do what he says" or "God is very powerful." For the first time, I felt afraid of and confused by god. Who was this guy, really, and what did he want from us? Whatever it was sounded like the opposite of freedom, but I didn't want to be chased by his flames, so what was a small girl, in her burgeoning body, to do?

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In middle and high school, catechism gives way to youth group, a group meant to feel trendy and youthful to retain future constituents. Once, we played an activity where the leader asked for six volunteers. Three boys and three girls. They were matched in pairs. Jeopardy style, the leader asked a series of questions about fashion, cars, cooking, and other gendered topics I'm grateful I don't remember. The moral of the game, as I'm sure you've guessed by now, was that boys and girls know different things. Therefore, they're the perfect complement to one another.

Another time, the priest of our church popped

his head in. I have no idea what we were talking about, or if he knew what we were talking about, but he said something like, "How can you know you like an ice cream flavor you've never tried?" I don't if he was referring to sexuality at all, but that's how I interpreted it. *He's right*, I thought. *I've never even tried either one, so what do I know? I'm sure I'm not gay.* I remember going through the rest of that night caught in a spiral. Trying to solve my sexuality which seemed in and of itself a failure. Obviously a sin.

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I was a senior in high school when same-sex marriage was legalized. In mass the Sunday after, our priest, Father Phil, announced that regardless of law, he would not be officiating same-sex marriages. The congregation gave him a standing ovation. I sat and looked around, bewildered. I was not as impressionable by the church at this point. I was eighteen and knew there was much of Catholicism I disagreed with. I'd recently raised my hand in youth group during a conversation (read: teaching) about abortion. "What about rape?" I asked. I once again don't remember the answer. Only that I was unsatisfied. Despite my growing separation between self and church, in five years, when it was time to come out to my father, I would replay this moment in my head. Him, joining the flanks of people rising to their feet.

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I had a boyfriend once who was able to convince me that the pull-out method was safe. Everything I know about sex education I have learned from Google. I must have Googled *can I get pregnant from....* a dozen times during the course of our relationship. He was twenty-eight to my twenty. He embraced a Peter Pan aura about him. My mother had just died. I stopped praying. I was devoted to very little except a desire to be witnessed by him. A need for my body to be confirmed. To be convinced I was real. A real breathing, walking mass. We had copious amounts of sex, a much more socially acceptable sin than the one I wanted. Or, rather, the one I feared too much to know I wanted.

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It is July, three years after Peter Pan man, when I tell Dad I have a girlfriend. We sit on his back deck eating spaghetti. My sister is there, too, because I asked her to be. I do not know what to expect. I don't think he will disown me, but I do not know whether he will say something that irreparably damages our relationship. I am so scared of not having any parents. It's hard to know which would be worse: a dead parent or a par-



ent who is alive but does not love me how I thought. My hand, holding a forkful of penne, shakes. My voice shakes. I cannot remember the last time I was this nervous. Cheerleading tryouts? My first date?

I tell him, and he is phased only slightly. Confused more than anything. He asks, “And you think this is like, a forever thing?” I prepare myself to defend that it’s not a *phase*, say, “What do you mean?” “Well, it wasn’t that long ago that you had a boyfriend, right?” True. I had introduced him to a boyfriend the winter before. “Oh, yeah,” I say, “I would identify as bisexual.” I wasn’t actually so sure of that by then—falling in love with a woman allowed me to be honest about my prior relationships in a way I struggled to before—but that seemed the simplest thing to say for now.

Later, he will ask why I felt the need to have my sister present. “What did you think I was going to say?” He’ll ask. I tell him what he already knows: you are a lifelong Catholic. The Catholics are not exactly known for embracing sexuality. He shakes his head. “It’s [sexuality] a very personal thing,” he says. “I think most parents just want their kids to be happy and fulfilled.” I am astounded equally by this almost instantaneous acceptance and ignorance to the fact that it’s not that simple for many parents. That people in my situation often find themselves parentless, or parented with factions of themselves dismissed, and therefore parentless.

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Sometimes, I walk outside and want everyone to know I’m gay. I have a *Proud* sweatshirt. I have a favorite olive beanie. I have neutral colors and cargo pants. None of that is the point, obviously. Obviously, there is no right or wrong way to be gay. The point is what the point is for so many: I was once very ashamed and am now very out. I am now very out and I still come up against the shame that was bred in me so early. I still expect people to think my love is weird or wrong. I am still the girl who sometimes feels strongly against skirts. And, at other times, wants nothing more than to wear one. I still like sneakers. I better understand the color pink but not what my body communicates to the world without my knowing. I am

new to myself only at first glance. Looking deeper, I am who I have always been. I am who I danced away from, by force, and am now dancing with, becoming one.

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**Elle Warren** is a poet and writer exploring themes of grief, OCD, queerness, joy, and a fierce commitment to being alive. She holds a B.A. in English & Creative Writing from Metropolitan State University of Denver. You can subscribe to her free newsletter at [tinyletter.com/ellewarren](http://tinyletter.com/ellewarren) or sign up for her poem-a-month mail subscription at [patreon.com/ellewarren](http://patreon.com/ellewarren). Though she has a complicated relationship with it, you can also follow her on Instagram @[ellehasatypewriter](https://www.instagram.com/ellehasatypewriter).

Enjoyed Elle’s work? Send a tip straight to her **Venmo: @daniellewarren555**



# No. 302

Kenneth Ricci



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**K.G. Ricci** is a self-taught NYC artist who has been creating collages for the past seven years. In that time his work has evolved from the larger 24x48 panels to the current 7x10 books. His work has been in gallery exhibitions throughout the country, and he has appeared in numerous on-line exhibitions. Many of Ken's most recent "visual stories" have been featured in several literary magazines.

Enjoyed Kenneth's work? Send a tip straight to his **PayPal** - [kentricci@gmail.com](mailto:kentricci@gmail.com)

# What Is Sacred

Beck Guerra Carter

*"we are in a world that is not ours. what do we do with the / dreams that touch our consciousness in the nude each night?" -Tatiana de la Tierra, "Dreaming of Lesbos"*

We are free  
from sin.  
If our bodies  
are meant  
for burning,  
it is only  
the torch  
of touch.  
Bless these  
bodies. Bless  
your mouth  
which is  
necessary  
and mine.  
Bless me,  
Butch and  
handsome.  
Bless you,  
and all  
Femme  
daddies.  
Praise  
Sappho,  
our mother  
and the mother  
-land  
we share.  
Our bed  
is an island.  
A sanctuary.  
A church  
where all  
our kind  
can come.

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**Beck Guerra Carter** (they/she) is a nonbinary lesbian poet from Austin, Texas. They are an MFA candidate at Texas State University. Beck has been published in *Lavender Review*, *the lickety~split*, and elsewhere. Their life is more than a list of failures and accomplishments. So is yours.

Enjoyed Beck's work? Send a tip straight to their **Venmo: @beckthepoet**

# Our Lady

JW Summerisle



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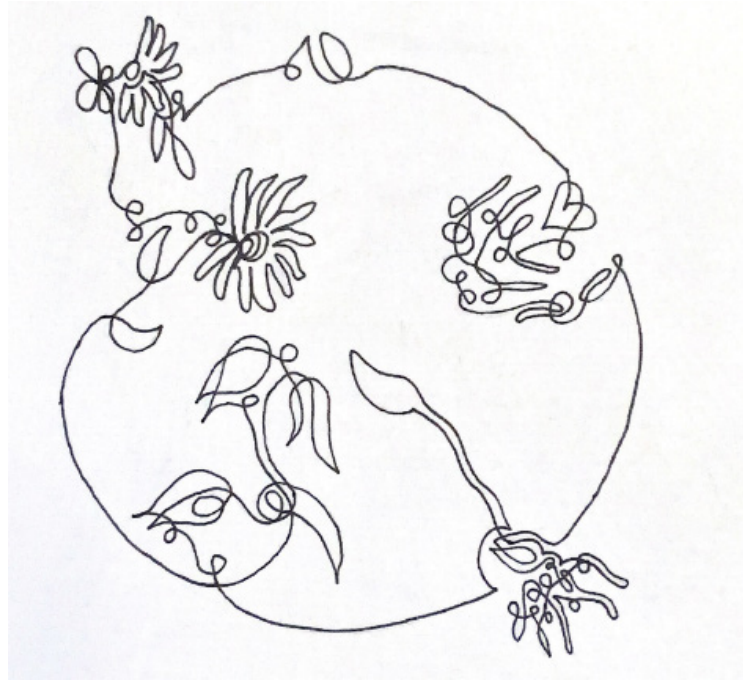
**JW Summerisle** is an artist from the English East Midlands who took up painting in April 2021. Since then, their work has appeared in Leicester Museum and Art Gallery, The Haunted Antiques Paranormal Research Centre, and has had the pleasure of being shipped worldwide. They have an online store at [jwsummerisle.etsy.com](https://jwsummerisle.etsy.com) and, occasionally, they remember their twitter log in details and tweet from @jw\_summerisle.

Enjoyed JW's work? Send a tip straight to their **PayPal**: [jwsummerisle@gmail.com](mailto:jwsummerisle@gmail.com)



# Life Cycle of a Daughter

Zoe Raine Maki



*Illustrations are by B. Muse (Insta: @tastesliketelevision)*

**Seeds:** Seeds contain a plant with leaves, stems, and roots.



*You see these trumpet vines? The honeysuckle? She'd said to the baby who was reaching for the leaves, we created these together. And she'd go on to tell the story of the day the girl said her first word — "apple" — and pointed at the apple her mother was eating. The mom nearly choked on the seed*

and coughed it into the corner where their first vine would grow, emerging from the dust and spiderwebs. It had taken the mom a few days to notice the vine snaking along the TV cables; when she found it, she tried to throw it away, but it was stuck between the floorboards. They couldn't have known then, but it had already grown a complicated system of roots beneath their feet.

Soon the room was filled with moss, figs, mangos, and everything else that didn't make sense in one place. Her mother explained that you'd never see another garden like this. *These combinations of plants don't usually grow together, but aren't they beautiful? Lush and wild, just like you,* and she would tap the baby's sternum and kiss her nose. As the girl grew older, they would water the plants together, ducking and weaving through the room. The mother would squat and pull the girl close, then show her the new plants popping up. *When you're picking raspberries, look for the fully colored ones. If you try to pick it, and it doesn't want to budge, try again tomorrow.* There were other plants too, ones that her mom said to keep secret. *The ones that grow on the rainbow plant — these ones are only for us,* she plucked a bright pink star from one of the red stems and placed it on her tongue, eyes closed. It tasted like strawberries and gushed like boba pearls. The girl felt it in her toes

first, then there was a ballooning in her lungs before the boba pearls bubbled into laughter. *The plant takes care of us, so we take care of her.*

**Germination:** With soil, water, and sun, the plant can begin to grow.



The garden reacted poorly to other hands. What the girl remembers: crawling through the jungle in the TV room to push *Winnie the Pooh* into the VCR, a neon blue spider crawling down the screen, a web more supernatural to her than the root system under their feet, and the week that Strangeman disappeared as fast as he appeared. The night he entered

their home, the garden leaves dried and shriveled to the floor, but this didn't stop the mother from inviting him in to spend the night. He didn't hurt them; he just changed things. He stayed away from the TV room, but the mom still brought him the stars that grew on the rainbow plant; it was not just for the girl and mother anymore. The girl could hear them laughing from the other room, and she didn't join in.

A week later, on the playground, the girl and her classmates were participating in the Clog. This took place in the tube slide where the first person down would stop, and one by one they would pile in until the whole slide was full of sweaty bodies and second grade Lunchable breath. They stayed in there until someone started crying because of the claustrophobia, but that someone was never her. This time it was Stephanie Stevens. She ran straight to the teacher, so the slide was blocked off for the rest of recess to prevent another "incident." If it hadn't been for Stephanie Stevens, the girl could've been squished in with Clementine for all of recess with her infectious giggle, bright yellow jacket, and honey lavender shampoo smell. As more and more weight stacked on top of them, squeezing out their breath, Clementine and the girl threw their heads back in laughter. Every time they came back to equilibrium, their faces were closer than before until they laughed so hard their mouths fell into each other. It was then that Stephanie Stevens cried and got everyone in trouble. She didn't see Clementine for the rest of the day, but she still had the remnants of her clementine taste on the bus

ride home. Her reliving of Clementine and the Clog was interrupted when she saw Strangeman on the side of the road with an extended thumb and her mom's old orange suitcase. The girl pressed her forehead against the window and squinted as if that might make him disappear altogether. Even long after she had passed him and there was nothing to see but blurred trees, she did not stop staring. Her head did not stop rattling against the glass.

**Stems & Roots:** Stems will grow upward towards the light, and roots will grow down towards the soil.



She sprinted home, backpack bouncing on her shoulders; she was ready to squeeze her mom tight and laugh together once again, to duck and weave in the TV room garden hand in hand. But when she reached the yard, her mom was digging a hole so deep that only the top of her sunhat was visible. The girl meant to scream out for her mom, kiss her forehead, crawl into the hole with her, but instead she stayed glued to the chalk covered sidewalk. The girl only moved when her mom said, *Come bury me!* in a way that sounded

fun and inviting — in a way that reminded the girl of pre-Strangeman times. With the girl's small hands and new excitement, she buried her mom in the yard. They covered her up to her mouth, and her pleading eyes said *Please, keep going.*

When only her sunhat poked from the ground, the girl picked flowers from the TV room garden and placed them around the hat. At first, the girl relished the alone time with her mom and bathed in the sunlight, feeling her mother as roots just below, keeping the girl grounded. But as the moon and stars came out, she started to panic. *When will this game be over?* When she dug into the dirt under her mom's sunhat, there was nobody — no body, no root system. The mom didn't come back for a few days, and the girl forgot to go to school. She forgot about the Clog and Stephanie Stevens and Clementine with her sweet shampoo. She didn't shower, and she only knew how to make grilled cheese. A few days later, her mom simply showed up and carried the girl — in her muddy sundress — to the TV room as if nothing had happened. *Let's get you cleaned up. I have a*



*surprise for you*, she said as she scooped her daughter into her arms.

**Leaves:** Leaves unfold, take in sunlight, and produce food through photosynthesis.



In the TV room, there was a newly inflated pool with clean water and lost leaves floating on the surface. The large blue rectangle fit perfectly in the center of the room, and the leaves that had been brittle and dry grew toward the skylight with renewed, vibrant colors. The mother stepped into the pool with the daughter still in her arms and lowered her into the water. Their

clothes clung to their bodies as the mom washed the dried mud from the daughter's arms and behind her ears. The daughter breathed in the collection of fruits and flowers under the warmth of the skylight and felt full.

She asked her mom, *Where did you go? I was scared you were gone forever.*

*I'm always with you*, the mother responded, *even if you don't see me.*

The daughter thought about that and felt it was true. When her mom was gone, she could feel her heart-beat under the floorboards and her laughter under the warmth of the sun, but still, she had felt lonely. The mother scrubbed the daughter's hair with tea tree oil, and said

*Keep your eyes closed. I have that surprise for you.*

And she kissed the top of her daughter's soapy head. When the mother sat back up, the daughter felt as if she had strings coming from her head and hands that connected to her mom. It was as if she and her mother were two marionette dolls, mirror images that moved with each other's motions. When the daughter sat up, she expected her mother to lay down as a result of what felt like their connected strings. But the mom sat still and smiled at the daughter. *Do you feel it? Now you will always know where I'm at because you can feel the pull. We can never lose each other.*

**Flowers:** Many plants produce flowers that are important in making seeds.



The daughter fell in love years later, and again, laughing fell into kissing. Their nectar lips spoke a language of their own and their cupid bows grooved to the rhythm of their bodies – the beat of their language as allegro and andante synched with their heart's bpm. They rested foreheads on one another and became miniature re-

flections in each other's eyes. The daughter felt goosebumps of seeds all over her body and spotted a leaf unfurling from the lamp – a distant memory of home. The longer her and \_\_\_\_\_ spent gazing in each other's eyes, the more plants began to sprout from the bathtub drains and light fixtures. Soon there were faucet ferns and orangelo outlets, and she said to \_\_\_\_\_: *we created these together.* \_\_\_\_\_ was delighted, and they fed the new fruits to each other in silence.

Amid all the love and new growth, the daughter dreamt of a strawberry field with acres of ripe fruit and knew there was someone she was supposed to find, though she wasn't sure who or how she knew. Her attempts at running — at controlling her body in any way — failed. She felt like she had been drugged; her vision tingled with dancing red and green splotches while she fought to keep her feet from melting further into the ground. There were wind chimes close by, and the sound made her mouth taste like earth.

When she woke up, she felt a heaviness she hadn't felt since the day she buried her mother in the yard. She felt like the strings had been cut, and suddenly, she was left to carry her whole body on her own. She tried to call her mom, heart still racing. When her mom didn't pick up, the daughter hopped in her truck, leaving \_\_\_\_\_ behind, and drove back home in the middle of the night.

**Pollination:** Flowers are pollinated when pollen from the stem moves onto the pistil. Seeds and fruit are produced.



While the daughter was away, the mother buried herself again, but this time, under the floorboards. As if trapped in a conch shell, the mother was overwhelmed with the sound of the crashing waves for days. At first, the sound came from the walls, the ceilings, the sinks, and she could taste the salt and feel

the sand under her fingernails, but eventually, she realized it was coming from below. She felt seasick while she took a box cutter and pry bar to the wooden panels in the kitchen. After crying and cutting and prying through two layers of hardwood floor, she had a body-sized hole. Underneath the floorboards wasn't water, but dirt. The sound of the ocean didn't go away, so the mother kept digging, dirt following the swirls of her fingerprints until it was a part of her.

When the daughter arrived back home and walked onto the porch, she smelled fresh dirt and knew it was true. *Why would my mother do this? How could she leave me alone again?* In the middle of the kitchen, there was a single strawberry plant. The TV room was past the kitchen and to the right, so this plant was out of place. The daughter felt an immediate tug from her fingertips toward the plant, a lightness again in her limbs, and knew the connection to her mother was back.

The patch of dirt around the plant was about the size of a body, while the rest of the floor was still the normal light wooden floors she was used to, though the edges around the dirt were splintered. The daughter had always wondered what was supporting their weight, if it was dirt or concrete or a large empty space. She knelt in front of the plant, her pants getting wet from the moist dirt, and said *I'm here mom, don't worry, I'm here*, and started to dig around the plant with heavy handfuls. She smelled the first few handfuls and accidentally sucked dirt crumbs

into her lungs. She wondered if she could inhale a seed and grow something inside of her. When she was up to her elbows, the roots (nearly as thick as her wrists) mazed down, down, down. Soon, the daughter's whole body was intertwined with the webs. The light from above started to dim. It felt like someone had fallen on top of her, and right as she was about to mimic Stephanie Steven's claustrophobic cries in the Clog, a sliver of light opened below.

The girl felt it in her toes first, then there was a ballooning in her lungs before the boba pearls bubbled into laughter. When she reached for the light, she slid through a familiar tube slide, fast and full of adrenaline. The light grew and grew until she was spit out onto rubber mulch with Clementine landing on top of her, with an infectious giggle and bright yellow jacket. They laughed until their cheeks and bellies hurt. The girl could tell her mother was around, with the invisible strings still tugging in multiple directions.



**Seeds:** Seeds contain a plant with leaves, stems, and roots.

On rubber mulch at the bottom of the slide, the girl curled into the fetal position, intertwined with Clementine. Crumbs of honey lavender joined the bits of dirt in her lungs and fused into a new growth. *Let's get you cleaned up.*

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**Zoe Raine** is intrigued by the intersection of motherhood, mental illness, and magical realism. She found her love of literary magazines through interning at *Passages North* and is now a fiction editor for *Bellingham Review* and reader for *Fractured Lit*. Her work is featured (or forthcoming) in *The Hunger*, *Maudlin House*, *Lost Balloon*, *Invisible City*, and *A Velvet Giant*. You can find her on Twitter @ZoRaineMaki1

Enjoyed Zoe's work? Send a tip straight to her **Venmo:** @Zoe-Maki

# Plus One

Danielle Klebes



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**Danielle Klebes** lives and works at Wassaic Project in Wassaic, NY. Her work explores and disrupts ideas of social expectations and gender norms by presenting queer bodies in utopic settings. Danielle has exhibited in notable galleries and museums throughout the United States, Europe, and Canada. Danielle received her MFA in Visual Arts from Lesley University College of Art and Design in Cambridge, MA, in 2017.

Enjoyed Danielle's work? Send a tip straight to her **Venmo: danielleklebes13**



# IN CEMENTO VERITAS

Mario Loprete



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**Mario Loprete**, born 1968 Catanzaro Italy. Painting for my is the first love. An important, pure love. Creating a painting, starting from the spasmodic research of a concept with which I want to send a message to transmit my message, it's the base of my painting. The sculpture is my lover, my artistic betrayal to the painting. That voluptuous and sensual lover that gives me different emotions, that touches prohibited cords...

Enjoyed Mario's work? Send him a tip straight to his **PayPal: [mario.loprete@libero.it](mailto:mario.loprete@libero.it)**





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