

defunkt magazine



ANTHOLOGY II

JULY 2021

DEFUNKT MAGAZINE

ANTHOLOGY II

Masthead

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Defunkt Magazine is published quarterly online, this anthology represents the very best of the previous years digital publications.

This book is dedicated to all of us still standing after the last year and all those who have fallen before us. You have not been, and you never will be forgotten.

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Melange Crêperie



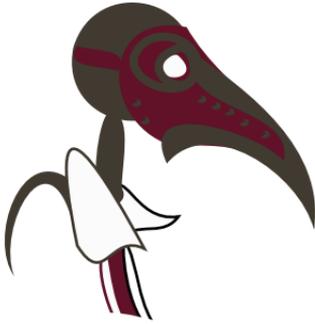
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From the Editors...

It's no exaggeration to say that this last year-and-a-half was, for many of us, the hardest we've ever experienced. The Covid-19 pandemic, the political division in our nation, the racism, and the violence we saw will likely come to define this period in history. As a people, we witnessed continued incidents of hate and oppression from public officials and fellow citizens alike. They smattered the news between literal death counts from the virus. These images are burned into the fabric of the American consciousness, alongside memories of isolation, grief, and loss. We're all dealing with trauma. The world is in a painful period of transition, and with any luck, healing.

It's not surprising that we at *Defunkt* have decided to remember these difficult times a bit differently. We want to think back on this era as one of hope. We prefer to recall the friends who were there for us, both morally and professionally--the people who stood by us, our mission, who didn't scoff at our virtual attempts to maintain the joy of a creative community.

Yes, of course, we aren't unscathed; we experienced tumultuous changes both within and without our publication. But rather than break or go under as so many businesses sadly were forced to do, *Defunkt* continued to grow. Initially, we bemoaned the loss of in-person events but soon found unexpected advantages to the virtual stage. We hosted community readers and featured artists, authors, and musicians from all over the country and as far away as Morocco, the United Kingdom, Ukraine, and Germany. Something a burgeoning publication such as ours might never have accomplished.

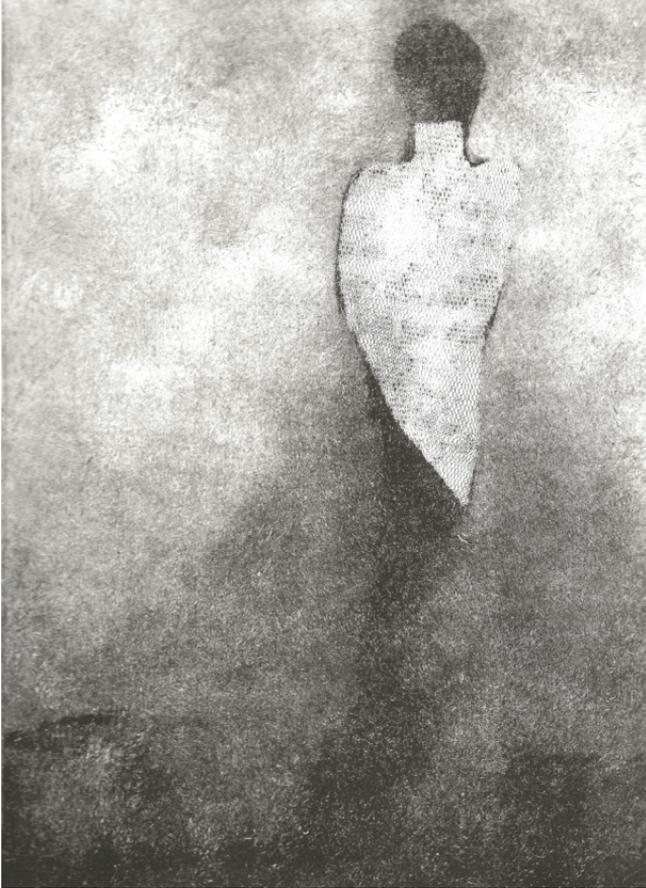
There was an outpouring of voices whose lives were homebound before the pandemic; they said, "Thank you, without this virtual space, I could never have shown my work; I may never have been heard." This

touched us and inspired an entire series of virtual and financially accessible workshops. Which in turn, enabled us to employ, celebrate, and promote numerous authors of varying and diverse backgrounds, another founding dream of ours. We applied and were graciously awarded several grants, and just recently, we obtained our goal of becoming a non-profit. A long-term dream replete with obstacles, unexpected pitfalls, and surprising boons. We may not be the same small litmag we'd initially conceived, but we speak for our staff, our contributors, and our readership when we say that the content of this text is uniquely daring and profoundly moving.

We are immensely proud of the work contained herein--its very existence gives us hope, and it is our deepest wish, at least in some small way, that it will do the same for you.

Ever vigilant,
Miranda & Chris

Two handwritten signatures in black ink. The signature on the left is 'Miranda' and the signature on the right is 'Chris'. Both are written in a cursive, flowing style.



Lost in the Darkness
Carla Barron

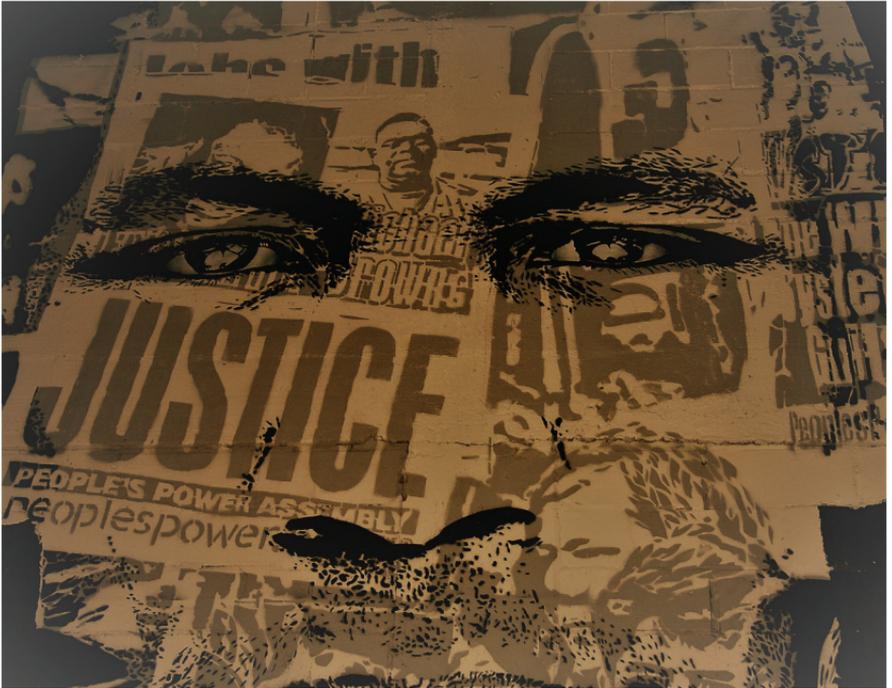
1st Place - Anthology Cover Art Contest 2021

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The Eyes of Justice
K.B. Solomon

FINALIST - Anthology Cover Art Contest 2021



Una ola de fuerza
Coyoli

2021 Musical Feature

Óscar Coyoli's work interrelates his two greatest artistic passions: music and visual arts. Coyoli began his career in 2007 with the release of his EP *Una tarde de domingo en la isla de la Grande Jatte*, followed by *Bemót* in 2012, which was produced by Grammy-award winning Juan Manuel Torreblanca. From 2014, he started a new project, closer to an abstract, electronic sound, under the name Mar de Sombra, releasing three short-length albums: *El Mar Valiente* (2015), *Nocturno 1* (2017) and *L'Abîme* (2018). He has been honored by UNESCO (Montreal, 2014) and by many Mexican institutions, including the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo, the Franz Mayer Museum and Mexico's National Film Archive (Cineteca Nacional). He has performed live in Mexico as well as in the United States and Canada, the country where he currently lives. <https://coyoli.bandcamp.com/>

Words from the Musician about *Una ola de fuerza*

Written after his move from Mexico to Montreal, and after *L'Abîme* (his first French-language EP), Coyoli returns to Spanish with these pieces and pours the search for his own roots into them. In doing so, he has created a musical artifact to share with anyone who needs to pick up their own pieces and reconfigure themselves.

1. "Quédate" (Stay)

llegaste aquí / como el sol / que nunca para de buscar / perderse en
alba

you came here / like the sun / who never stops looking / to lose itself at
daybreak

MUSIC

As opposed to a serenade, an aubade is the song that speaks of lovers separating before dawn, a form of sentimental rupture sung since the Middle Ages. “Quédate” is a postmodern aubade, a song to lull us to sleep when we have to leave (each other and ourselves) at sunrise.

2. “Poema de Luna, no. 2” (Moon Poem, no. 2)

te miré / hasta que la noche nos ahogó
i looked at you / until we were drowned by the night

A desert ballad with melancholy undertones. The metallic sound of a guitar that evokes the banjo and miners singing night songs far from home. A campfire song with an amplifier in the middle of a lunar landscape.

3. “Una ola de fuerza” (A Wave of Strength)

temo / borrarne así nomás / de las calles de esta ciudad
i'm afraid / of erasing myself just like that / from the streets of this city

A ranchera-style neo-bolero. The voice, wave of strength, symbol of freedom; the guitar, only a wooden ship to bear the charge from a waltzing tide. The piece that gives its name to the EP founds a new music genre, a hybrid of a hybrid, which Chavela Vargas would raise her shot glass of tequila to.

4. "Azur" (Azure)

Azure: intense or dark blue on the coat of arms of cities and lineages. Spectral color between sky-blue and indigo. Represents the virtues of justice and strength.

A noise nocturne. Organic song, growing and decomposing. The guitar reveals its role as a steed-instrument, taking over the piece before extinguishing it.



*To experience this EP for yourself
scan this QR code.*



Reflections in Light
Lorri Frisbee

2nd Place - Anthology Cover Art Contest 2021

Palestine

Noor Hindi

is a woman. A child
in a thobe. Olive pits in
my hands. The tatreez
on my grandmother's scarf.
Is thirty-four Palestinians killed.
We don't wake up. American
politicians. Occupied
country. *Israel has the right
to defend itself.* Ahed Tamimi,
ice cream on her tongue,
flavor unknown. *Are you grateful
your parents came to
this country?* Three hundred
dead. Open air prison. Ten-year
blockade. Rouzan al-Najjar,
accidental bullet. Pomegranate
so bloody. My grandmother,
born ten days before Nakba,
gun powder in her blood.
Stop killing us.
Stop telling us how to fight.
Is grape mint hookah, country
I've never visited. Woman,
body bruised and policed.
Is queer. Is *fuck the patriarchy.*

Three hundred thousand Palestinians killed.

My father crying

to Omayma El Khalil. Sweet black tea,

fresh mint stuck on the roof

of my mouth. Two state solution.

We thought the house

was empty: Is stranger living

in my great-grandfather's home,

eating the pomegranates he planted.

One hundred acres of farm land.

So how do you say

your name again? Is

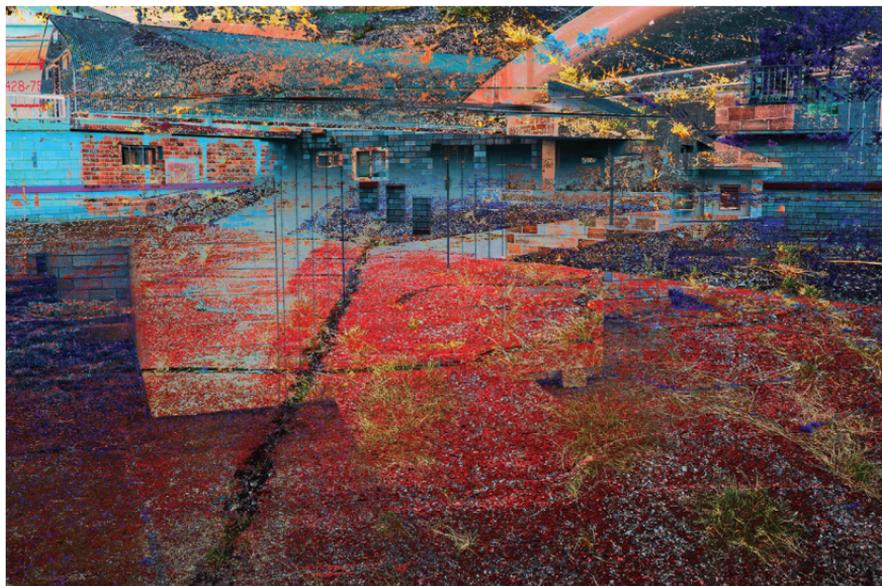
_____ Palestinians killed. Sunflowers

on their graves. Seeds

we crack between our teeth,

spitting out each shell

before digging another grave.



Untitled

Christopher Paul Brown

3rd Place - Anthology Cover Art Contest 2021

If You Go Back, Don't Ever Tell Them

Elizabeth Jaikaran

She opened the top dresser drawer for the sixth time that morning. Face towels, underwear, sleeping shirts; even the socks with grips on the bottom that she stole from Jamaica Hospital at the end of her shifts were there. Everything but the Necklace.

The Necklace had performed odysseys with her, crossing oceans and mountains, in her bosom for the most important days of her life, just to turn up missing on what she thought would be yet another insignificant day.

Every morning, Radhe would open the purple muslin pouch where the Necklace lived. She would admire each stone laid in gold, for which her father had sold the family car and mortgaged their home in Bihar to buy. When he came home from the jeweler that day over two years ago, he gathered his family into the kitchen to announce that he would deliver Radhe to the bridegroom's family like a maharani; like a queen. He placed

an intricately carved wooden box on the square breakfast table in the corner of the kitchen and unclasped the aged bronze lock to reveal the luminous gold necklace resting on a field of red velvet.

When she moved into her in-laws' home on her wedding night, her mother-in-law took the wooden box as Radhe slept, still wearing her wedding saree and the Necklace. Her mother-in-law used the box to store her dozens of earrings and nose rings, thinking that Radhe would not need it anymore. When Radhe awoke, she searched all over the strange new bedroom, quietly so as not to disturb her strange new husband. But when she failed to find it, she was forced to repurpose the purple muslin pouch that once carried her large bridal earrings. She undid the knot in the pouch's drawstring and carefully nestled the Necklace inside, all the while worried that the strands

would tangle as it sat there in a ball. It was in this pouch that she stored the Necklace from that day forward, even after she discovered the wooden box in her mother-in-law's room one afternoon as she swept the house. This was the pouch that the Necklace rested in when Radhe traveled to New York City from Bihar just a few months after her wedding.

"Nikhil! Have you seen my purple pouch?" she shouted as she continued to rummage through already rummaged drawers.

No answer. He had already left for work. Radhe was already late for her shift at the hospital. The evening operator would have to wait until she got there – she had long decided this much. Her Necklace was gone and not even fifty overtime shifts could replace it. She couldn't call the cops. If they came and saw that she lived in an illegal basement apartment, she wouldn't have a place to live in anymore.

Just a few weeks after they first moved in, Radhe and Nikhil had

to vacate the apartment while their landlord removed the mini-stove and bathtub for the city inspection, promising to pop them both back in once the inspection was passed. Rima, the landlord, suspected that it was her insufferable sister-in-law who had made the call to the city to report the basement to get back at her for an argument they had.

"The bitch has never liked to see us happy," she told Radhe one day over evening tea. "If there is ever a way to bring us some calamity that woman will figure it out!"

Rima and her husband Amal left Bangladesh sixteen years ago and have been living in Queens ever since. They had their first child nine years ago, within months of moving into the house they own now. Rima tried to get pregnant for so many years after she had her daughter Farheen, but to no success. 'Allah knows best', Rima and Amal would both say with just enough sadness in their eyes to re-

veal tenderness no one would otherwise know existed. And what a weight this was on little Farheen! They would tell Farheen it was God's plan that she fulfill their many dreams for the many children they wanted but could not have. Dreams of academic scholarships and dance recitals and instruments played with professional calculation - that was all Farheen's responsibility to actualize, all on her own. By now, at the time the Necklace was discovered as missing, Rima was already walking Farheen to school and Amal had long gone to open his convenience store hours ago. Radhe was shaken. And alone. Had someone stolen her Necklace while she was at work yesterday? Had she moved it somewhere and just didn't remember? Was she losing her memory like her grandmother who went missing for a week because she couldn't find her way home?

Radhe dashed to the kitchen where her all too quiet cell phone was charging next to the narrow two-burner stove. She called Nikhil's

cell six times only to be forwarded to his voicemail just as many times. It was comical, really, how her father mortgaged their family home so that she could get married and live in this place that is barely a third of the size. When they first got their visas, Nikhil told her family that he had made arrangements for a house in New York City. When they finally arrived at their new home that winter evening two years ago, Radhe was horrified when Nikhil said, "Follow me," and, rather than up the front stairs and through the heavy oak door, he proceeded down narrow steps into the ground.

--

They had only been married for five months when their U.S. visas were approved. Their lives became a screaming rush as they prepared for the move, but it was Naresh, Nikhil's childhood friend, who helped ease their shift. Nikhil had secured a job for himself with Naresh, who was working in a restaurant kitchen. Naresh was in many ways a much

kinder person than Nikhil could ever be. His delicate facial features -- his small upturned nose, rosy lips, and cheeks that could never know stubble though he tried -- all contributed to the sweet aura that always seemed to surround him.

Radhe struggled to understand how Naresh and Nikhil could derive from the same place; how they could possibly have lived shared experiences as childhood friends. It was Naresh who picked them up from the airport. It was Naresh who helped them find their apartment. It was Naresh who had his wife, a sweet Bihari girl named Diya, cook and send meals for them for the entire first month of their relocation. When they had to vacate that apartment, it was with Naresh that Nikhil and Radhe stayed. And it was Naresh she found with Nikhil on the fateful day that it all started to make sense. After that stay, Diya's meals no longer came to them when they returned home. Those three weeks living together which should have made them all closer formed a

field between them instead.

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It took Radhe eight months to find a job. For the first time in her life, she sent a muttered blessing to the mean, dictatorial teachers of her childhood who forced English on her unwilling tongue, as it helped her to secure the only job she could find. It was Rima who spoke with her cousin, who spoke with his co-worker, who spoke with his aunt, who knew the hiring manager for administrative staff at the hospital, and got Radhe a job as a telephone operator at the hospital switchboard. Speak English and be available for the listed hours. That was all she had to do. The rest they would teach her, they said.

The eight months before this job turned up, Radhe remained confined to her basement-dwelling all day, brewing in her discontent. Too afraid to face the foreign snow and arctic winds, those first months she just stared at walls and ceilings, watching the brown water

stains and looking for any growth. She'd sit with her back against the wall on the bare ground, hugging her knees, taking in the unfurnished space, an antithesis to the clutter of the family home she was used to. She eventually began a daily ritual of retrieving the purple pouch and examining her Necklace -- the only bit of her bridal jewelry that she brought with her, leaving the rest in Bihar for her sister's wedding day.

The purple pouch was her security. The kind of security that she needed to know was there each morning in order for her spirit to rise with the cold New York sun. When her best friend Shruti got married a few years back, her parents could only afford a simple wedding set -- plain gold without precious stones, complemented by tiny earrings of the same style. Shruti's in-laws did not mind that she was not dripping in valuables. They had made some snide comments once or twice whenever they felt she was disrespectful, reminding her of how gracious they

were in accepting her despite her flimsy jewelry and laughable dowry, but it was enough for her. The flimsy jewelry was enough for her to buy a train ticket from Odisha back to Bihar after her husband beat her until the gold retainer between her front teeth flew out of her mouth. She pawned the retainer too.

Just a few weeks after Shruti returned home, the Yadav family's girl came home with a glistening black eye. Her opulent wedding jewelry was enough for her voyage from Bangalore back to Bihar. It covered her tuition for the first year of business school, which had always been her dream. A dream that led her husband to bring his fist to her face when she brought home the enrollment forms.

It is often shameful for the mothers and fathers who welcome home daughters after failed marriages. Yet, when she arrives on their doorsteps, crying and bruised, there is also some pride to show that they had sent her well-

equipped to find her way back. They did not send her as a beggar. They sent her with jewels. It is an arsenal that is so crucial in these parts where girls don't leave home with wads of money hidden in their bras, much less with their own checking accounts.

When brides leave their homes, it is understood that they are leaving their families behind, only to return when absolutely necessary, or for some auspicious holidays. Thus, a bride's wedding jewelry is the only protection that she takes with her into her new home. The golden anklets and multi-strand necklaces that beautify them before the marriage ceremony are what discharge them when their new lives turn ugly; when the vicious mothers-in-law and violent husbands become all too much. One gold nose ring can buy two small pieces of hand luggage. Three if you're shopping in Delhi. The bangles will cover food and new clothes for the voyage, maybe even a hotel along the way. The Necklace can potentially cover the plane or the train ride home

with enough left over to survive for weeks before finding a job. When a bride walks into a ceremonial hall, the guests examine her closely, waiting to see with what arsenal of asylum her family is sending her away. 'What a beautiful bride' really means 'look at her armor'.

Leaving the rest of her jewelry back in Bihar for her sister, Radhe came all the way to New York armed only with her Necklace. Bright yellow gold, dual stranded with an 'S' eye-and- hook clasp in the back. Laden with precious stones. Bits of rubies. Emeralds. Kundhan. All of them nestled into the golden ground like feeding calves upon their mother's safe teat. Radhe's father purchased the Necklace from the wealthiest jeweler in Bihar. He said his pieces came from all over India: Karnataka, Jaipur, and even Mumbai. His shop was located at the opposite end of their district in a shopping strip that was bookended by rival textile stores.

The day Radhe's father purchased the Necklace, he drove to the store and walked back home. "The car was part of the payment," he explained to his distressed wife as she stood over the stove with boiling curry and half-cooked parathas. They had saved for seven years to buy that vehicle.

"What about the money from the mortgage?" Radhe's mother demanded to know.

"That wasn't enough, Neelam," her father pleaded. "We needed extra. We need to protect our girl, don't we?"

In the end, they both agreed. Mortgaging the house and selling the car were worth it to have peace of mind. This was the only marriage proposal Radhe had gotten in three years. And the boy and his family seemed nice enough. But after what happened to Shruti and the Yadav girl down the road, they knew there was no such thing as being too careful. Even if it meant flinging themselves into instability.

At nineteen-years-old, Radhe made for a stunning bride which came as a shock for all of the community members who had dismissed her as "too dark" her entire life. Her in-laws heard about Radhe through her eldest aunt on her father's side, and were keen on getting her for their aloof son.

Nikhil never completed university, and he floated from job to job. This made it so difficult for his parents to market him, leaving his poor mother in a constant state of strain to formulate good traits about him. NON-VEGETARIAN, FAIR-SKINNED BOY WITH NO SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS SEEKING HOMELY GIRL, was what the newspaper ad read. Dozens of families had refused to arrange their daughters with him. Radhe's family was the first to accept the arrangement. During the wedding ceremony, Nikhil refused to look at her, but Radhe couldn't look away. Throughout all the varieties of Sanskrit chants and performative devotion, her eyes remained fixed

on him, searching for what was wrong with him that his family would agree for him to marry a girl like her. Either he was an enlightened and conscious man, or just entirely self-loathing. Those were the only calculations that made sense to her.

When she moved in with him and his family, her mother-in-law stepped into domestic retirement and shifted the totality of the workload onto Radhe's back, insulting her for her dusky complexion whenever she sliced the potatoes too thin or forgot to douse the Shiva lingam in milk first thing in the morning. One afternoon, Radhe cussed at her under her breath just loud enough to cause her mother-in-law's hand to collide with her right ear. The jingle of her new mother's bangles as they traveled to her head matched the ringing in her ear that did not go away for days. Her earring had flown off, and she was left with a shallow cut on the lobe from one of the many rings which adorned her mother-in-law's bony, dry hand; rough with flaking and splintering skin and

white cracks that resembled train routes.

She spent the rest of the afternoon weeping in the bedroom until Nikhil came home from work. This time he was trying his luck working at an insurance call center. He put his arms around Radhe's shaking shoulders, awkward and stiff, as he listened to her explain what happened. It was the first time in a full month of marriage that he touched her. He didn't say anything. He just held her as she emptied her eyes onto the starch pressed dress shirt that he hated wearing and she hated ironing. He never told his mother anything. They both knew how horribly that would go.

Nikhil's mother Shanti -- paradoxically a namesake meaning "peace" -- was a miserable and hardened woman, once soft and loving with trusting dairy cow eyes. This was all before she went through the proverbial wringer of her own mother-in-law when she was married at fifteen. After years

of verbal abuse and punitive lashings, all with no defense from her husband or only son (Oh, how Nikhil loved his violent grandmother notwithstanding!), Shanti became the kind of woman whose very countenance put the world on notice that she wanted revenge. And now she finally had a daughter-in-law of her own to abuse.

It was just two weeks after Shanti's Slap and their first physical contact as he soothed his sobbing bride that Nikhil finally moved closer to Radhe in bed. He pushed his right hip closer to her body on the opposite side of the bed and then the rest of his body shifted to follow. Radhe shut her eyes and pretended to be asleep. She felt his heavy breathing on her neck. His legs over hers. His chest becoming parallel with her own. She opened her eyes. The light from the street came through their bedside window and shone orange on his face. That was when she saw and she knew. His eyes were sewn so tight that they created wrinkles along the lids that resembled deep fault lines. As though

he was trying to avoid witnessing some grave tragedy. She shut her eyes with him, not wanting to see it either.

--

By now, Radhe was nearly fifteen minutes late to work, and she was still at home. Dumbfounded. She had to go, she knew this, but she remained planted, sitting on the edge of the bed. She knew she had to, somehow, find some motivation to get up and go or they would not even be able to afford the basement they were in. And as loving as Rima was to her, she was very serious when it came to her rent.

She threw on her silver down coat with the horizontally stitched puffs and her green mesh sneakers. Radhe raced out of the door without turning off any of the lights. She locked the door from inside, pulled it in behind her and started for the sidewalk. She forgot her scarf. Even with her coat fully zipped to the top, the breath of the arctic that always came to visit

around January stabbed her skin. Her neck and chest felt barren and dead, just like the naked trees that lined her street.

When she got to work, the evening operator stormed past her in a huff. She was just shy of an hour late and the evening operator's unexpectedly extended shift meant that his wife had to drop the kids to school and be late for her own job. Radhe didn't even look at him. She was too empty to fill herself with apologies or explanations. She just walked straight to the switchboard and replaced his seat in the rolling chair. Her coat still on; her face infused pomegranate from blood capillaries bursting in the slap of the New York winter air; her tied back hair frizzed as though electrified, with short strands postured upright. The next six hours were a miracle to behold. She had no idea how she made it through the workday. So many calls came in -- to page doctors, to connect with patients' rooms, to alert that vitals were flat-lining and bodies were dying in their beds.

She punched all of the appropriate buttons and paged all of the appropriate people as though on autopilot. Not present. Not feeling. Mindlessly. All while an uneasiness bloomed in the pit of her stomach in thick, fleshy petals. Her only means of escape was gone. It left in the middle of the night, much like she thought she would one day do herself.

--

She had this plan. She would stow her travel bag, filled with her most important articles of clothing, in the narrow oven while Nikhil showered. She'd put an extra measurement of warm milk with cardamom in his evening chai, and let the especially deep sleep embrace him as they slept on the extreme opposites of the queen-sized mattress that lay on the bare tiled floor. She memorized which parts of the ground made noise from loosening tiles when you stepped on them, as though to welcome you for visiting. She'd tie the brown strands of the

beaded curtain that hung in the place of the bedroom doorway to the sides so she could walk through freely without inciting the flirtatious clamoring of the small, round beads.

She'd leave with her bag and her purple pouch filled with the cash she would receive from selling her Necklace. She'd leave her cellphone behind. Once she was outside, she'd walk three blocks to the 24-hour taxi stand owned by the Dominican men who always called her Linda India. THE QUEENS QUISQUEYA. She'd climb into the backseat of an old Lincoln sedan with silver duct tape patching the rips in the upholstered seats, and instruct the driver to take her to JFK, Terminal 4. Air India. She would nervously fondle and leaf through her passport as they sat in mind-numbing traffic on the Van Wyck Expressway.

"What time is your flight?" the driver would ask, "What time do you need to be there?"

"I am on time," she'd reply absently, knowing she doesn't even have a ticket yet.

She'd pay the driver when they pulled up to the always-bus-tling terminal. She'd walk up to the ticketing counter, hopefully not burdened with a long line of incoming passengers, and inquire about the next few flights out. She'd choose one of them. "Oh, just one way," she'd tell the agent as she slid her navy blue passport, emblazoned with gold letters reading REPUBLIC OF INDIA, across the counter along with crisp, new U.S. bills, which she would pull out of the purple pouch. She'd take off her shoes and carry the wide plastic container on her right hip as she waited on the security line. She'd step into the security vessel and place her feet on the outlined footprints; lift her arms above her head and wait for her body to drink a small dose of radiation. She'd retrieve her bag and her shoes from the conveyor belt, grateful that the officers did not say anything about the perfume she had packed. Too lovely to leave behind.

She'd walk to her gate and

sit with her passport and boarding pass in hand. She'd keep her head down in case anyone she knew was there. In case some relative or friend or friend of a relative was there who could potentially tell the world that she was there without Nikhil. She'd stand to board the plane only after all the rows had been called. There was no use standing on that long line the entire time. She'd have her boarding pass scanned and torn along the perforations, leaving just her name and seat number on the stub. RADHE SRIVASTAVA. 23F. She'd walk to her row near the rear of the aircraft. She'd find her seat and buckle her seatbelt. She'd unbuckle and change seats with a woman who wanted to sit with her family in that row.

She'd settle into her new seat a few rows back and then watch the reunited family with some bitterness as she thought of how Nikhil never wanted a family with her. As she thought of how he never touched her again after *The Night He Shut His Eyes* a whole two years ago. As she thought

of the three weeks at Naresh's house while Rima's basement underwent inspection, and how she came home from work one day to find him kissing Naresh on his neck. His lips parted and suckling lovingly onto his skin, as though trying to inhale him. She would shake as she thought of the way Naresh held onto the counter as he leaned into her husband's body, and outstretched his neck as though commanding him to drink.

She'd swallow the emptiness that so frequently crawled up her throat and gripped her as callous as Shanti's dry and bony hands for the year and a half following that night when everything began to make sense. That night when she began to avoid her own thoughts, terrified by the fact that, at the sight of them, she felt betrayed, but also intrigued.

The pilot's voice would thunder overhead and shatter her spiraling thoughts, welcoming them on the direct flight to New Delhi.

She'd then become busy thinking of which train tickets to arrange to get from Delhi to Bihar. About what her parents would say when they saw her on their doorstep after so long. When they saw that she came alone.

"Did he touch you?" her father would cry, scanning her with his eyes in search of signs of hate on her skin.

"No. He never touched me," she would answer truthfully. More truthfully than her parents would ever know.

The plane would begin to taxi. She'd hail the Mother Goddess under her breath. It would be the first time in months that she remembered god. There would be no turning back now. The plane would accelerate and lift off into the air, leaving her suffocating basement home far away on the ground that she never wanted to walk upon again.

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On the bus ride home from work, she had to get off two stops early. As the bus drove closer to her street,

her chest became tighter and she struggled to find air in her lungs. She felt like she was encased in thick, salty water. She wheezed and gasped. She pressed the yellow tape on the wall by the window that signaled for the driver to stop at the next bus stop. She hit the tape just in time for the driver to reach a stop he was about to zoom past.

"Back door!" she shouted as she waited for the rear exit of the bus to unlock. When she heard it click she shoved the dual accordion doors apart and ran down the three short steps onto the sidewalk lined with muddy snow. She gasped repeatedly and percussively. Crouched over with her hands on her knees. After a few minutes, she slowly regained her composure. She had to return home unarmed, without the weapon that her father plummeted their family into financial distress to give her. All she had now was Nikhil.

She walked haltingly, like a ceremonial guard, in the direction of their home. Nikhil never returned

her calls from the morning. He never returned her calls in general. Sometimes, he would send her a brief text to be sure there was no emergency in times when Radhe called many times in a row.

But he awarded no such acknowledgement today. Radhe's life was collapsing around her. And Nikhil was too busy to see if she was still standing, six calls later. They'd been robbed in their own apartment and she couldn't even call the authorities without them being robbed of a place to live. And Nikhil was just too busy.

The tightness returned. She gasped. Again. Again.

She tried to stop thinking about him. About his grainy skin and perpetually chapped lips. She tried to love him once. She tried so hard, after she moved into his home, to adore him and learn to do all of the things that would make him adore her. But nothing could bring his gaze to her. Nothing motivated him to hold her except the night of Shanti's Slap. Nothing motivated him to ask how

she was doing when he got home from work. To thank her for dinner. To at least try to look at her with an expression that didn't so easily communicate that, but for his mother, he would not have married her. It made her wish that Shanti had slapped her more. Maybe it would have made a difference to have more outlets demanding comfort.

When they moved to New York, she thought that without Shanti as her overlord they'd be free to attempt a marriage. To act like they loved each other and not as though their entire arrangement was as transactional as it was. But she slowly came to understand that the environment made no difference.

Radhe made no difference. It was Nikhil who resisted the life Radhe wanted so desperately to build. Nikhil didn't want any of it with her. When she discovered him and Naresh, he did not even care enough to apologize. To at least say sorry for wasting the one chance

she had at marriage after three years of searching, and three years of rejection. During the remaining week of their stay in Naresh's home, the men carried on as mutes in their shame, looking at Radhe with pleading eyes so that she would not tell Naresh's wife. But they didn't even have to do as much. Radhe was unable to hurt Diya with the truth that she felt was circulating like a poison in her own body. She kept it to herself.

At that point, at least it all made sense. She could make sense of *The Night He Shut His Eyes* and of his always-disinterested attitude. She was just his roommate. Just a pawn to keep his parents off of his case for being unwed. She understood why they always ate in silence, and laid in bed in silence for the many minutes before they fell asleep. And it was in silence that Radhe looked at Nikhil's face one day -- slender with salt and pepper stubble, accented by a broad nose and almond-shaped mud-brown eyes -- and decided that she did not love him either. A feeling that was as

somber as it was a relief and gasp of fresh air.

And so, from the *Day She Gaspd for Air*, she began the ritual of staring at her insurance each morning. Examining each centimeter meticulously to be sure no scratches or scuffs had plagued the Necklace. Shining the corners with bits of cloth and warm water. Placing it back in its pouch, resting the pouch back in the drawer, before leaving the room to brush her teeth. Tracking the value of gold from her work computer each week.

By now, her feet finally brought her to the front gate and she reached into her left pocket to retrieve her keys. She pulled the bunch out by hooking her index finger into the keyring and letting the single brass key dangle freely along with the yellow and pink box-stitched lanyard that Rima's daughter made for her at her after school program. She shuffled down the short series of steps to the basement enclosure and unlocked

the door, turning the key swiftly to the left in the keyhole. The lights had been on all day. When she stepped into the doorway, she halted in her steps at the sight of Nikhil sitting on the ground, eating from a takeout container. Dominican food from the restaurant two streets over. She could smell the sweet plantains and the broiled chicken. She pushed the door in softly and turned the small lock on the round doorknob.

He didn't even look up from his food when Radhe stepped inside. He continued chewing and maneuvering his fork about the bowl. Before she could begin to tell him of the robbery, she noticed two things placed on either side of his seated body. On his left was a flat, square, white box with gold foil trim. To his right: the purple pouch sat contentedly with its base puffed out and the top narrowed as the drawstring was tied securely in a knot. As though grinning mischievously for all the trouble it caused today. "I called you this morning," Radhe choked as she tried not to weep.

"I called you six times."

"I know," Nikhil countered matter-of-factly as he shoveled a final mound of rice into his mouth.

He stood up and his knees cracked. He walked a few steps over to the sink and threw the take-out container in the trash. He turned the faucet on slightly so that he could rinse his fingers and then cup just enough water in his right palm to sip with his lips and swish around his mouth. He spat the water out into the drain and rinsed his fingers again before turning the faucet all the way off. He wiped his hands and mouth with a nearby napkin and then threw it, soggy and gray, in the trash.

Without looking at Radhe, he returned back to his seat on the ground. He crossed his feet and left his knees bent. He reclined to brace his back against the wall and let his hands rest on his sides— one on the broad white box and the other on the same purple pouch that piloted Radhe's emotional stability.

He raised his eyes after a heavy sigh, and finally met his wife's gaze.

"Sit," he instructed her. His voice was more rough and gravelly than was usual. He must have smoked nearly twelve cigarettes today. Yes, that was a twelve cigarette voice, Radhe decided as she removed her sneakers and, in light steps, walked five careful steps to be seated in front of Nikhil. She sat on the ground and unzipped her coat. She maneuvered out of the arms and let it fall behind her like a shadow.

"You have two options, Radhe," he began. Radhe's heartbeat was nearly painful in its intensity.

"Option one is, you can go back to India. Stay with your parents in Bihar, or even get a flat on your own," he said. "You can work, go back to university, whatever you want." He paused to examine Radhe's face. To assess her understanding of what he was saying. He noticed a tiny mole resting peacefully on her quivering jawline and was surprised that he had never noticed it before.

"Option two is, you renew your visa, stay in New York, get a place that isn't a basement under Rima and Amal's bedroom, and continue to seek whatever you want in this place without having to look at me everyday," he said as he reached into his back pocket with his left hand to retrieve his wallet.

He pulled out his brown leather bi-fold wallet and opened it carefully, the way a holy man opens a holy book. He reached into the pocket where the bills are typically kept, but there were none there. An oddity, as he always kept at least forty dollars in cash on his person. Instead, he brought out two pieces of paper. Both folded. One was a thick, white sheet, the other a thin, yellow sheet. He unfolded both and placed them in front of Radhe. With his right hand, he lifted the purple pouch that had been sitting so patiently, taunting Radhe during this entire exchange. With his left hand, he lifted the white sheet of paper off of the ground. It was a narrow slip

with bold black text.

"You cannot succeed under either option with this," he said as he shook the purple pouch in his fist for emphasis. He handed the white sheet to Radhe. It was an appraisal.

"Your father's necklace cannot even cover one week of groceries. The jeweler is a fraud. The gold is mixed with other metals and the stones are not even semi-precious," he explained. "But do not dare ever let your parents learn that," he said with eyes that showed he spent a lot of time thinking of this. "If you go back, don't ever tell them."

He placed the purple pouch and the white sheet back on the ground as Radhe's eyes began to sting with comprehension. Tears jumped off the corners of her eyes as though suicidal. Hot and thick, leaving salty rivers on her cheeks.

"You will be able to succeed under either option with this, though," Nikhil said as he retrieved the white box and the yellow sheet from the ground. He handed the yellow sheet

to Radhe. She took it with trembling fingers. Her nails were all bitten down to different lengths and her peach nail polish was in tatters, like maps of countries, on each nail. She held the yellow sheet up to her eyes, blinking away tears so that she could read properly. It was a carbon paper receipt from an Indian Jeweler. NAIR JEWELERS. What kind of name was that? From Kerala? Or was it Bengali? She couldn't remember. Her mind was too clouded, unsure of whether she would leave this night grieving or relieved. She scanned the receipt and found a number on the bottom that was circled and sat right above a stamp that read PAID IN FULL. \$9,000.00.

"It's worth even more than what I paid," Nikhil said after some time, nodding toward the white box to signal for Radhe to open it.

She lifted the box off of the ground and then lifted the top so that it opened its hinged mouth. It was the brightest gold she had ever seen, resting in a familiar aesthetic

of red velvet. It had a thick collar piece that cascaded into a golden waterfall in the center. Intricate designs danced in the sun-toned metal, and scalloped arches accented the border of the collar. Off to the sides were matching earrings – also gold with a round stud center with attached cascading waterfalls of gold. Small Kundhan stones twinkled playfully throughout the aurous landscape.

“It was half of my savings,” he remarked as his eyes lowered to the linoleum tile that blared under the harsh bare fluorescent bulb jutting out of the ceiling. “But now you won’t wake up each morning to remind yourself of something that isn’t really there.”

He uncrossed his feet and planted them flatly on the ground. He used his hands to push and propel himself off of the floor. In silence, he retreated to the bathroom and shut the door. The shower turned on and the pipe squeaked as it belched out barely warm water mixed with traces of orange rust. Overhead, the

ceiling shook with the fast pace of footsteps – little feet and big feet. The bare bulb trembled under the tremors of life above. Radhe sat unblinking. The pipe continued to squeak as water spat and shattered onto the porcelain shower floor.



Trapped in their own Company
Brittany Worlinsky

FINALIST - Anthology Cover Art Contest 2021

Playground

Melissa Huckabay

The equipment was shoddy, the paint peeling, and I wasn't sure the swings were stable, but I brought the girls to the playground anyway because there, I could draw air into my lungs and loosen the bitter tightness in my shoulders. There, the breeze slipped across our skin and we were free. I discovered the playground last Thanksgiving, after my mother stood too close to me, stared intensely and told me I couldn't get divorced. Not shouldn't, couldn't, as if I were too fragile, as if I would dissolve into dust should I dare leave a man's orbit. Should I dare speak the truth into existence?

I'd felt a constriction rise up from my chest to my throat as my mother stood there, her breath hot on my face. I nodded and then gathered up the girls. "I'm taking them to the park," I said, the words squashed and small. "I'll be back later." We walked on a sidewalk broken by spreading oak tree roots, my daugh-

ters joyfully jumping over the fault lines. I stepped over the cracks cautiously, warning the girls to watch their feet. They never heed my warnings. They weren't like me. The neighborhood was unfamiliar. It didn't have the shabby, single-level houses I remembered from my childhood, but the tall, pristine condos that marked the spread of gentrification. Tucked away in a corner of the neighborhood was the playground, an "eyesore" not yet torn down. A maverick amid ostentatiousness, its weathered skeleton felt familiar to me, and apparently to the girls too, for they ran with abandon to climb, swing and spin. I sat in a swing, wrapping my cold fingers around the rough, rusty chains and breathing deeply. Before we left, the girls gathered up pebbles and wilted flowers—tiny universes they stowed away in their pockets. We returned there a year later, after

my mother put her hand over mine and said that I couldn't be alone, that I must find someone--must have someone to take care of us. Her eyes were frenetic, her hand cold, squeezing my knuckles until they ached.

"I think it's time to take the girls outside," I said.

"Where? What park?"

"Just a playground nearby."

"Not that ratty old one made of metal down the street," she said, the whites of her eyes becoming more visible.

"That one's dangerous. They could fall off and break their necks or get flakes of lead paint on their clothes."

I mumbled acknowledgement while putting coats on the girls, who were eager to taste the cool November air. To run down the street, skipping over breaks in the sidewalk. To swing and feel the crisp wind on their unlined faces.

I was worried it wouldn't be there, but the bulldozers had spared it for one more Thanksgiving. My daughters gleefully shed their coats and scaled the ladder to swing on monkey

bars and hang upside down. Their faces were flushed with freedom, and I could breathe.

My mother's words reverberated in my mind. You must find someone. You and the girls. Because all girls must be found, not left to languish in the wild. How many universes could we travel if we stayed lost? I wondered as my hair whipped in the wind.

The following Thanksgiving, we discovered the playground was gone, and the bones of a larger, newer one made of gleaming, polished wood stood in its place. Bulldozers and excavators flanked the structure, hard at work digging up the earth and casting it aside. My daughters cried in disappointment. My shoulders felt heavy as stones.

I knew the old playground had been shabby and maybe dangerous. The newer one would keep my girls safe. I felt a tightness in my throat, surprised by a single, hot tear on my cheek.

FICTION

On the walk back, my daughters still skipped over the fault lines in the sidewalk. They still tucked pebbles in their pockets. They weren't like me. When we returned, my mother gave me the business card of one of my father's coworker's sons. He'll be calling you, she said. I took the card, feeling the paper's smoothness between my fingers before slipping it in my coat pocket.

My daughters had dropped their coats on the ground near the doorway. I picked them up, one at a time, to hang on a rack. I hung my coat next to theirs in a neat row, remembering the tiny universes still hiding in my girls' pockets.



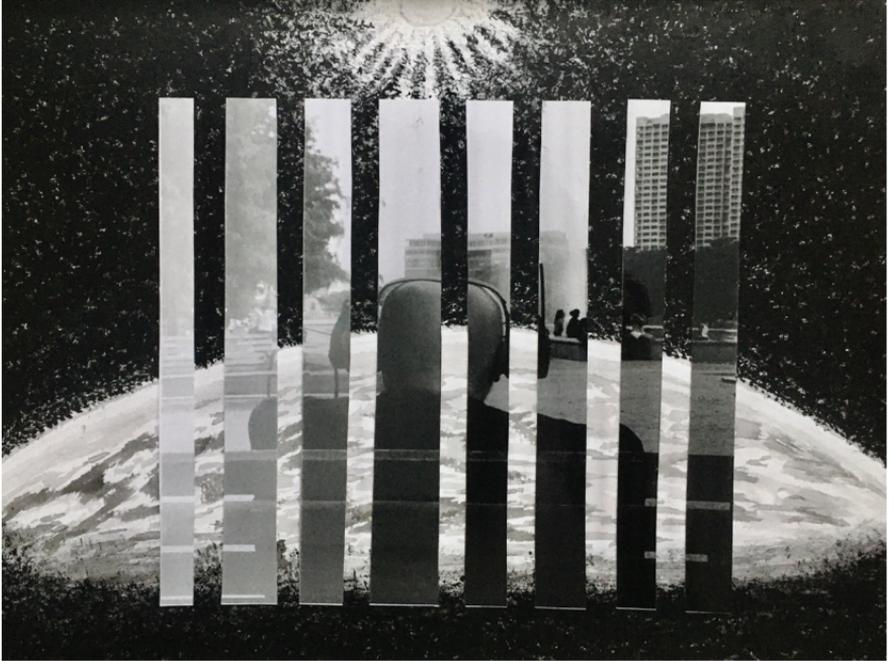
Spring Snake
Sara Stasi

Last Stop

SG Huerta

I stop at a Valero
to use the bathroom nobody
keeps clean. There stands
the funeral director in line
ahead of me. This Valero:
my dad's body's last stop
before the veterans' cemetery,
sticky floors and cheap beer.
Does he feel at home?
Did he ever? I never stopped
to think that the hearse would
have to put gas after a three hour
drive across South Texas. I did
think about the bumps in the road,
my dad's body bouncing against
the casket. Closed casket.
I had a hard time believing
he was really in there. *He's really in there*
became my mantra for the viewing
during which we viewed nothing
but masked faces, the masks soaked
with tears. I sanitized my hands after
each pitying, apologetic handshake
and hug. This is conversational
and I'm sorry. I want to have this

conversation with my dad, I want to believe the bumps in the road didn't disturb his half-decomposed body. My tía told me I have my own personal angel now. That terrifies me. Dad, can angel wings decompose?



Epoch
Milton Parraga

FINALIST - Anthology Cover Art Contest 2021

I Drive Around With Tears in my Eyes

Lupe Mendez

The other morning I fumble around in my head, the debate of listening to Banda music or NPR still tripping around while I am still on hwy 90. It's early morning and the sun peaks a bit and muscle memory takes my hand and all of a sudden, I am in the middle of a StoryCorps recording. It is two brothers remembering their father.

And they speak of him; hard working, dutiful, and one man chokes up about a particular day where his father keeps him from school, instead, a day trip. The father delivers wood bundles for winter and he asks his boy for help. This grown man cracks his voice, the father does not ever shy away from the work. The boy travels with his father that day, reading the addresses to all the homes on his father's list.

He reads all the street names and the numbers for a father with a 3rd grade education. He reads for a father who can't read. He cries

for his father, my breath quakes a bit, I pause, I know this man, this boy, this moment.

My father and I, we didn't deliver wood. We filled out progress reports on Galveston Parks & Rec. forms. My father only has a second grade education in his native Spanish. I know what it is to write all his English, without the accent, write his Spanish without the accents. I remember nights after my homework, I would serve as a secretary, a translator, a guide and a pupil. My papa, with Miller Light in his hand, describing to me what the next few days would entail. I learned all the different names of the fields he and his work crew attended to. His only directive, keep the details to the point. I knew the stakes. He had bosses that were looking for reasons to remove him. He would hit me if I asked too many questions. He would get angry if I interrupted him in the middle of a thought. So I

NONFICTION

learned to be a bruised stenographer. I think on this for a moment. I know that when we speak of fracasos, it knows no color. We are all brown. We are all black. When we grow up, we will hold our fathers' jaws. We finally speak the way they speak, we place their tongues on the letters and their eyes on the print. We translate the world they cannot recognize. We do this in our youth. We do this in their old age.

We carry their voice boxes with us. We shoulder the burden of manhood before we even know ourselves. To my brothers, mis hermanos, we have always known what to carry, our hands are the same when we build the word humility.



Monsoon Citizens
Suman Kabiraj

The Corners of My Mouth

Jennifer Nessel

*Ink runs from the corners of my mouth.
There is no happiness like mine.*

I have been eating poetry.¹

b u t t o n s

When he finishes, he turns over, tearing the comforter off of my legs and exposing them to the biting chill of the standing fan. At the sound of his snoring, I sit up and part my hair from my face, accidentally marking it with lubricant as if to say *Yes, he has left my body and entered his.* I look down at my legs, overtaken by vines of scratches trailing and spilling over the sides of my hips. This room feels foreign despite the hint of distant rain, an underbelly of cloud stealing its way over the orange tinge of the afternoon like an unwelcome visitor.

The men invited to my room fill me with salvageable things; things they might find in an alleyway beside a coffee shop or nestled in between someone in line at the DMV. I take this lint or cheesecake or playing card with both hands because that is the

proper way. I sit cross legged beside the bed and thank them, situating myself in between their legs, my long hair coming to a point at the bridge of my collarbone. *The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,/ Glowed on the marble.²* There is a woman in the bedroom mirror, but I do not look at her. She is covering her eyes.

d a n d e l i o n

I had always needed filling. When I was young, a small boy approached me with a dandelion he plucked while waiting for the school bus. In spring/ the moccasin flowers/ reach for the crackling/ lick of the sun/ and burn down.³ I was never told how to respond, was never given the instructions to look him in the eyes, to press my fingers together. I nodded solemnly, taking the shoot and plunging it into my mouth. I chewed while he ran away and chewed while the teacher made me write my name on the blackboard

three times. Once for when I took the flower. Once for when it went into my mouth. Once for when I spit it back into the Earth.

On leaving bed, I enter the hallway, where snaking strings of yarn sit atop a coating of construction paper on the floor like fallen leaves. I search the floor for the clothes my body had once clung to, tracing my eyes over the canopy of white like a displaced lover. Because of their great beauty, young men sometimes follow the antelope and are lost forever. *Even if those foolish ones find themselves and return, they are never again right in their heads.*⁴

b l o d

In the bathroom, I lie beside the empty bathtub and listen to the water pour out of a broken pipe that grows fatter and heavier until —all at once—it screeches from within the wall. I stare at the broken soap fixture, intent on the cluster of residue that trails the side of the grout. *What are the roots that clutch/ what branches grow out of this stony rubbish?*⁵ There is only me and

the groan and the itching feeling of the bathtub against my tit so I pull myself up from the siding and strain to ignite the cupcake scented candle on the corner of the peeling tub. Momma had once told me not to make problems where there were none. I had looked at her stony face and said watch me.

I wait for the steam to bubble the paint on the ceiling before climbing in. The woman in the mirror appears as bits of me dissolve into the hot water. Her lopsided, sunken eyes hike across the hills of gray skin. I pull my hair over her eyes to avoid her hideousness. Instead, the strands cling to my face like one-thousand small arms reaching out over my mouth, saying no, no, no don't you dare let the words out. She asks why poetry rises like sick in my throat. *I tell her I sing roses, too/ my hands in dirt where she blooms forever.* I respond that there are no longer places to hide it. The words land upon my bulging stomach. Hold them, the grout says.

Cling them to you 'till they harden on your side.

s o a p

He asks, are you coming out sometime soon? I cannot respond, so I submerge my head underneath the water, pretending to wash my hair. When I rise again, I tell the grout that there is a woman in an apartment in northern Alabama pretending to be me, staring at the lifelines of grout on the bathroom wall and picking at her nails. It tells me to wash my body with soap to rid myself of her. *Oh my much praised but-not-altogether-satisfactory lady*⁶ I put the bar of soap to my mouth and rake my front teeth across its topside. The pieces dissolve across my tongue. A smile grows across the woman's face in the bathtub fixture, who comments on how big my stomach has become.

Eating soap or skin or buttons reminds me of Momma, who had been alone for only a week before the mobile home had emptied itself of Daddy overnight. *Home is so sad./ It stays as it was left/ Shaped to the comfort of the last to go/ as if to win them back.*⁷ I was

young and not young when I learned that there was another woman Daddy was loving. That it was Momma's fault because she had known about it from the moment they married and hadn't said anything about it.

Not to anyone, not to me.

p a p e r

*When I was a child, I talked like a child,
I thought like a child, I reasoned like a
child.*⁸

Shortly after Daddy left, I was sitting at the kitchen table eating cereal, since Momma had forgotten to take me to school. Momma was on the phone, wrapping and unwrapping the cord around her finger. She turned and looked at me intently, waiting. She had nodded and said, I understand, before hanging up the phone.

Momma came back to the table, and for a long time we sat there without saying a word to one another. The sunlight spread over the red roses on the table cloth, ushering Momma to rise from her

seat, stand behind me, and rub my shoulders. I looked up at her and asked, what's wrong—why are you upset? Mrs. Kitteridge from down the street told her that our church, St. Augustine's, didn't want us coming. We weren't welcome, what with Daddy leaving and all. In response, I stared into the bobbing heads of my uneaten Cheerios as I heard my mother shuffle down the hall, closing the door to her bedroom.

c l o t h

When Momma retreated to her bed, the men learned to follow. I remember how the house would grow when Michel would visit, his shadow trailing over bunny-eared slippers and Power Ranger pajamas. He was the Second Coming, the Second Father. Quebecois began to seep across the dinner table at odd moments, no longer pass the bread, but *donne-le moi*. The days were filled with waiting, he told me as I kicked my feet against the wooden kitchen chair to the beat of Dragon Tales. He promised me that behavior equaled reward, so I knew not to cry

when I saw him at the edge of my bed. He was outside more than inside, but he was inside, too. He prepared the skin for insertion, tracing his fingers across hills and valleys of flesh. He assured me that him being a doctor allowed flesh to mean flesh. Touch was an icy February moon splattered across black curtains. Michel saying, *Non, ce n'est pas le moment*.

And just like that there were mornings, too. Alone, I crept out of a closet-turned-bedroom towards the dust-pale blue of April. There were no consequences for breakfast besides sitting across from him, sharing his meals.

Ta mère rend visite à sa soeur
Yes.

Peut-être tu peut faire les
courses avec moi?

No, I don't think so.

Ok.

s a n d

The button was the first. I found it lying face down on my bedside table. Tortoise shell like a cat I once

saw roaming at the bottom of the hill near my mother's mobile home, beside the man made lake where, sitting atop of the misshapen rocks, I had once watched the water ribbon with fallen leaves riddled with pinpoint holes. I was pressing my hands to my face, looking at the button when I noticed the rumbling in my stomach. The button slipped to the back of my throat easily enough, except that I paused before swallowing to take a breath, forgetting that I had gotten braces only days prior. I had hoped to choke on it as my tongue cut into the metal on my teeth, a solid force of plastic washed in blood. The button fell into the black pit as if to *say you need this, allow me in.*

flowers

My Momma was somewhere in between the boyfriends, the alcohol, and the series of mismatched friendships as a shape of color from bedroom to kitchen to bedroom, again. Michel begat Howie begat David who begat Bryce who begot men whose names were barely mentioned, and all the

while, my stomach grew with the objects that made it their home. *As you from crimes would pardon'd be, / Let your indulgence set me free.*⁹

The woman is silent as I unplug the drain. I lay on the bathroom floor and wait for the cold to seep into my insides. The door locked and the groaning pipe silent. It is too much to slip clothes back over my head, to find the arm holes, to crawl back into a mess of multi-colored skin. *While I spoke, / The thought I called a flower grew nettle-rough— / The thoughts called bees stung me to festering.*¹⁰ My finger finds its way to my mouth and I begin to rip against skin. It pulls too far, trails up the side. Breaking a seal is much easier than easing those corners back together again.

h a i r

When I leave the bathroom, I find him standing by the fridge, saying there is nothing to eat. How can there be nothing to eat? I wonder when he might have woken up and dressed, and what intimacy was left

behind in the sheets. Wrapping my arms around him, I tell him that what he could eat cannot be contained in him. Still naked, I lead him to where the secrets are kept, deep in the throngs of a misshapen bed where I lay. I am eager to tell him of the moments that have come to pass between bedroom to kitchen to bedroom, again. Head to shoulder, I whisper how the woman in the mirror has been smiling recently, how it is uncommon for men in my bedroom to learn of this. But I hear his breath shudder, and he does not pause for me. I pull his hair taut as if to say *mush, stay, stop*. He does not hear me. His shadow does not look the same way it did when it came into my bedroom, and I wonder if this is how it felt to watch my Momma die in pieces like I always thought she would.

1. Strand, Mark. "Eating Poetry."
2. Shakespeare, William. 77. Cf. Antony and Cleopatra, II, ii, l. 190.
3. Oliver, Mary. Moccasin Flowers.
4. Linderman, Frank. Pretty Shield, Medicine Woman of the Crows.
5. T.S. Eliot. "The Waste Land."
6. Pond, Ezra. "The Bath-Tub."
7. Larkin, Phillip. "Home Is So Sad."
8. 1 Corinthians 13:11
9. Shakespeare, William. The Tempest. Act V, Epilogue, 19-20.
10. Barrett Browning, Elizabeth. "Pain in Pleasure"



The Mermaid
Ivan Isaev

Finding Light

Chibbi Orduña

I used to carry shame like a shield, and all its weight
Shouldered a Wyoming fence post station to station
Hunched and hurting 14 years to Mount Calvary
Walking straight with all that weight - eventually

A tomb where I could disappear, the closets,
Where I put on costume and courage to walk
This dark sanctuary in broad daylight, el único joto
Solo, soltero, y asustado, I have seen the beatings

Heard the sermons bullets belts blessings 10 hail Mary's
For each impure thought and a long shot wish
To shed the shield, unholster history, but all its weight
Felt like a burden, felt like oppression, felt like an island

In a small town where out and proud looked like X
Marks the spot, I white-knuckled that shield, buried
My nails into my palms, self-imposed stigmata, until
I realized a barrier looks like a [bullseye] for bullies

And I was tired of being target practice. If I was gonna be
Fodder, let me be juicy, let me be rich, let me drip
Wet shine, let me be gold light and fighter, for fear
has no home in my hunger. So I sharpened that shield

POETRY

Into a spear, leather-bound and harnessed the healing
Hands of history, black, brown, and brick, so
Here's to the riots that changed everything, to the coded
Language making it possible to find friends of Judy

This side of the rainbow, to the milk cartons
Thrown at beautifully (flam)buoyant bodies
To the bruises, the bloody lips, to the blood
A grill of rubies, a string of pearls, a limp wrist and a hard

Cocky attitude serving shade and spilling T to the boys
Too fluid to walk a straight line losing cold nights
In a celibate jail cell, to the tenacity of love, to the audacity
Of a kiss, to the times I have said, I'm tired, but kept going

To the times I was too tired to keep going, to the nail polish
Chipped off before coming home, for those of us who couldn't
Come home, to the eyeliner turned black eye and the right hook
Instinctually buried in that pious jaw, to counselors, and experimenting

On college campuses, to reclaiming pink triangles and feeling
My fabulous faggoty self, emanating every shade of hair dye
To Alex, and HangOut, and StandOut and QPOC, to the girls
that were actually boys, to the boys who were actually neither

To the friends that listened, to the parents that never left
Us, to the family we found when everybody left us. For Matthew
And Bree, Merci, and Riah, For hundreds more buried without a headline.
To Harvey, to Marsha, to Baldwin, to Ginsberg, Guillermo, Gloria, Eddie

And Gianni, to Ani, and Elton, and Freddie, to Indya, MJ, Dominique
And Billy, to Bunny, to Ru, George, Ricky, Whitney, to Cher, Goddess
Almighty, light and fighters all. To the pain and struggle that binds us
To our past victories and the losses ahead, to the journey to the light

To the future, to the fighters, to those that throw punches, to those
That write memes, to the squad soldiering the steps of congress
To the shy and uncomfortable souls still searching, déjame decirte
El único joto ya no está solo. Somos luz. Somos luchadores.

Somos lo que somos.
We have found our home.
We have found each other.
We are light and fighters all.



The Ritual
Mark Eshbaugh

Small Talk Backstage at Wheel of Fortune

W.T. Paterson

Randy had his feet on the coffee table, dirty socks with the holes, a bottle of beer resting on his round belly, laughing at an advertisement on TV when Sandra got the congratulatory email from Wheel of Fortune. She nearly toppled forward and dropped her bag of groceries at the sight. It was, hands down, the most interesting thing to ever happen to her.

"Boys, empty the car please," she called upstairs.

"Look at this," Randy said, pointing at the screen. "An ad for hearing aids!"

"Ok," Sandra said, scrolling through the text of the email.

"The people who need it most can't even hear it! Hilarious!"

Dear Sandra Wellworth,
CONGRATULATIONS! We receive thousands of auditions every day, but our producers have chosen you to be a participant on **WHEEL OF FORTUNE**. Please respond to this email within 48 hours to confirm your

willingness and we will forward the necessary paperwork.

"Boys!" Sandra called again.

"Leave'm be. I'll lace up," Randy said. He stamped his bottle onto the coffee table next to a coaster and shoved his feet into the worn-out work boots beneath. Standing with a wince and a hand to his lower back, he hobbled out the front door to Sandra's car parked along the noisy suburban curb. Sandra watched him load his arms with flimsy plastic bags bursting with produce and store-brand ice cream and generic potato chips, and went back to her email like a secret affair with a dreamy lover. She replied in all caps.

YES I CAN'T WAIT THANK UYO
 SO MUCH IS THERE AONTERH EMAIL
 OH WAIT YOU SAID THERE WAS I'LL
 WATCH FOR IT.

Randy lumbered through the door as one of the boys up-

stairs hollered in pain followed by his brother telling him to quit being such a baby.

“Boys!” Randy shouted, and all noise ceased. “What’s the damage? And what’s for dinner?” he asked half-limping into the kitchen and looking at the grocery receipt.

“Taco Tuesday,” Sandra said, and took the receipt from her husband. “Eighteen forty-one total. Now go sit down like the doctor said. Your back and legs won’t heal otherwise.”

“Ah, doctor-shmockter,” Randy said. He waited until his wife turned around to write \$81.41 on the budget chart hanging from a magnet on the fridge. Then, he hobbled back to his spot on the couch and let himself fall onto the cushions with a strained groan. A life of physical labor, Randy’s already-broken body was backed into by the foreman’s son trying to parallel park and the union sent him home on semi-paid leave until he was fit to work again.

That had been three months ago, and Sandra had since made a list

of injury attorneys that advertised during Wheel. While the medical bills piled up, their bank account felt the very real pinch of what might be an early retirement. If the boys had any shot of college—lord knows scholarships were out of the question once they showed signs of that reading thing that Sandra had where sometimes letters and numbers switched around—they needed a lump sum of cash from somewhere.

The boys thundered down the stairs and rifled through the bags. They tore open chips and cookies and shoved handfuls into their mouths while Sandra shrieked for them to knock it off, that it would ruin their dinner, that they needed to put the food away instead of being little piggies.

“What’s for dinner?” they asked, chomping down snacks and moving around the kitchen in dizzying circles to put away the more boring foods.

“Taco Tuesday,” Sandra

said, and the boys high-fived. They left the empty plastic bags on the countertop and joined their father on the couch. Sandra caught a glimpse of herself in the dark kitchen window. A life of housework and raising two boys had gifted her the physique of a farmer's wife. Sturdy but set. Top-heavy with knees no longer built for gymnastics.

"I want us to start eating healthier. As a family," she said, and pushed her shoulders back.

"It's ok, Ma," one of the boys said, pointing at an ad on TV. "They've got pills for diabetes now."

"It's pronounced dia-beetus," the other boy grinned, and the three males shared a deep laugh while Sandra fired up the stovetop to brown the ground beef.

*
Plates cleared of everything but crumbs, the four watched Wheel of Fortune from their spots on the couch and loveseat. Randy was bookended by the boys while Sandra had the loveseat to herself.

"Loose Lips Sink Ships!" Randy said, and sat back proudly. The contestants on screen seemed baffled by the partially solved puzzle. _OOS_ _ _ _S S_N_ S_ _ _S stared them down like the Cheshire cat as they guessed 'T' and 'R' and 'Can I buy a U?' to no avail.

"Nice, dad!" one of the boys said. "You should be on this show."

"Nah, it's built for morons," Randy said. "A game so simple, the goal is to spell words. Not even hard words! Just words. The categories are simpler than simple. People, Places, and Things! Ha! What a crock."

Sandra wanted to break the big news, but what would she tell them when they asked about her audition? Well, this moron had a second glass of wine and recorded herself playing the online version of the game while your father was passed out from pain meds, and you boys were glued to their videogames upstairs, and that was all it took.

"Let's pretend we're contestants. How would you introduce yourself?" Sandra asked.

"That I'm the best at owning noobs in Call of Duty," the older boy said.

"No, I am!" the younger said, and a wrestling match erupted across Randy's large torso.

"Take it to the floor, hooligans!" he said, and shoved them to the carpet.

"Boys!" Sandra said, and then daydreamed what her introduction might be. There was the time on her honeymoon in Maui when Randy pointed to the ocean and a dolphin swam by. Or she could mention how, at the coffee shop, she thought she was buying a blueberry muffin, but it ended up being chocolate chip, and now chocolate chip muffins are her favorite. Maybe she could tell the story of when she did a cartwheel on the dancefloor in seventh grade, and one of the popular kids from the soccer team gave her a high five.

"Ma," one of the boys said, as

his face turned purple from a headlock. "You should talk about how you were cleaning the tub that time and fell forward and got stuck and dad had to come home to get you out!"

The boys howled as they tumbled across the floor.

Sandra sat back, wounded. Was that how her family saw her?

"Tell'em how you caught that raccoon in the attic by feeding it cookies until it was too fat to move and eventually had a heart attack," Randy said.

"That's not funny," Sandra said, as though Randy had spoken ill of a departed friend.

On screen, Pat Sajak checked his notes and smiled as the contestants continued to guess letters until someone finally said 'P' and broke the puzzle wide open.

"What's for dessert?" the older boy asked.

"I'm going to be on Wheel of Fortune!" Sandy said, standing up and stomping her foot. The room went quiet. "I auditioned, and they

accepted me, and I don't appreciate the jokes!"

The boys stopped wrestling. Randy turned his torso toward the loveseat.

"This show?" he asked, as an ad for heart medication played. "Darling, that's amazing!"

"Mom's going to be on TV!" the boys chanted. They scampered up to clear the plates from the coffee table and make room for the would-be family champion to claim her new spot front and center on the couch. Sandra sat next to Randy to play out the rest of the episode feeling like she was in seventh grade having just done a cartwheel in front of the girls' soccer team.

*

After a few days, Wheel of Fortune's digital documents arrived. The show covered round-trip flights (business class!), hotel (look at that comfort-er!), shuttle transportation (my own driver!), hair and makeup (I'm a star!) and a contestant meal backstage (my own chef!). Contestants were not

to approach Pat Sajak or Vanna White for any reason unless it was a designated interaction for taping, contestants should pre-plan a twenty second introduction with a fun, family friendly fact about themselves, and contestants weighing over two hundred and fifty pounds must notify producers 72 hours before filming.

Sandra stepped on the scale. Two-hundred and five pounds, not the young gymnast she used to be, but not the still not the ogre time had tried to force upon her.

With Randy asleep in their bed snoring and twitching from the pills, groaning at a dream that ailed his slumber, Sandra logged onto Facebook to research winning strategies for Wheel. Would she post about her upcoming visit ahead of time? Or wait, what did the contract say? Shows are filmed three months in advance of the air date. Episodes are subject to editing. Producers reserve the right

to withhold episodes in the event of an incident – See below. Incidents included foul language, visible tattoos, obscene gestures, injury, wardrobe malfunctions, threats of violence, etc, none of which seemed a problem for Sandra although she chuckled at the idea. How many upset contestants had sworn, or thrown tantrums, or let slip a cuss word? Enough to warrant rules and waivers apparently.

She found a Facebook group of previous contestants who shared their stories of prizes and cash. Most cautioned readers about taxes and such, but everyone seemed pleasant. It was in the comments section where people who had never been on the show raged with venom.

The weight limit is body shaming! One person wrote.

Wheel of Fortune is just a 30-minute ad full of product placement. Fatties can't sell products, idiot! The person below them wrote.

Heavy people have to have their stoop lowered so they don't fall onto the wheel when they spin, a third

wrote.

Sandra felt her heart thump into her neck. Her shoulders tensed. Why was there so much hate for one America's favorite pastimes? What type of meaningless lives did people lead that drove them to cut down the success of others online? At least she wasn't like them, even if her life was a constant cycle of cleaning, feeding, tending, and driving. The boys had school and sports, and their appetite was enormous, and Randy had doctor visits, and his medicine made him extra hungry and extra sleepy, and there weren't enough hours in the day to vacuum, and food shop, and clean the pots and pans. The hour that Wheel of Fortune and Jeopardy aired was the only time in her day where she found quiet moments with her family, even if they shouted answers at the television. She felt quietly connected to them because they all shared a common goal – solve the puzzles and answer the questions. Now, she had the chance to capture

their full attention and bring home some much-needed cash in one fell swoop. It filled her with the type of pride that made her feel invincible, and so she typed a response to those online trolls.

AT LEAST THEY HAVE A INTERESTING STORY TOO TELL NOW!1!!

It felt good, like being handed a cherry popsicle on a summer day, or opening the refrigerator to find it fully stocked and sorted. What could they possibly say to that? Feeling confident, she clicked on her profile to scroll through Facebook page and look at old pictures.

There were the birthday pictures of the boys smiling and roughhousing through the years. There was Randy opening his Christmas gifts of work gloves and winter hats last Christmas. She paused at the honeymoon picture from Maui when she and Randy lived in younger bodies and the boys were nothing more than a daydream. If she closed her eyes, she could still feel the prickly heat of the tropical sun and smell the

fragrant hibiscus breeze, could still hear sing-song accents of the local surfers explaining that Aloha meant both hello and goodbye. Sandra soaked it all up and savored the memory wondering how a simple girl like her had ever been so lucky. Looking at the picture brought unexpected nostalgia, and she felt sad that moments were fast and fleeting. The big moments came and went along with the everyday drudgery of domestic life, which made them feel like they never happened at all.

Just as she was about to sign off and go to bed, a notification popped up that someone had commented on her comment in the Fans of Wheel of Fortune page. She clicked over. Game Show contestants are literally the most boring people on the planet, the commenter wrote, and Sandra turned off the computer to sit quietly in the dark.

Randy and the boys drove Sandra to Logan International Airport for the flight to California.

They hugged her, wished her well, and Sandra promised to give them something extra special to talk about, something exciting.

“Just have fun,” Randy said, and then kissed her forehead.

“And get super rich!” the boys said, eclipsing her inside of their awkward teenage-boy hug.

She checked in at a kiosk taking note of how all airports smelled the same – recycled air and scorched rubber – and wandered to two wrong gates before finding the correct California flight. Something about how the terminals labeled everything didn’t seem to match her ticket. 11B, or 1B1, or why couldn’t they just call it what they called it? Nonetheless, she found a seat and told anyone who would listen that she was going to be on television.

“Well done,” an older gentleman said, and then asked if he could plug his phone into the outlet near her feet.

The flight was long, but fine. The back of the seats had televisions

with more to watch than one person could ever hope for, so she watched reruns of Wheel of Fortune on demand as a way to gain a competitive advantage.

A shuttle with a driver named Ahmed picked her up from an airport and brought her to the hotel for check-in. Once inside the queen deluxe, she dressed in the outfit reserved for Tupperware parties – a blue and airy sleeveless top that went to her thighs, and cream-colored khaki pants. When she went down to meet up with the driver and get to the studio, she secretly hoped Ahmed wouldn’t recognize her. But he did, and Sandra reasoned that it was his job to recognize people.

At the studio, a producer in a headset led her inside and pointed out the contestant’s waiting room with televisions, mirrors, and couches, the room for hair and make-up, and craft services.

“Real quick,” the producer said in a hushed voice, “what’s your

weight?"

"Two-oh-five" Sandra smiled, masking the sudden hurt of the question.

"You're certain?" the producer whispered, and Sandra nodded remembering the reading from the scale just a few days ago. The producer smiled an uneasy smile as they walked away.

In the dressing room, she said hello to the two other contestants – a man with bright red curly hair in a tweed blazer who blinked at twice the normal rate, and a woman with perfect posture and shining white teeth in a dress suit.

"What are your fun facts?" the guy asked.

"I have three cats, and I volunteer at an animal shelter," the dress-suit woman said.

"Me? I've completed over five-hundred puzzles," the red-head guy said, blinking.

"I have two wonderful boys and a loving husband," Sandra said.

"This is going to be fun," the

dress-suit said, and all three sat on separate couches smiling at each other for an hour until a PA collected them for the pre-show meal.

And just like that, it was places.

A producer walked the contestants to the podium and had them practice spinning the wheel to get a feel for it. When Sandra gave her test spin, she had to catch herself on the lip of the podium, her thighs catching the forward-leaning weight, because the thing was heavier than she imagined. She wondered if she might need to get her platform lowered, but was there even time? Besides, she was only two-oh-five. Unless...

"Remember," the producer said, "this is a game. Smile when you win, smile when you don't."

The studio audience filed in and the contestants waited patiently until the lights went out, the music came on, and Pat Sajak walked onto the floor with Vanna White. Sandra watched, starstruck.

They jumped right into the first puzzle. Event. Two words. Four letters, seven letters. Sandra spun and landed on \$500.

“T” Sandra guessed.

“There are two T’s” Pat Sajak said.

“I’d like to buy an A,” Sandra said.

“There is one A,” Pat said.

TA_ _ T_ _ _ _ A_ , the puzzle read. Sandra spun again and landed on \$800. She guessed “Y”, and there was one way after the A.

T A_ _ T_ _ _ _ A Y.

Of course! It was so obvious. Up eighteen-hundred dollars, she made the leap and said she’d like to solve the puzzle.

“Tank Truckway,” she said proudly, and waited for the music to celebrate the victory.

Instead, buzzers.

“Well, not quite,” Pat said. Next up, the blinking man with red hair said he’d like to solve.

“Taco Tuesday,” he said, and the triumphant lights flashed as the

audience applauded. Sandra felt immediately and horribly self-conscious. What would her family think when this episode aired and they watched her make such a moronic bumble? What would the online forums say?

Pat Sajak began his contestant introductions.

“It says here that you, Sean, have completed over five-hundred puzzles. Isn’t that something?”

“Yes, it started as a kid during family vacations, and I just kept on going from there,” he smiled, and blinked.

Pat moved on to the next woman.

“Elaine, you have three cats?”

“Buster, Penny, and Jojo,” she smiled. “We watch this show together every night.”

Pat swung back around to Sandra.

“Sandra, you are the proud mother of two boys,” he said, and

Sandra sucked it up.

“Yes. Hello boys, and hello to my wonderful and supportive husband Randy!”

“Hello, boys, hello, Randy,” Pat said. “Let’s see if you can bring them home some money. Our next puzzle is What are you Doing?”

Five words. Two letters (split by an apostrophe), six letters, four letters, two letters, four letters.

Sean spun and landed on \$300.

“T” he guessed, and there was one T in the final word, second-to-last letter. He spun again. \$450. He guessed L, and there were three L’s. He bought an A, and there were two A’s. Sandra thought she knew it, and one or two more letters would seal it.

_ _ _ L A _ _ _ _ _ A L L _ _ _ _ T _

Sean spun again. Bankrupt. Slide-whistle sound effect. Onto Elaine who spun and landed on \$1,000.

“Y” she guessed, and there were two Y’s.

_ _ _ L A Y _ _ _ _ _ A L L _ _ _ _ T Y.

Elaine bought an I. Two I’s.

I’ _ _ L A Y I _ _ _ _ A L L _ _ _ _ T Y.

Elaine spun.

I’m playing and Carl is Dirty, Sandra thought. The phrase replayed in her head like a broken record. Everything fit, she just knew it.

Elaine landed on Lose a turn. Back to Sanrda.

“I’d like to solve,” she said. Here it was: redemption. “I’m playing and Carl is Dirty.”

Again, no music. Again, buzzers.

“I think you added some extra words and letters there,” Pat Sajak smiled.

“I’d like to solve,” Sean said. “I’m Playing Call of Duty.”

Again, music for Sean. Applause for Sean.

The feeling of humiliation crept across Sandra’s body and held her captive. That was two bombs on national television in a game so simple, it was built for morons. Yet, there she was getting simple answers wrong. Her boys would have

a meltdown when they saw this one, and how could she laugh it off? How could she hide the shame? The only validation would be a big win, but the second guessing had already started as the next rounds went by in a sort of blur. She guessed letters, and some of them were correct, but made no attempts at the solves. It was like the game show preyed on her inability to focus on a singular task. It was like the gameshow knew she spent all of her free time running errands, and cleaning, and cooking, and driving to ever slow down and read, to ever step back and look at the larger situation. Sandra wondered if maybe that was the point. This wasn't a game for the super smart and elite, it was a game for the tired and worn-out, a way for the working class to feel special.

During a commercial break, Pat Sajak made pleasant small talk with the contestants about the weather, and he assured Sandra that she could still make a comeback. Sandra knew he was just being nice – it was his job to be nice – so she didn't

fully buy into the idea of a win. Had the producers mentioned anything about a do over? A mulligan? Maybe if she swore...

The lights came back up and the second to last round began, the round for all the marbles if she had any shot of making some real cash and winning the final round for all the marbles. The much-needed marbles to fund Randy's recovery and not worry about grocery bills. The boys-can-afford-to-go-to-college marbles. One last round.

The board lit up and Vanna clapped from her post on the side of the enormous blank spaces. The category was "Phrase". Five words. Five letters, five letters, five letters, three letters, seven letters.

Elaine spun. Her blazer caught the light like an angelic halo and Sandra did her best to smile through the building frustration.

"T" the woman said.

"Sorry, no T's" Pat said.

Sandra's turn. She spun the wheel. \$1500.

"S" she said, and there was one 's' at the end of the second letter. Another spin. \$700.

"L" she said, and there were three l's.

_L _ _ _ _ _ S _ _ LL _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

--

She needed another clue, one more to break the puzzle open, it's how it always worked. She needed to buy a vowel, but the most common letter "e" was too sure of a shot for the final round. That's how they shook things up, she saw it happen too many times on the flight while watching reruns. That, and when contestants knew the answers but got greedy and kept spinning until they hit the inevitable bankrupt slot.

"I'd like to buy an...O," she said, and four space holders lit up.

_LO _ _ _ _ _ S _ _ LL O _ _ _ _ OO _ _

--

No, she thought, remembering coconut drinks with tiny umbrellas and dolphins swimming just beyond the crash of the waves. Could it be?

She spun again. \$1500.

"H" she said, and two more letters lit up.

LOH _ _ _ _ S H _ LL O _ _ _ _ OO

Aloha Means Hello and Goodbye, she was certain! More than certain, she was willing to face down the giant wheel of fortune and fight against the looming bankrupts to clear the puzzle and bring home the cash.

She spun again. \$400.

"M" she said, and there was one M. She spun and landed on a sparkling \$10,000 slot.

"D" she said, and there were two D's

LOH M _ _ _ S H _ LL O _ _ D _ OOD

"I'd like to buy an A" she said, just to make double-damn sure this puzzle was on lock.

There were four A's.

ALOHA M_A_S H_LL O A_D_OO
D _ _ _

She spun. \$650 and guessed N, of which there were two. Another spin. \$700, and she

guessed a Y, of which there was one. Another spin, \$1000, and she guessed B. There was one B.

ALOHA MANS H_LLO AND _OODBY_ No need to buy a vowel and waste money, one final spin to secure the last letter, solve the puzzle, and go onto the final round for a shot at even more money! As long as she didn't lose a turn or go bankrupt, she had this game on lock.

Joy filled her stomach and made her feel light. Her family would be so proud and forever get to tell the tale of how their mother went on Wheel of Fortune and won the whole shebang. They'd have an interesting story to tell at parties, and college applications, and job interviews for the rest of their lives. As long as that wheel landed on a number, Sandra would be golden.

Feeling the rush of victory, she bent over a little too fast and spun the wheel with a little too much force, which caused her to lose balance. Before she had time to brace, her legs went up above her head and

she toppled over the podium falling shoulder-first onto the spinning wheel. She saw Pat Sajak reach out as though in slow motion. The audience gasped, but no producers called for a commercial break. Instead, the wheel clicked to a stop on "bankrupt" as Sandra stared up into the bright studio lights. Overcome with a tranquil calm, she knew she'd be leaving the studio that night with something that no other contestant that could – a story that lived in infamy – and even though she lost the money, and Sean solved, and his total beat hers out, she understood that some things were more important. Oh yes, sometimes all the marbles meant being the butt of the greatest story ever told, and that was far better than any consolation prize those advertisers had waiting in the back. No longer was she just a mother, a wife, or an errand-runner, she was the woman who fell onto the wheel during Wheel of Fortune and lived to tell the tale.



Waiting
Suzanne Bailie

Outback

L. A. Clark

A hive of morning activity swarmed the overland trucks parked across several rows of sites at the campground in Etosha National Park where I had spent the night. Looking like a cross between a school bus and a Land Rover, each vehicle was designed to take at least a dozen people on the quintessential, multi-month African adventure from Nairobi to Capetown. Visits to the Serengeti and Victoria Falls, nightly bonfires, a guide who can also fix mechanical problems, picnic lunches, dinner barbecues, wildlife viewing, and bush camping were all part of the package. I was on a seven-month, independent journey from Johannesburg to Addis Ababa, mostly depending on public transportation. My route and plans changed constantly thanks to chance encounters and unforeseen complications. In Namibia (I learned on arriving in Windhoek), public transportation does not reliably serve the country's most iconic sights. So with three other

independent travelers, I had gone in on a rental car for a week of manic touring. Now, we rushed to pack our tents, food, and backpacks into our tiny sedan so we could go looking for elephants and rhinos before the sun got too high. But my curiosity kept me stealing glances at the overland truck tourists.

"You've got a flat tire, mate."

One of the overlanders, an Australian making his way to the bathrooms, nodded toward our driver's side rear tire without breaking his stride. The four of us scrambled to lay eyes on it and quickly reversed our efforts, unpacking the trunk to liberate the spare. Our entire day would have to be restructured to get ourselves to a town with a garage capable of repairing a tire puncture. Until then, the threat of a second flat in this spiny, thorny terrain would have us all on edge.

As we rolled out of the

campground I took one last, longing glance toward the overland trucks. Part of me knew I would hate being trapped in close-quarters with loud, alcohol-fueled revelers for weeks at a time on a set schedule across wild Africa. I barely drink, I tend toward introversion, and though I was still a relatively youthful twenty-nine years old, many in that sun-kissed, Bohemian crowd were a decade younger. Yet I entertained a fantasy that climbing aboard a dusty overland truck in Africa might magically transform me into someone who drinks around a campfire until the wee hours under a dark sky of a trillion stars, wears a skimpy tank top sans bra, turns my hopeless pale into a deep bronze tan, and has an intense, ill-advised affair with a beautiful, reckless man. Fantasies aside, it sure would be nice not to ever worry about finding meals, locating lodging, or being responsible for the inevitable flat tires along the way.

Eight years later, in a living room in Colorado, I find myself

trying to convince my 45-year-old boyfriend that we should join an overland trip traversing the outback of Australia. I have to admit, even to Michael, that part of my motivation is a warped nostalgia for an experience I never quite had and someone I never quite was. Michael is reasonably skeptical, arguing that we are too old and he is too shy and grouchy to enjoy such an experience even a little bit.

But as we come to grips with the vast distances, dearth of public transportation, expense and liability of vehicle rental, lack of facilities (much less water), and threatening wildlife (albeit venomous snakes and spiders rather than hippos and lions) of the Australian Outback, overlanding begins to look like the lesser of many evils. Plus, the five-night overland trip from Alice Springs to Adelaide is a very different thing than three months from Kenya to South Africa. Sitting on Michael's comfy couch, we go online, find a company that

limits group size to sixteen, and book it before either of us can change our minds.

Eight months after that, we stand groggily with our backpacks on the sidewalk outside an Alice Springs hostel before dawn on a brisk June morning. Three equally sleepy young women join us at the roadside. The 5:45 a.m. pick-up time for our tour comes and goes. Michael sighs and shifts his weight impatiently. I can feel him trying to catch my eye with a wordless message: I told you this was a terrible idea. We are in the second half of our four-month journey Down Under, and the rot in the foundation of our five-year relationship is an issue neither of us knows how to address, remedy, or even discuss. So here we stand, waiting in silence.

The deep violet of the sky begins lightening into a soft pink. It is 6:15 before a white passenger van bearing the logo of the tour company finally careens down the empty street and lurches to a halt in front of us. The tall, tanned man who swings open

the driver's side door sports dark stubble and walks with a distinct swagger around the van to the sidewalk.

"Don't be scared by the deep voice and the grumpy face," he says, by way of an icebreaker. "I'm not a prick. I just look like one." Checking our names against a list on a clipboard, he introduces himself as Nolan, our guide and driver for the next six days. Nolan looks to be in his early thirties and would be distractingly handsome were it not for one diseased, gray front tooth, a laugh too impish for a man his age, and a small potbelly that (on his otherwise lanky frame) makes him look four or five months into a pregnancy. His smile is a mischievous grin complemented by a twinkle in the eye, even at this hour of the morning. Pure Aussie. Refusing our attempts to help, he tosses our bags into the van's trailer while directing us to climb aboard.

As the five of us stake out seats on the temporarily pristine

van, Nolan settles back into the driver's seat and informs us that luck is already on our side. After one more stop to pick up two other travelers, our group will be complete: including him, only eight of us in this van built for seventeen. He promises a very relaxed, spacious week together on the road. I glance at Michael, relieved to see him looking pleased at the news. Then we are off, Nolan barreling down the quiet streets of Alice Springs, squinting into the rising sun.

A full morning on the road—red and yellow desert, endless scrub, and a few wild camels—brings us to King's Canyon, known to the Aborigines as the sacred site of Watarrka. Taking the rim hike along its steep sandstone walls, I get to know the others in our group: aside from Michael and me, there is one other American and three Germans (all female university students) plus a Brit in her late twenties called Natalie. I can tell immediately that she and I will get along well. Michael sticks close to Nolan as we walk, seeking

solidarity with the only other man in the group. Occasionally, Nolan points out various medicinal plants, and we stop at striking viewpoints over the palm-filled chasm, watching its walls change to ever-more-brilliant shades of orange and red in the late afternoon light. The sun is hot but a perfect breeze surfs the canyon rim.

At one such vista toward the end of the hike, I look to Michael and find him watching me. I smile at him, and he smiles back. When we met we were both living and working in Denver. But last year, not long after he surprised me with his decision to buy a house in the suburbs, I finally followed through with my long-term plan of quitting my office job to pursue a life of travel and contract work. Given that our relationship was already plagued by poor communication and my inability to understand or accommodate his frequent dark moods, I assumed we would break up when I left Colorado. But he wanted to try

long-distance, even taking a leave of absence from his job to go on this trip with me. Now, that enormous compromise of his, my unwillingness to make an equally large compromise for him, and our inability to talk about any of it are combining to poison this trip. Despite the profound beauty we have experienced in the past couple months, I have often felt intensely lonely. I think he has, too. But not right now. Jointly appreciating this moment, everything is okay. Wonderful, even. Then one of the German students asks me to take her picture. After I do, she offers to take one of me and Michael. And just like that, things fall apart. Michael detests having his photo taken. If I ask him to pose with me, he will do so but be angry with me for not respecting his wishes. If I decline the photo, he will convince himself I do not really love or want to be with him. If I verbalize the predicament and ask what he prefers, he will be embarrassed. Every scenario ends with him stalking away and giving me the silent treatment for hours while

he fights his mental demons. This is exactly what happens. And so I discover a benefit to overland-ing aside from having someone else to plan the meals and change flat tires: there are other people around to distract from the grow-ing, gut-level sense of relationship dread that has followed me into the dry remoteness of the Australian bush. Nolan, in particular, is a striking distraction. As we sit down to dinner at the campsite that night, he asks if any of us have done any driving while touring his country.

But before anyone can answer he continues: "People say, oh, I can't drive a car in Australia because it's on the left side of the road. And I say, then good, then you really shouldn't. If you can't drive on the left side on a totally straight, empty road in Australia, then you're a fucking retard and you shouldn't be renting a car."

He does not seem to notice the collective cringe that seizes the other native English speakers

in the group at his use of the R word because he has already moved on to another topic, wanting to know: do any of us have tattoos? But again without waiting for a response, he barrels on to say, "I think some people shouldn't get tattoos, just based on their personalities. I think, 'You look like a little bitch, and then you've got your tattoos.'" He is, simultaneously, a one-man show and a real conversation killer. I feel sorry for the three German girls, since Nolan's generally vitriolic attitude toward Germans flares anytime he sees a piece of bread (which happens at every meal) due to his conviction that they have an annoying obsession with brown bread. At lunch, he tossed a loaf of Wonderbread onto their picnic table and announced, completely unprovoked, "I'm not going to get into a conversation about bread with Germans. Piss off it." Tonight, he starts asking whether Germany has white trash, but then instantly finds that he himself has so much he would like to say about German white trash that they

have no opportunity to answer. By the time we finish dinner I am ready for sleep. Michael has avoided acknowledging me the entire evening, and my coping strategy is just to wait him out, but the tension still exhausts me. I am setting up my bedding when he finally approaches me conciliatorily.

"So, we're really going to do this?" he asks with a nervous smirk.

"Do what?" I reply, confused.

"Sleep on the ground around the campfire, out in the open, no tent, nothing?" We had read in the description of this trip that most nights our accommodation would be an Aussie "swag"—a sleeping pallet on the ground next to the fire with lots of blankets provided against the chill of nighttime in the desert.

"Yeah?" I ask, still confused. Michael and I love to camp and I expected him to adore this aspect of Australian overlanding.

The black sky is insane with stars and the campfire crackles comfortingly. What could be better?

“So if you were a highly venomous Australian snake looking for warmth during a cold night in the desert, you wouldn’t try to slither into a tourist’s warm swag? And what about the spiders?” He rolls out his pallet directly next to mine to make a sort of double bed.

“I see your point,” I laugh, knowing he is not entirely kidding. “But I’m pretty sure if there was much chance of a snake or spider cuddling up to us in the night, this wouldn’t be the norm for sleeping in the Outback.” “Okay,” he concedes, tossing several heavy blankets onto his pallet with decisive thuds. “But just to be sure, I am sleeping as close to you as I can possibly get, for protection.”

The muted synthesizer, low electronic beat, and deep voice of rapper Le Le bring me to consciousness at sunrise the next morning. Nolan cooks up eggs and toast at the outdoor kitchen area of the campsite

and sings along: “You’re the cheese on my baguette...the French on my toast...bitch, you’re breakfast....” His volume increases until we are all up and out of our swags.

While we eat, he outlines our day: pack up, drive three hours to Uluru, make lunch, set up camp, and then hike the Mala trail with a local guide who can give us the Aboriginal history of the site. When we all just nod silently, still half-asleep, he gleefully chides us: “You need a fucking Nazi like me so you can really experience this, so you can really feel like you’re in Australia.”

I glance to Michael, who raises an eyebrow at me. Before falling asleep last night, I whispered to him that I wanted to start writing down the outrageous things Nolan says. We both sense he is good-hearted, but his word choices nearly always land somewhere between insensitive and offensive, to the extent that I will probably doubt my memory of them as soon

as this trip is over. Now, I discreetly reach for the little notebook I keep in my backpack and begin scribbling.

The morning drive to Uluru is through a relentless scrubby, yellow desert. A few more wild dromedaries roam the bleak, waterless terrain. So often the past couple days, I have been reminded of traveling through Africa—less because of being on an overland trip but because of the remoteness and long drives through nearly uninhabited landscapes. Three hours on the road is over too soon.

From our campsite we cannot see Uluru (the behemoth red, domed rock that squats imposingly on the plain of this region and draws so many tourists to the center of Australia). But we got a glimpse of it on the drive in and are all excited for the close-up view. Most of the discussion in the van during the morning's drive was about who is planning to climb the rock (a bucket-list experience for some travelers) and who is not (out of concern about cultural insensitivity toward the Aboriginals for whom

Uluru is a highly sacred traditional gathering place). Nolan tells us that the Aboriginals say tourists should climb or not climb as they prefer, but does not elaborate even when pressed. My guidebook says it is not forbidden to climb the rock, but it is discouraged. Discouraged by whom, I wonder? And why not just flat out disallowed?

After lunch, Nolan says he will do the dishes while we grab our backpacks and swags and set up camp. He tosses Michael the keys to the trailer.

"Mikey, you can unload," he instructs, prompting the rest of us to roll our eyes at his obvious sexism. "I know, I know. You girls are capable of carrying your own bags," he pushes back, "but Mikey's gonna show some basic courtesy. Unlike his counterparts in Europe. Just once, I want to see a European guy say, 'Ladies. I've got this.'" My notebook is already on the table next to me (a few minutes ago he called something "boring as a badger's

ass”) so I start recording this latest gem. Considering all he says with no care for how it might land on the ears of his listeners, I have decided Nolan could not possibly be aware enough of anyone around him to even notice my notebook. But I have underestimated him.

“You’re not a journalist, are you?”

It takes a jab in the ribs from Michael for me to look up and realize Nolan is talking to me.

“Me? No, I’m not a journalist,” I say, probably looking very guilty. “But you’ve been writing down all the things I say,” he observes. “Yeah...I...I...”

Nolan bulldozes past my stammering to tell the story of how a few years ago a journalist came on one of his tours and then wrote an exposé about Nolan’s racist commentary, causing a shitstorm in the local tourism industry. This somehow contributed or directly led to the tour companies now being required to hire local guides at Uluru to explain the site, supposedly

with more detail and sensitivity than the tour companies’ own guides could. I promise him, again, that I am not a journalist. He seems satisfied and sends us off to unload the trailer with orders to hurry because his buddy Jonah, the Uluru guide, will be arriving shortly to take us on our hike to the rock. As I lay out my swag, I mull over Nolan’s backstory.

The implication is he got in trouble not for his annoyance with Germans’ bread preferences or even the well-meant but shockingly racist ways he expresses his appreciation for Asian tourists. Specifically, he must have gotten in trouble for things he said about the Aborigines. As he has already told us (using the British word for flip-flops rather than describing his underwear, as I first assumed): “You need a fucking bogan like me—a guy who wears thongs and jeans and says exactly what he thinks—so you know you’re really in Australia.” My mind connects the dots: Maybe that is why he has said almost nothing to us about

Aboriginal culture and history. Maybe after the journalist publicized Nolan's racist rhetoric, he was told to cut it out or lose his job? And he decided the only way he could avoid saying offensive things about the Aboriginals, given his inherently offensive way of talking about absolutely everyone, would be to say nothing at all?

When Jonah shows up at the campground and rides with us to Uluru for a guided walk to see some of its primary indigenous rock art, we ask him to weigh in on the question of climbing the rock. He explains that Aboriginals do not ever climb Uluru, yet they do not feel that anyone can "own" it—or anything else in nature. So their cultural concept of land being communal compels them to accept tourists feeling the need to climb it. I exchange relieved glances with Natalie; his tone makes clear to us, finally, that we should keep our feet on the ground.

After the tour, Jonah sets us loose to explore. Michael has been grouchy all afternoon and hangs back

now. So I set off for a solo stroll, taking Jonah's recommendation to follow a red footpath into the shadow of the rock, where some trees and bushes manage to flourish thanks to the shade and a nearby natural spring. I find the water hole tucked magically into a fecund alcove of the rock's edge and stop there for a long time, just breathing and studying the interpretive sign posted in front of a wooden bench:

After Minyma Kuniya defeated Wati Liru, her spirit combined with her nephew's and together they became Wanampi (water snake). Wanampi lives here today and has the power to control the source of this precious water. This is a good place to listen to the country.

Take a minute to sit down,
Close your eyes and breathe deeply.

Enjoy this moment.

Listen to the birds.

Can you hear water trickling?

Concentrate on the wind.

Can you hear it? Feel it?

Kuniya is a strong woman,
This place has a strong feeling.

I obey and sit on the bench, full of that strong feeling. And other strong feelings. Problems enjoy road trips, too, and the problem of my dynamic with Michael sits down next to me with a nearly tangible presence. I try to just sit with it and hear what it has to say. But all I hear is gurgling water and rustling breeze. Then I hear footsteps, sense someone pausing tentatively behind me, and feel Michael's hands on my shoulders, massaging deeply. I'm sorry, say the fingers of this man who prefers not to put anything into words. How long will we keep doing this to each other? I try silently asking him in return.

One thing Jonah said during his tour really hit me: Aboriginals only tell the beginning and the end of a story, and the rest is up to an individual to figure out. Transcribing this out of the oral tradition and onto a meta level: Life gives us the beginning (our births) and the end (the inevitability of our deaths) and we write the story

between those bookends for ourselves. There are also stories within stories, where the first and last pages of a chapter already exist. I know the beginning and I am pretty sure I know the end of my story with Michael. But we are still filling the blank pages between the two.

That evening Nolan is in rare form, even for Nolan. He and Michael tend the dinner meat on the barbeque grill. One of the German women offers to help, but Nolan waves her away.

"The barbie is men's work," he asserts.

"Sacred site," adds Michael with an authoritative nod, quite proud of his place next to Nolan.

"Dead set, Mikey," Nolan confirms. "The barbie is a sacred site for the men. Women are in the kitchen making salads. And you don't say to people, 'Oh, come over for some salads, and we'll also have some meat.' No. It's, 'Come on over and eat some meat, and the women

will make some salads.' Just how it is. Dead set."

I cannot take Nolan's chauvinist diatribes seriously while a Spice Girls song blasts on his iPad playlist. Also, as we clean up after dinner, I overhear him earnestly tell Natalie: "It's always nice to have plenty of Tupperware."

Once the dishes are done, we gravitate toward the warmth of the campfire. Nolan says he intends to go down the road tonight to party with a guiding buddy at another campsite and his tourists. We are all invited. I ask if Nolan's groups are usually much rowdier than us. He gives his impish laugh at my practically rhetorical question and happily goes on a verbal tear of memories. Once he had a mother/son duo on a trip, and the mother initiated a game of strip poker that ended with her loudly cheering on her naked son as he tried to swing his penis in circles. Once, completely drunk, he rescued an even more drunken tourist who fell into a dangerously swift river in the dead of

night. In the summertime, he tells us, it is so hot in the Outback—even after sundown—that everyone has to drink enough beer after dinner to pass out, as it is the only possible way to sleep for any amount of time; the extreme heat brings you to a state of meditative acceptance of the inevitability of sweat and dirt and discomfort and that is where you find your freedom.

By the end of this monologue, Nolan has a look of such awe, reverence, and nostalgia on his face in the glow of the campfire that I feel a flash of real tenderness for and kinship with this man who every day makes my jaw drop with his insensitivity. There is an exquisite moment of silence after he has finally said his peace. And in that silence, I find the freedom of knowing that people are many things at once, not all of which coexist peacefully within them.

"So, tomorrow," Nolan says, his voice devoid of its usual sarcastic edge, "up at dawn. Hike

the Valley of the Winds. Back here for lunch, then back to the rock. If you want to climb Uluru, that's your chance. Otherwise, there's a ten-kilometer path that goes all the way around it. Your choice. We sleep here again tomorrow night. Just for planning purposes, who is going to climb?" The other American on the trip and one of the German women both raise their hands. Natalie shoots me a look. I know she feels the same clarity I do after Jonah's talk and is disappointed that anyone is still considering climbing the rock.

"Nolan," she speaks up, "It really did seem like Jonah was saying we should not climb the rock. It seems quite complicated with the Aboriginal culture and I—"

"Everything with the Aboriginal people is complicated," he interrupts her, in a tone demanding that this be the last word. "It's like being in a relationship. With a woman. Complicated. Except it's worse. Dead set." Then he stands, gathers his beer bottles, and kicks one of the logs in

the fire with the thick sole of his leather boot. "I'm off," he says, tilting his head toward the party down the road. "Anyone coming along?" Both the girls who intend to climb Uluru tomorrow afternoon say yes and hop up to follow him down the road to the ruckus. And in that moment, I have to admit to myself I will never feel inspired to rise and jump into the Bohemian travelers' melee I have been observing from the outskirts for nearly twenty years of global adventures. It is time to release my fantasy of belonging to that crowd and that culture. All I really want is to lay down alongside my tender, troubled boyfriend, bury myself under a mountain of blankets, listen to the crackling embers of the fire, think, breathe, and drift into dreaming.

Nolan subdues our expectations for the second half of the road trip by describing it as three days of endless driving through underwhelming landscape. But I

enjoy the remote Outback scenery speeding by outside the van's enormous windows for hours upon hours. It reminds me of Botswana and the many long-distance bus rides I took through Africa. Memories of those days reconnect me with a sense of true nostalgia for the countless unforgettable experiences I did have while traveling in Africa so many years ago, rather than wondering about the ones I did not have. Plus, I think he sells short the stop we make at the fascinating opal mining town of Coober Pedy, where dynamite is sold in convenience stores in bundles called "sausages" and we sleep in an underground motel.

Over pizza outside the entrance to our cave, Nolan admits to me and Natalie that he occasionally falls asleep for a brief moment while driving this long, straight, boring highway but insists he nearly always wakes up still on the road in his proper lane. Horrified, we coordinate a rotating schedule for everyone to take turns sitting in front with him for

a few hours at a time to ensure he stays awake while driving for the rest of the trip. The next day, when we stop for a stretch break at Lake Hart, Natalie has just finished her shift and is turning the Nolan reins over to me. While the four youngest members of our group take selfies from a different viewpoint, Nolan, Natalie, Michael and I stand looking out over the shining expanse.

"Australia has another inland lake, not far from here, that is twelve kilometers below sea level," Nolan tells us, voice tinged with national pride. Michael, Natalie and I throw amused, sidelong glances at each other.

"Twelve kilometers?" Michael asks Nolan. "Are you sure about that?"

"Dead set, Mikey," comes the reply. "Twelve kilometers."

Eventually we get him to admit that maybe he means twelve meters. But now I am not sure if I should believe anything he has told us over the past five days.

No compensatory confidence is inspired by my conversation with Nolan during my shift with him in the front of the van. Nor can it truly be called a conversation. I ask him occasional questions and he holds forth at length on any topic, with absolute authority. Australia's experience of World War II?: The Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor was a mere pit stop on their way to bomb the city of Darwin because they were mad at Australia for refusing to accept any Japanese immigrants. The 9/11 World Trade Center terrorist attack?: Orchestrated by the American government. Global warming?: A joke. I also learn of his plans to someday run for political office in Australia.

After a while, his conspiracy theories get a little tiresome. Half-listening, I check over my shoulder to see Michael dozing peacefully in his seat, then resume gazing out the van window over the sun-scorched wilderness. My mind time-travels between now and then, Australia and Africa, this choice and that choice, one

path taken instead of the other, and one path forward versus another. The vast landscape between birth and eventual death. In the rearview: gnarled trees of experience and possibilities left behind along the path. Stretched out ahead: a new landscape, everything about it still to be discovered. Eight intersecting stories, tucked into this van hurtling through the Australian bush under the blazing sun.

Still talking, Nolan drives on. The road rushes forward to meet us all.



Figureheads
R. Trentham Roberts

How I Rise After I Fall

Anna Maria Morris

Morning breath reminds me I am alive
a gentle nudge to my senses that I'm awake.
Cold feet find comfort in regifted houseshoes
a half size too small yet warm like granny's.
Whistling reminds me to hydrate
like he would text me and I drink tea
cry scrolling through Facebook
complete a booty band workout
gotta keep this ass fat
gotta stretch
because I deserve to feel good
my body deserves to feel good
my body got me this far
my body got me to this mat
my body got me here.
I deserve to be.
Here.
Right now.
I deserve to just be.
Being is enough.
Being is more than enough,
I breathe.
Stretch these muscles, these tight hammies
breathe into my splits
nothing remarkable at 26

but---

Don't you remember being so proud to show your splits

to anyone who would watch

to anyone who would say "good job"

or "wow, you're so flexible."

To your father holding a camcorder

"My daughter the actress."

Watch me s t r e t c h

bend

morphe

change

eager for validation from others

so much that one day I stop stretching

because it stopped being for me

when its no longer a neat trick

until your body forgets how to take care of itself

your brain tries to take over

but your heart can't

or wont

it just

aches

flesh ripped back revealing white meat

scarred

not deep enough

for stitches

not something surgical

not something fixed with a pill

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but cleaned with hydrogen peroxide
allowing all the dirt to rise to the surface
bubbling
a release
a purge
stinging
but you pour more
until the white foam dissipates
a wound cleaned
not yet healed
because that will take time.
And when you're left with a scab so thick
you feel 8 years old again
relieved when you're left with just the scar
the raised skin
the reminder
the memory
smacking into a fence while roller skating downhill
slicing open your thigh
landing directly on your tailbone
hearing a few cracks.
It hurts like fucking hell
to breathe
to walk
to eat
to sit
to talk
to feel.

Until today,
January 1, 2021
today I will pick up my pain
acknowledge the hurt
put back on my skates
thank my body for getting me here
to this moment
to every moment.

And I will stretch
smoke a bowl
drink a green smoothie
manifest
and be
because I already am enough.

Not because anyone said so
because I said so
because I am a child of something bigger than this brokenness.
I am not only grief, I am glory.



Hunger, Desire
Kateryna Bortsova

Completely Candid, an Interview with Justin Jannise

Miranda Ramírez

The best distraction of Fall 2020 was the chance to sit down with Justin's book, *How to Be Better by Being Worse*. Between the pandemic and a tumultuous political season, this part of the world felt a bit bleak. To beat the struggle of being trapped indoors with loved ones, I dove headlong into this vivacious little romp-like a cynic to hold your hand or hair back, all while quipping wit so quickly it may cut you. I have the joy and privilege of knowing this poet socially and used his impending book release as an excuse to pick his brain.

MR: Was there a pivotal moment when you were like, "Yeah, I'm going to be a poet?"

JJ: I remember the first time somebody called me a poet in my presence. It was a few days before I started my MFA program, and a second-year student said, "Oh! You must be a first-year poet." I think I laughed,

then blushed, and then walked away, scratching my head because "poet" always sounded to me like something one aspires to be. I'd been writing poetry seriously for a number of years, and I'd moved across the country to study it, but I'd never thought to call myself a poet until I basically had to use the word to introduce myself. I couldn't let people walk away with the impression that I wrote fiction.

MR: Was there any other career choice you would have considered?

JJ: A long time ago, I worked a summer internship at a marketing firm in Houston, and I was absolutely miserable. Bored out of my mind! I would take two-hour lunch breaks and wander around the aisles of Target. I'm a first-generation college student whose plan was to get educated to get rich, but that summer, I learned that playing

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all day in a corporate sandbox, chewing on corporate granola bars, and spitting out corporate buzzwords would KILL my SOUL. I hadn't cared much about my soul or even really believed I had one until I felt it being strangled by 9-to-5 chains. It was a crisis. I cried in front of my mom, and (being the best mom ever) she told me never to do anything like that stupid marketing job again and just go be an English teacher. Fuck 'em if that's not ambitious enough for some people.

MR: So, I know you were in both the Yale and the Iowa Writers' Workshops? What was that like? And how was coming to Houston for your Ph.D.?

JJ: I'm not going to lie—Yale was incredible. It's hard to summarize what it was like. I mean, it was also college. And coming from rural Texas, I knew nobody who could've prepared me for it. Literally, Yale's admissions team didn't interview me because there were no alumni within a certain radius of my home address. Yale did

a lot for me—it introduced me to some of my best friends, it gave me the freedom to be a huge gay nerd, and boy, oh boy, the teaching and the resources (the libraries!) were just...interstellar! Galactic! Amazing! I've all but made it my life's goal to put as much of what I took from Yale back into the world. However, when I visited New Haven for my ten-year reunion, I quickly realized how much pain and frustration I'd either forgotten or buried. I think I repressed it while I was a student there, too. It will surprise nobody to hear that there are many highly toxic people in the Ivy League—largely students and alumni, I'd say, more than academics and administrators. Of course, there are bad apples in every barrel. Talk about micro-aggressions! There were students whose parents worked in the White House who'd complain of "looking poor" because their sweatshirts came from the Gap. Freshman year, I had to endure watching a group of so-called "smart kids" look up every

other freshman's home address on Zillow (or something like it) so as to compare the extraordinary wealth of one another's families. And then there was the cliquishness that divided folks so predictably along the lines of otherness"—and it was depressing to see that ten years later, virtually nothing had changed. I'll never go to another reunion. They're just fundraisers, anyway.

As for Iowa, I'm also ambivalent. I seem to have had a unique experience in the sense that the poetry faculty enthusiastically supported my writing, whereas most other students did not. In any workshop setting, this "teacher's pet" effect can be awkward, but the Iowa Writers' Workshop is so much more than what goes on in the classroom, and while you might assume that the dominant culture was snobby and elitist like Yale, I found nearly all the grad students at Iowa to care much more about writing than anything else. Among the fine arts, I think writing is the most democratic since it requires so few supplies and

so little specialized training—relative to, say, landscape painting or classical piano. I was a fish out of water in my hometown because I was creative and curious. I was a fish out of water at Yale because less than a hundred years later, I'd have been shining everyone's shoes. I was a fish out of water at Iowa because while I took the craft of poetry very seriously, I didn't take myself that seriously. That's probably what made my work attractive to ye olde professors—they'd gotten tired, understandably, of a new crop of punk kids coming in year after year claiming or pretending to be the next Rimbaud or Berryman, when the truth is that we all try out the same "radical" ideas or techniques independently of one another. I've actually taught long enough by now to see certain episodes as reruns. Very little of what I've written, by the way, has been published. If I had to estimate, I'd say less than 1%. I think the worst workshops are ones that assume that any bad draft can

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be salvaged. I had a friend, a painter, who took this intensive painting class in France. Students wore themselves out painting all day long, and when night came, they burned everything, no matter how good or bad. I'd love to lead something similar with poetry. The good news and the bad news are the same: we are all capable of bad writing.

This is all to say that I've never felt more at home in a writing program than I do at UH. Of course, there's plenty to bitch about, but generally speaking, I'd say I feel understood and supported by both the faculty and the student body. It's no-nonsense most of the time. The undergrad population is the most diverse I've seen. And our professors for the most part seem truly to embrace the art of teaching.

MR: We met through the UH program, I was an undergraduate, and you were the editor-in-chief of Gulf Coast, and I remember thinking, "whoa, this gent is grounded and witty." You were

always so helpful and approachable. Do you miss that, being an editor I mean?

JJ: Ha! I'll accept "witty" as true, but "grounded"? That's a very generous compliment. Funny, too, since I actually once published a poem called "Grounded," although it didn't make it into the book. If I remember correctly, it was in three parts. The first was about being "grounded" in the sense of being punished, like when your parents make you stay home. The second was about my father cutting down a dead tree with a chainsaw—"grounding" it that way. And the third was about an art teacher, an old friend, who told me she used to be a flight attendant. She's grounded now, I guess. As for me, I want to be grounded more than I actually feel most days. A couple of years ago, I had a whirlwind relationship with a man who projected an air of unshakeable calm. I thought that was so sexy. It turns out he was brimming with

chaos; his affect was the only thing he could control. So, of course, it ended in heartbreak—heartbreak so painful that it introduced me to a side of myself that, trust me, was the opposite of grounded. But maybe you're right because I have had the privilege of covering a lot of ground with my own two feet. I've been allowed into some highly elite spaces, but I wasn't born into any of them. I've not traveled nearly as much as I'd have liked, but I have lived in enough shitty places to know when I'm living well. And, well, being a writer is the perfect cover for being an inveterate slut for new experiences.

I miss being Gulf Coast Editor, but I don't envy those who are doing the job now in these circumstances. It's a tremendous amount of work and responsibility, and I'm glad it seems like you never caught me on one of those rough days when it just felt like I'd never get out from under the piles and piles of planning, reading, e-mailing, and so on. I was really lucky to have worked with Robbie and

Paige (the other two senior editors during my tenure), and it's odd to be reminded that among the three of us I might be the most approachable—not because it isn't true, but because when else in my life have I been the approachable one? I'm an Aquarius. And a classic introvert. I think too much. I've been known to weaponize words and keep people at a comfortable distance. So, maybe on some level, I knew that to be a good Editor, I would need to open myself up more in order to embody what I thought the role required. I guess that's just what leadership is: you're always being watched, in a way—watched and judged. And there's one way to let that really play with your head and steer you off course, and then there's a better method that's like, "Oh? You're watching me, bitch? OK, then watch me. Watch me slay."

MR: So, you're an Aquarius? Does that impact your poetry?

JJ: I'm about as Aquarius as they

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come. I've always been ambitious, creative, and independent to a fault. I'd rather spend hours trying to figure something out than ask for help—only to fail or drive myself nuts. Writing suits this side of me because it really can be done alone, mostly.

People often assume Aquarius is a water sign, but it's actually an air sign, meaning that I'm a shapeshifter who's difficult to predict, often tough to categorize. My poetry is like that, too—or at least I hope so. I subsist on challenging writing. I like to think. I don't like being told to have thoughts I've already had, again and again. Oprah, Darwin, Lincoln, Shakira—all Aquarians, all so unique and successful that they're known by one name. Virginia Woolf and FDR are also Aquarians and heroes of mine. If I were president, I'd have a hard time leaving after eight years. Close friends and siblings get tired of seeing me win at things. I don't blame them. It's exhausting to have to congratulate the same person every time you see them.

But congratulations are honestly the least interesting part of it for me. Sure, I like attention and cherish praise, but if there were a way for me to keep doing the work that I love to do without having to compete, for prizes and fellowships and things like that, I'd take it. It's common to look at someone else's success and think, "Oh, they make it look so easy." What you don't see is the mess that they started with.

There's a type of poet who finds "process" immensely interesting—fragments, revisions, that sort of thing. I'm more interested in the best possible versions of what I read. Can I say that without sounding dismissive? I feel like it's an Aquarian attribute, or at least one that's related to those aspects of myself that I've mentioned, to see intuitively all that can go wrong, all that can be mishandled or misshapen, and yet to celebrate each triumph as a triumph. We have ideals because, as human beings, we can never be ideal. I say this as

someone who has been in love many times and fallen out of love an equal number of times. We show one another insufficient forgiveness and grace, which is maybe why I want my poetry to be abundantly forgiving, excessively graceful.

MR: You may feel ambivalent about the experience--but it is impressive that you've been in 3 of the most elite CWP's in the nation, and after reading your book, I can see why. It is chock full of the grounded, near-caustic wit that you've already displayed in the first three questions of this interview. I say the work also feels grounded because the text is approachable to all readers, from the streets to the scholars...not a common feat for a collection of poems. You have a way of making the quotidian pertinent in a very concrete and specific way. It's honest, refined yet gritty, and oh so colorful! I couldn't put it down. Thank you for sharing it with me. That being said, let's talk about the book, *How to Be Better by Being Worse* due out

Spring of 2021 by BOA Editions, Ltd. I love the title, and the poem that shares its name--it reads like a personal mantra, is it?

JJ: "How to Be Better by Being Worse," the title poem from the collection, first appeared in *New Ohio Review*; I'll start by saying that it was a poem that (a) I nearly abandoned so many times but for some reason couldn't let go of and (b) was roundly rejected countless times until it wasn't. As I recall, the editor at *New Ohio Review* called it "Byronic," which caused me to take another look at the poem to see what the hell he was talking about. I took a Romantic Poetry class in college. I've read some Byron. Not once would I have ever set out consciously to write a "Byronic" poem, and I'm still not 100% certain what he meant by that, but I prefer to think that he meant it's about accepting one's own recklessness and stepping out of the confines of obedience. I guess it all comes back

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to the people I've loved. Nothing they did—to me or to anyone else—could make me stop loving them, which sounds very sad, but I think it's the way (I have to imagine) some mothers love their children, for instance. You could fill the New York Public Library with books that tell you how to become smarter, stronger, more beautiful, more virtuous. All I'm saying is that no book can tell you how to make someone love you any more or any less than they already do. And yet from some strange place, we get the very harmful idea that we have to earn one another's attention and respect—when the reality, truthfully, is that either we have it or we don't. It isn't what people do that makes them worthy or unworthy of anything like love. And yet we're all so terrified, aren't we, of being unloved? I guess I needed to write a poem to tell myself to be less afraid of that. There are other heartbreaks to be had—other than “he doesn't love me anymore.” I'm willing to say: grow your leg hairs out, eat a pint of ice cream every night,

blow your savings on something you enjoy. You may be surprised to find out that THAT is exactly what somebody new will you worship you for.

MR: I know you have a number of impressive pubs listed on your CV: Copper Nickel, New Ohio Review, but am I correct in assuming this will be your first complete collection that is being published—is this book *numero uno*?

JJ: Correct. This is my first book. But I did edit four enormous issues of *Gulf Coast*, each of which I treated—from cover to cover—as if it were mine. I'd like to take this opportunity to say that there are many great writers, poets especially, who have yet to publish a book. Editing a literary magazine is a highly taxing and yet substantially rewarding experience if for no other reason than it feels like assembling a brand new book every six months. I didn't think of it as training for this experience, but I guess in no small

way it was. You'll soon know exactly what I mean—if you don't already.

MR: Are the poems included from across your academic career (or prior), or are they a body of more recent works?

JJ: Two or three poems date back to the very first semester of my M.F.A. program, which was almost a decade ago. The majority of them were written much more recently, in 2019, which—if you can believe it—was a much harder year for me than 2020 was. It's no secret that, especially when it comes to making art, our vulnerabilities are our strengths. It's no secret, and yet it was ridiculously difficult for me to accept. But here's something obvious, maybe, that also warrants being said: our strengths are also our strengths. Spoken like a true Aquarius.

MR: What would you say you were hoping to accomplish with this collection? To publish a book? To offer an authentic reflection? Emotional

catharsis? All of the above?

JJ: Did you know that before Freud started referring to his “talking cure” as psychoanalysis, he called it “catharsis”? I'm vaguely aware that some academic somewhere has debunked the whole notion that catharsis is what art aims for. Imagine going to bed with someone who thinks that. On second thought, don't imagine that. I'm likely stalling either because I don't really know what I wanted to accomplish or because I don't particularly like the most truthful answer. Accomplishments feel good, but the best they've ever done for me, as far as I can tell, is keep me going. The worst they've done is reward negative behavior. By the way, I like that you put the word “authentic” in your question. I want to see more people using that word to make meaningful distinctions.

MR: These poems seem to hold together quite nicely—as in the

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collection's theme feels well-curated, and the sequencing is excellent. Did you have an intention to create this body of work about these particular topics, or did it evolve naturally from your own opinions and experiences? To clarify, were these poems that occurred organically? Did they just so happen to be about the same or similar situations, or did you "think I want to write a body of work that deals with these particular topics," i.e., relationships, identity, family? Would you even name those as your themes?

JJ: I'm authentically thrilled that you think so! I think the best word for how it came together is "organically," but let's not forget that we're using a metaphor here. I mean, obviously, I didn't plant a seed in soil and water it every day. I can't guarantee that any pesticides weren't used. I think the most misleading metaphors are those we frequently use and fail to acknowledge as metaphors. To me, there's nothing "natural" or "organic" about

writing a poem or curating a book. If I had to choose, I'd be more willing to say both are wholly unnatural and inorganic, in the sense that a great deal of artifice has been used with the goal of making it feel as if it all holds together. It may not feel that way for some, but I sure hope it does. I'll say that one major difference I've noticed between writing a poem and sequencing a book comes down to your question of "theme." I don't usually think about themes or topics when I write poems. There isn't enough time. I'm too busy trying to coax the lion into its cage, so to speak—throwing out scraps of meat, purring, making promises, and so on. The sequencing process is interesting because now we have an entire zoo on our hands, and it becomes a question of what kind of zoo, which is a question of what kind of experience we might want our visitors to have, knowing that some will follow the map in numerical order, giving more-or-less equal time to the pandas and the gazelles,

while others will head straight for the reptiles exhibit and save zero time for the sea otters.

My approach in this collection was to pair everyone up first, based on some clear affinity like a shared image or “theme,” then to combine pairs into quads, and so on until I basically knew which poems went together and which were basically loners. I’ve always been partial to loners, so I figured I’d give them the most prominent places in the collection, working from the principle that it’s easier to tolerate rude company earlier in the evening than later. As I shuffled things around, I made a mental note of anything that felt like a “discovery” and tried my best to keep it that way, masochistically reminding myself that—should this particular sequence ever see the light of day—an ideal reader might, by following the map, be led to that very same discovery and go, “Ah. Yes. Quite right.” (I guess my ideal reader is a member of the Royal Family.)

I’ll illustrate with one such

discovery. “How to Be Better by Being Worse” concludes, “Someone will still fall madly in front of you.” The next poem in the sequence is called “Falling As Adele,” in which the speaker, who’s dressed in drag as Adele, literally falls down outside an after-hours bar. In other words, we go from “someone” falling to perhaps the most operatic of tumblers. While the poem does not explicitly say that Adele’s wig went flying off, it’s possible to infer that it did. Turn one page, and the next poem is “Wigs Everywhere,” which turns things up yet another notch. We have not just one wig on the ground but countless wigs—a veritable explosion of wigs!—Wig City!

I’ll conclude by saying that not every series of poems in the collection is meant to escalate the drama as these three are. An ideal trip to the zoo provides an outlandish spectacle as well as moments of quiet contemplation; there are opportunities for learning

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and, at times, a healthy dose or two of conservationist propaganda. And for better or for worse, my zoo doesn't have a gift shop.

MR: Did getting a Ph.D. change a lot for you--daily living, publishing, teaching, etc.?

JJ: It's easy to forget, once you're in a creative writing program, that there are writers who never really go that route, and there are even those who've made careers in writing without having gotten advanced degrees in creative writing. Sometimes those writers (and others) make a big fuss about how workshops and MFAs (and now PhDs) ruin originality and promote uniformity, but my take is that it's always easier to make such claims when one hasn't really been a part of them. I know that's not the question you asked, but I think it's been valuable to me to have spent as much time--I think, an equal time, more or less--outside of academic writing programs as I have been in them. I

took three years "off" between my B.A. and my M.F.A., and three years again between my M.F.A. and Ph.D. Those were difficult years, but I think they made me a better citizen of the world and gave me a broader perspective about my place in it. If nothing else, those years taught me how to be grateful and not take for granted ANY time I could steal, in which my only job was to enrich my understanding of literature and advance my writing practice. Also, it helps to have friends. I don't simply mean "connections." I mean people who, like me and you, are compelled to face questions related to our own vanishing--how briefly a certain kind of joy can last, how fragile a certain kind of intellectual or artistic freedom can be. I'm lucky that I've gotten a second and now a third chance to carve out so much time for such joy and freedom, thanks to the M.F.A. and the Ph.D. It's not lost on me at all how few people are afforded this opportunity, nor is it lost on me how many people with

these opportunities squander them or take them for granted.

MR: Will you miss school? Are you planning to continue life in academia?

JJ: There are certain things about school that I will not miss, especially now that I've spent so much time teaching, and once you get a "peek behind the curtain" or learn "how the sausage is made," it can be frustrating to play the part of student yet again, to find yourself yet again angling for validation or approval or whatever else you're seeking. Personally, the more time I've spent in and out of school, the less immediate rewards have mattered to me, and yet (astonishingly! ironically!) the easier such rewards have been to come by. I seem to remember having to fight harder as a high school student and college undergrad for the grades I wanted and for the accolades I thought I needed. I'll be the first to admit I like approval, and I seek attention, but in a creative field, there

isn't much to be gained by simply "cracking the code" of what this or that professor, editor, institution, peer, or whoever wants from you. They're all as fickle and complicated as we are. Perhaps somebody should write a paper on the erotics of academic life—the elaborate courtship of it—how important it is to appear indifferent to success while being secretly obsessed with it. I worry that academia is trending in the direction of being hostile to the kind of free thinking that made me want to be a part of it in the first place, but I see no way to reverse such a trend from the outside. I worry more about it becoming an environment that can no longer be hospitable to the very people who can flourish within it and make such flourishing a more available possibility for others.

MR: What's next?

JJ: All summer, I worked on a bunch of short, quasi-rhyming poems

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that I guess you could call epigrams, though they're not strictly epigrams. A topic I'm interested in (if you want to call it that) is embarrassment. We think of it as a private emotion, but its etymology, and the early history of its usage, involves something more public, more theatrical even; to know what I mean, just consider the idiom "an embarrassment of riches." I've also been thinking a lot about the wind. I know! But I wouldn't be the first poet to have far too much to say about the movement of air if that's really all there is to it. I suspect there's rather much more.



A Starcrossed Prophecy
HELLSEA X

WRITE ABOUT **NOW** — POETRY —

Write About Now Mini-Anthology

During the entire month of April 2021, the National Poetry Writing Month: poets and writers accept the challenge of writing thirty poems in thirty days. To help accomplish this goal, Write About Now's, Christopher Diaz shared 10+ writing prompts a day throughout the entire month of April, sharing more than 300 writing prompts in total to help generate new work. In support of this, *Defunkt Magazine* ran a contest for the participants. We selected ten lucky winners to feature in this exclusive MINI-ANTHOLOGY!

PROMPT 1: WRITE A POEM THAT BEGINS WITH, "IF THIS IS THE END"

If this is the End

Kimberly Shaw

If this is the end...
I don't want to know
Whisper it to me slow
Keep it on the low
Hushed up hissed whispers
On the low

In a game of telephone
So I can interpret it a different way

Shape my own ending
Open my own departure
Remake my finale

Show you my authentic self
Shout out to Kingston Nalli

If this is the end...
Let me go down in a rebellious lie
Defy the truth

Howl my secrets through
Dead graveyards

If this is the end
I'm stumbling into
Help me find my balance
In quiet suffering and loud relief

If this is the end
Lay me down on a shoreline of meticulous waves
That pull me into deep sea sleep

If this is the end
This is all greek to me

I sing to the sea goddess Amphitrite
Who brought me to the end
Ask for new beginning
Ask goddess to have mercy

I close my eyes on coral flora
Stabbing me alive
And it worked...what a god

BAKER'S DOZEN 13: WRITE A POEM THAT ENDS WITH "WHAT A GOD."

Love is what I god

Amir Safi

The grass is gleaming what a god. There's air to breathe what a god. My daddy just got his second vaccine what a god. About to celebrate my first wedding anniversary what a god. She's still with me what a god. Still loves her wedding ring what a god. I'd rather give gratitude for all the pandemic gave me what a god. Today, all the windows look like they just got wiped down what a god. It's spring and the world is opening, a slow bloom, there are lilies everywhere and Westheimer smells like jasmine & tacos. What a god. What a god. What a god. Ameen.

**WRITE A POEM THAT IS A LETTER TO WHO YOU COULD HAVE BEEN, HAD A SIGNIFICANT EVENT NOT
HAPPENED IN YOUR LIFE**

Para ti

Ilja Van De Mortel

Para ti,

Adoption turned into adaption, however sometimes I still wonder about who I could have had been.

Had my mother not made the hardest decision, I would now be in a totally different position.

Daniela Del Mar Zamora Arias, you must have reminded her of how beautiful the sea was. Just like her wavy hair and beside that cheeky right-dimple installed, multiple resemblances could be found.

Moreover, having matching characteristics made it clear to me that you were molded in mamá's very same image.

Hermanas y hermano, familia es primero. A family to go home to. A family feeling like home to you. Attachment without issue because you never felt the type of abandonment that makes you adamant about not committing to.

Colombia para siempre. Unshattered lineage and proudly claiming heritage because knowing where you come from is knowing that you belong. People that you can relate with and a permanent place to live. A roots so strongly intertwined that it gives peace of mind.

Fuerza y valentía is what a strong woman once told and showed me. Words that I now live by, while in the meantime wild fantasies will keep running through my mind.

Atentamente,
Tu niña interior

WRITE ABOUT A SUPERPOWER YOU WISH YOU HAD

Superblack

Cassandra IsFree

I wish I could absorb bullets

Create a force field to protect my brothers and sisters from being hit by
shots from stray

cops

Give them the power of intangibility so that they can't be touched

Watch them Marvel as I fly to their rescue in dark alleys and cold streets

Make 'em Wonder "where did this Super Woman come from" - who can lift the
weight of

oppression with her super strength

Be a woman of steel and flex my iron, man

Fly like a Bat out of hell to be the hero they deserve

Have the power to transport to them in that moment of need right before the
lives of 12-

year old boys and sleeping women are taken

Race to Tamir Rice with the speed of a Black Panther to stop these kill
mongers

I would jump at the chance to face Breonna's killer and avenge her

Bring down my hammer like Thor on these crooked cops

Swoop in like a Falcon and Hulk smash these hawkshaws

Expose this web of corruption

Leave the worst ones Dead in a Pool of their own deception

Better yet Locked in a Cage with no Defenders

Call me Cyclops cause I have my eye on em, ready to give em Hell, Boy

How Dare these Devils be so blind to this injustice

League of legalized killers who draw their weapons in a flash

I call em DC. Dumb cops who don't know the difference between a gun and a Gauntlet.

It's enough to make me Snap.

I wish I could Clobber anyone wanting to harm my people, Stretch myself thin to protect

them or at least go out in a Blaze trying

It would be Fantastic for us

But as a black woman in this nation, the only power I seem to have, is one of Invisibility.

WRITE A POEM THAT PUSHES THROUGH NEGATIVE EMOTIONS INTO THE POSITIVE ONES

Starlings

Alicia Turner

I remember sunflowers inside out. Ripened
roots accompanied by leaves
and the leaving.

A crutch of unmade
things.

Yet, I have always believed that you can see
murmurations through fog,
that there is safety in numbers,

and at the root of receipts
are all of the things that we did not pay for,

just vanilla confusion
echoing
the same pink bruise.

What I need you to know is that
grief is a heavy thing
not meant to hold.

Because I lie
(to myself)
when I mistake pain as something that's
intricately coordinated.

It isn't that the sky is opening up.
It's just that where I'm planted,
panic blooms,

so I plant sunflowers in winter.

WRITE A POEM THAT BEGINS WITH, "EVENTUALLY, WE..."

Horsehead Death

Sarah Mental

Eventually, we die
become ash that resembles dust
find our permanent home
rust in the earth
learn to decay and provide
fertilizer to flowers
or rot within
a steel coffin
bones just remembrance
to how our carbon was home
to more than maggots feast
more than memory's deceased.

I'm asked whether I've lost
I lie, say I've lost nothing
never had a death strike
in the forehead and remind me
we're just all a matter
of death catching up
with our shadow and overtaking
the light we create until
we're nothing but the darkness
we keep hiding from.

I lie, say I don't see my great grandmother
standing in her kitchen
turning to smile at me
the smile a nebula exploding
like another dying star
that inspires a sun
for us to revolve around
her beautiful center.

I lie, say I never remembered
her lollipop laughter
as Werther's original candies
as the best thing
besides her smile
was this woman's laughter.

My dad tells me my eyes
are like hers, and I don't know
whether to cry or pry them out
of my head, so I don't
go to bed in my house
and die in a hospital
like she begged
not to die there.
I'm asked whether I believe
in an afterlife
family says I'm Christian

raised that way
praised god for being something
that I shouldn't take their name
in vain, but my brain is programmed
until I shed the programming
with a virus that didn't allow
this singular look at life and death
to be my ending breath.

I do believe in death
it coming for me eventually
we all give in to it.
I lie, say I'm not scared
but how do I keep the dead
alive within me like a horse head
buried next to me in bed.

WRITE A POEM THAT ENDS WITH "NO ONE TOLD US THE RULES"

No One Told Us

Cassandra IsFree

We didn't know we weren't allowed to breathe.
Had no idea we were SUPPOSED to be shot
No one ever explained that our lives were not gonna matter. Ever.
We were in the dark that "our kind" wasn't welcome in corporate...neighbor-
hood...
store...skin.
We weren't aware.
Because the history books only tell half truths...
Never said kidnapped.
Raped.
Castrated.
Murdered.
So how were we supposed to know we were only 3/5?
Lesser than?
Subpar?
We really didn't know.

No one told us the rules.

WRITE A POEM THAT BEGINS WITH, "IF THIS IS THE END..."

Final Verdict

Kristy Macellaro

If this is the end
Let the record show
It was not the money lost to laziness that bankrupted our marriage
It was the unreturned investment of hope
Each morning making a deposit of renewed faith and love
Only to receive a short pay of anger and resentment

If this is the end
Let the record show
I wasn't searching for a better man
I was discovering a better me
Borrowing another's love to recover
my losses and subsidize my future growth

If this is the end
Let the record show
I finally earned enough to secure my own freedom and peace
The cost was high
But the value is priceless
Worth every principal payment of pride and interest expense of humility

**USE A PROMPT FROM A PREVIOUS DAY OR ALTER ONE OF THE PROMPTS OR COMBINE TWO OR MORE
OF THE PROMPTS OR WRITE ABOUT ANYTHING YOU WANT TO WRITE ABOUT OR SHARE A PROMPT
YOU USED/CREATED**

Gardening the Canadian Shield

Sara Hailstone

fingers creep into her
shallow recess
crustaceans gripping fist claws
in pine needles and that
sticky earthworm

the unceasing bedrock
metres below holds stories
of others who have
knelt for hours on aching knees
their fingernails earthen
sharp as fossils

a thrum of wings
hush and haunting
in bare-branched trees before
the first globular raindrops
of the season
are pulled down

id open my mouth and let
the world come crashing in
id cradle the hollowed out
souls in the warmth of
my throat and hope that
this earth caked to my skin
won't burn

WRITE A POEM DESCRIBING YOUR NAME

small stream as answer to thirst

Alicia (uh-lee-shuh):

I've been watching you drink from empty cups.

"And how are you doing?" I want to say that I am not doing. I want to say that I am existing; instead, I just exist. Like things just happen. I exist the way you remember to breathe-out of habit.

Out of habit, I am writing a lot more. I love both running from it and making it. I love that it reminds me of a different way to bleed, to put the weapon down, to be the weapon.

Wrong answers only: My name symbolizes a "small, gentle stream" and the smallness of strangers—it is the static cling in my father's hair when he was late, post-shower, arriving to the delivery room. It is a combination of the soap opera characters my mother named me after.

Since then, I've been late at showing up for people.
Since then, I've only shocked few when I arrive and say:

My name is for young girls who lost their parents but found a pen.

Who learned early that the body is a text.

Who learned early in their bones to release.
Who learned early that when bones crack they're
learning how to make space.

My name is for the girls who present their partner to
their paranoia, introduce themselves as "cursed," and
easily manipulate themselves into believing that
they aren't living through loss
but loss is living through them.

My name denounces generational curses but inherits
curse words like "Fuck" when I write a poem,
like this one,
where I try to get over this and I fail.

Alicia, write a poem that can catch its own
breath,
that speaks fluently,
and never ends on "end" –

because the poem is hungry for your
name drops
and it is
starving.

Speak through the poem
the way water answers to thirst.

Tell the poem that you're learning to
love yourself
like the sound of your name
when it rolls off the tongue
of a person who pronounces it right.

Do not let yourself be lost in translation.
Be read back to you.



Creepy Ludwick Encounters a Mirror for the First and Last Time
Dave Simms

Art Contributors

Suzanne Bailie is an artist and writer. Since childhood Suzanne loved manipulating paper. Her first creation was a covered wagon made from orange construction paper and all the tape she could find in her parents' house. Her award-winning collages are vibrantly whimsical or darkly disturbing. A published poet, her writings look at the world of everyday people with compassion and confusion. Suzanne wrote her first play while living on a coffee farm in the jungles of Hawaii. It was produced by a local theatre company and she hasn't stopped hitting the keyboard since. Her creations are described as in your face reality whipped together with humanity, truth and unexpected laughter. www.SuzanneBailie.com

Carla Barron is a queer artist from the Texas Panhandle, now residing in Houston. As a child, she found her love for creating in makeup artistry and poetry writing, but currently focuses her energy on drawing, printmaking, metalsmithing, and jewelry designing. She enjoys combining these techniques and including "recycled" items in her metalsmithing and jewelry. Drawing inspiration from her daily life, she is primarily focused on feminine energy and local flora and fauna.

Chelsey Bolden, aka Hellsea is a tattoo artist and clothing designer. Her art conveys Dark Beauty in whatever theme. Her inspiration draws from romantic renaissance, gothic & vampiric lifestyle and architecture, Japanese lore & culture, dark psychedelia, occultism, and hell itself. Sometimes, she models and showcases her visions on herself, but mostly she gives it to others in the form of body art.

Christopher Paul Brown earned a BA from Columbia College Chicago. He was born in Dubuque, Iowa.

At the present time, **Kateryna Bortsova** is a painter – a graphic artist with BFA in Graphic Arts and MFA. Works of Kateryna took part in many international exhibitions (Taiwan, Moscow, Munich, Spain, Italy, USA etc.). Also, she has won a silver medal in the category “realism” in participation in “Factory of visual art,” New York, USA, and 2015 Emirates Skywards Art of Travel competition, Dubai, United Arab Emirates. Kateryna is always open for commission, and you can view her work on Instagram: @katerynabortsova, or on her website: <http://bortsova6.wix.com/bortsova> .

Mark Eshbaugh has been a working artist for twenty years. He has a Bachelors of Fine Arts degree University of Massachusetts- Lowell and a Masters of Fine Arts degree from the Savannah College of Art and Design. Mark has taught workshops in the United States, Mexico and Europe. He has taught at Bridgewater State University, St. Anselm College, Montserrat College of Art, Anna Maria College, and the University of Massachusetts at Lowell. HE exhibited his images in several solo exhibitions and over 100 group exhibitions worldwide. As an illustrator, he explores dream states, anxiety, fear, desires, and the subconscious with elements of surrealism and optical illusions in multi-focal point imagery. As a photographer, he was among the first to explore split images over multiple rolls of film in a single exposure in a significant way. He authored a textbook on alternative processes and excels in PT/PD printing, chrysotypes, cyanotypes, and gum dichromate printing. He has given public lectures on his artwork in galleries, museums, and on television. Mark's work has been shown in museums and galleries around the globe and has received Juror Awards in a number of exhibitions. Mark's images are included in several private and public collections.

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Lori Frisbee, Life is ephemeral. Nothing lasts. What we carry forward with us are the vibrant, fluid snapshots of life, the moments that matter. Sometimes out of the corner of our eye we get a sense that the world is looking back at us as a reflection of multiple possibilities. My childhood memories are of growing up poor, and going into work with my mother at the bowling alley. The expansive textures of the wheat blowing across Montana plains with the sharp contrast of the sharp snow-capped mountains are forever etched in my mind. Rich tourists came and reflected a life that was only within my reach with education. So, off to university I went, left Montana and travelled the world. I have been fortunate to wander Korea, Mexico, Italy, France, and Spain. I currently reside in Denver, Colorado and have shown at the Lakewood Cultural Center, the Arvada Cultural Center, The Spark Gallery, The Lapis Gallery, the Anam Cara Gallery, and La Piccioletta Barca. My website is lorrifrisbee.com where you can view my multi-media paintings and photography.

Van O (Ivan Isaev) was born at 1975 in Moscow, Russia, graduated the biological faculty of the Moscow State University and the School of dramatic art of An. Vasil'ev. He worked as the actor at the theaters "Dance-model" and "Mystery of costume", as the club designer- created the collections of vanguard fashion "200 volt ago or Some aspects of individual luminosity...", "The Circus", "Viniloplastika". Art-photographer since 1999, the member of Russian Union of Art Photographers since 2009 and of the Creative Union of Russian Artists since 2015. Works are in the collections of Russian museum of St. Petersburg, Moscow Museum of Modern Art and private collections. The heroes of the series "Werewolves" are mythological, religious and art characters bearing distinctive proteistic features. The constant metamorphoses, loss and finding of own person, change of physical appearance, historical

and social role, mask or image becomes the defining principles in their biography, forms round them changing, fluid, game reality. During my studying of entomology at the biological faculty of the university I devoted a lot of time to the study of complete and incomplete metamorphosis of insects and photography, with its charm of documentary, allows me to accumulate my scientific, theatrical and design experience in one work. The series was shot on a black-and-white film and printed on a color paper. Sometimes I apply multiple exposure, and also introduce external images into the frame graphics, scientific and technical schemes. Printed on various media (paper, textile, transparent membrane), they help to achieve the effect of collage, an unexpected transition from volume to plane. <https://vanoart.wixsite.com/photo/werevolves>

Suman Kabiraj is a South Asian multidisciplinary artist based in India. Kabiraj's work includes Paintings, drawings, photography, installation, short-films and multimedia works. Has pursued his MFA with 1st class 1st from Govt. College of Art and Craft, Calcutta University in the year of 2006. His works have been represented and exhibited in several international galleries, festivals, art events, and film festivals. He has been honoured with several Awards, Scholarships like Governor's Gold Medal , Kalanand National Gold medal, Kalanand Scholarship, Gaganendranath Tagore Memorial Award, Camlin Euro Professional Visit Scholarship, Rashbehari Dutta Memorial Award, Sunil Das Scholarship , Gopen Roy Memorial Award, Mukul Dey graphics Award etc. He has mounted three solo shows in his artist career. Represented in Taiwan International Show, Group Show organised by Indian Tourism Department and Kolkata Centre for Creativity 2019, Group Show 'Reflection of Another Day' 2018-2019 at Birla Academy of Art and Culture Calcutta , Netherland Streaming Festival for Audio Visual art, United Kingdom in

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2014, Summer Show 2014, Centre of International Modern Art (CIMA), Kolkata in 2014, 'Liquid Cities & Temporary Identities' international exhibition, Espoo (Finland) in 2013, Catalyst Arts Belfast International Festival, Belfast, United Kingdom in 2013, Stigmart /10 Europe International Annual Previews in 2012, 'Zen Next-111' International Art Show at Aakriti art gallery, Kolkata, 2008, 'YOUNG CONTEMPORARIES' organized by Aakriti art gallery, curated by Shri Jogen Chowdhury, Kolkata in 2007, 'ART WATCH' trends and talents of India today- Group Show organized by Gallery 88, Kolkata in 2006, All India Fine Arts & Crafts Society, Annual Exhibition (AIFACS) New Delhi are few of them.

Milton Swami Parraga is a writer, a photographer, and a visual artist. His work has been featured in *Microfiction Monday Magazine* & *Defunkt Magazine*. Originally from Mexico City, Milton currently resides in Houston, Texas.

R. Trentham Roberts lives in Charlotte, North Carolina. After a 40-year career in newspapers, he is navigating retirement while trying to ride out the pandemic. His work can be seen at <https://whimtunnel.blogspot.com/>

Dave Sims makes art and music in the old mountains of central Pennsylvania. His tangible and digital paintings and comix hang from the walls, appear on the covers, and lurk inside the pages of over sixty actual and virtual galleries and publications, while his totem carvings continue to catch the eyes of many strangers, and his guitar playing and singing still leave listeners shaking their heads in disbelief. Experience more at www.tincansims.com

K.B. Solomon, Photographer/Activist based in Houston, Texas. Born during a time of free love, tumultuous politics, and the civil rights movement, she has been telling the unwritten stories within her photographs for over fifty

years. Her work focuses on being the advocate for the voiceless, a love of historical architecture and the environment. She is fascinated by our ever-changing cultures, diversity and enjoys a different point of view. You may find her published work in *Defunkt Magazine*, and various event posters.

Sara Stasi is an artist and poet residing in Santa Cruz, California, with her husband and two cats. She finds inspiration in the natural world and enjoys creating nature-based images. Drawing on her background in anthropology and literature, her work explores the relationship between symbols and meaning. Her art and poetry has been featured in the Porter Gulch Review as well as various online publications. Find more of her work at sarastasi-writes.com.

Brittany Worlinsky has exhibited with curators from the *Huffington Post* arts Blog, Chocolate and Art Show LA, Proxy Place Gallery, Jamie Brooks Fine arts, and House of Wren, along with exhibiting nationally in Florida, Virginia, Washington, Missouri and California and internationally in Korea. She has paintings featured in *The Party* movie, directed by Julianna Robinson.
[@brittanyworlinskyart](https://twitter.com/brittanyworlinskyart)

Poetry Contributors

Noor Hindi (she/her) is a Palestinian-American poet and reporter. Her poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *POETRY*, *Hobart* and *Jubilat*. Her essays have appeared or are forthcoming in *American Poetry Review*, *Literary Hub*, and *Adroit Journal*. Her debut collection of poems, *Dear God. Dear Bones. Dear Yellow.* is forthcoming from Haymarket Books (2023). Visit her website at noorhindi.com.

SG Huerta is a Chicana poet from Dallas. They are pursuing their MFA at Texas State University and live in Texas with their cat Lorca. SG wrote the chapbook *The Things We Bring with Us: Travel Poems* (Headmistress Press, 2021). They are *Porter House Review*'s nonfiction editor and an assistant prose poetry editor for *Pithead Chapel*. Their work has appeared in *perhappened* mag, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Lavender Review*, and various other places. Find them at sghuertawriting.com or on Twitter @sg_poetry

Anna Maria Morris is a multidisciplinary artist currently based in Houston, TX. As a poet, she has performed at various open mics, slams, and features hosted by Write About Now Poetry, UH CoogSlam, and Coast2Soul Poetry. In addition to poetry, Anna Maria is a proud AEA actor with a background in live theater performance. Audiences might remember her from *Stages: Little Shop of Horrors (Chiffon)*, *Sin Muros: City Without Altar (Socorro)*, *PANTO Wonderful Wizard (Monkee/Cow)*; *Alley Theatre: Alley All New: High School Play (Sophie)*; *The Landing Theatre Company: Between Two Caves (Alex)*; *Obsidian Theater: For Colored Girls... (Lady in Blue)*; *Firecracker Productions: Crooked (Laney)*. More of her work can be found on Instagram @TheArtAnnaMaria, *Defunkt Magazine*, and her website <https://www.annamariamorris.com/> She has abundant gratitude for her family, friends, Patrick, and her biggest fan Dad. BFA: Sam Houston State University, Theatre.

M.R. “Chibbi” Orduña is a Mexican-born, Texas-raised queer poet and actor, the founder of Laredo BorderSlam, a founding member of Write About Now, Director and co-host of the Words and Sh*t virtual talk show and podcast, and 2-time San Antonio Slam Champion. He has self-published 2 books and was the co-editor of the anthology *Contra: Texas Poets Speak Out* (Flowersong Press, 2020). He’s toured across the country performing his spoken word set, and his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Acentos Review*, *Defunkt*, *The Latino Book Review Magazine*, *The Journal of Latina Critical Feminism*, *Wax Nine*, *We Are Mitu*, *George Takei*, *SlamFind*, *Poetry Slam Inc.*, *Button Poetry*, and *Write About Now*. You can follow him on IG @gemineyes and Twitter @gemineyespoetry.

WRITE ABOUT NOW CONTEST CONTRIBUTORS

Sara Hailstone’s writing is born from navigating the raw and confronting connections that living in a small-town project by scouring collapsed domestic landscapes. They are an educator and writer from Madoc, Ontario who orients towards the ferocity and serenity of nature and what we can learn as humans from the face of forest in our own lives. A graduate of Guelph University (B.A.) and Queen’s University (M.A. and B.Ed.), they are currently completing their Masters in English in Public Texts at Trent University.

Cassandra IsFree is a 3x published author, spoken word artist, slam poet and award-winning actress from Norfolk, VA. She is also a founding member of the Verb Benders’ slam team representing VA. IG: Cassandra_IsFree

Kristy Macellaro is a perpetual work in progress, residing in the greater Philadelphia area, a mom of 2 beautiful boys, an instructional designer by day, a bourbon-drinking poet by night.

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Sarah Bellum Mental is a Chicago born spoken word artist and poet now living in Houston, where she considers Write About Now poetry a home space. Sarah writes and performs poetry to give a voice to those who don't have one, or feel they don't. She looks to amplify her voice for those too scared to speak of what they've been through. To provide light in the darkness of living life in difficult times. Her books can be found on <https://www.sarahbellum-mental.com>.

Amir Safi is a writer based in Houston. He is the founder of Write About Now and his work has been featured by *The Huffington Post*, *Upworthy*, *A plus*, *Whataburger* and more. Most recently, he won the Poetry International Prize.

Kimberly Shaw is a native of Charleston, SC and a mother of 2 amazing boys with Autism and other special needs that keep her on her toes. She is a graduate of Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC where she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Mass Communication. She has been writing poetry for almost three decades and enjoys the craft heavily. She has performed some of her work on Write About Now's virtual open mic stage, *The Word is Write*, *MindWell Poetry*, and several others. Her first book, *Inspired by Actual Events*, has a projected release date of July 2021.

Ilja van de Mortel, or Daniela del Mar Zamora Arias, is a 23 year old woman living in the Netherlands, however her roots lay in Colombia. Adopted as a baby, this theme functions as a red thread in her life as Ilja has made it her life mission to find out her true self. Writing is one of the tools that she uses for this, just as it has been since she was a little girl. Growing older, Ilja discovered that writing is her true passion and with sharing her art she

ultimately hopes to reach people who can relate with her words. Instagram: ilja.vdm Twitter: vdmilja

Alicia Turner holds an MA in English and is a grant writer & storyteller. She can be found writing confessional, conversational poetry in an over-priced apartment somewhere in WV. Her work is featured or forthcoming in *Four Lines (Alines)*, *CTD's 'Pen-2-Paper' project*, *Voicemail Poem's*, *FreezeRay Poetry*, *Drunk Monkeys*, *Luna Luna Magazine*, among others.

Prose Contributors

L.A. Clark's writing has previously been published in magazines such as *Cardinal Sins*, *The Ear*, and *Ghost Parachute*. She is also the author (as Lindsey Clark) of pieces in the *Shanghai Literary Review* and many others, as well as *Land of Dark and Sun* a travel memoir detailing her nine-month, shoe-string trip across southern and eastern Africa. Writing has been a consistent joy and common thread through her itinerant life of traveling, studying, or working in all fifty states of the U.S., nearly seventy countries, and all seven continents. Nothing makes her happier than to learn about the world, and none of it feels completely real to her until she writes about it.

Melissa Huckabay is a poet and multi-genre writer whose work has appeared in *Defunkt Magazine*, *The Remembered Arts Journal* and *The Inklings*. Her short fiction won the 2019 Spider's Web Flash Fiction Prize from *Spider Road Press*, and her short plays have been produced at several stages in Houston. A former high school teacher and journalist, Melissa is currently an MFA candidate in poetry at Texas State University.

Elizabeth Jaikaran is a New York based author and lawyer, with work published across a spectrum of print and digital media. She began writing at the age of eight and, since then, has published fiction, non-fiction, legal commentary, poetry, and comedy. She is the proud child of Guyanese immigrants, born in Brooklyn, New York and raised in Queens. Her writing has appeared in the *Huffington Post*, *Playboy*, *The Higgs Weldon*, *Brown Girl Magazine*, *Drunk Magazine*, *SILENT Magazine*, *Literally*, *Darling Magazine*, *The Muslim Observer*, *Bruk Out Media*, *PREE Lit*, *Human/Kind Journal*, *The Jurist*, and the *New York Law Journal*. Her first book, *Trauma: A Collection of Short Stories*, was published by Shanti Arts in 2017. Her children's book, *Nothing You Could Do*, was published by Bruk Out Media in

2021, and her first poetry collection, *Waiting for a Name*, will be published by Shanti Arts in 2022.

Justin Jannise is the author of *How to Be Better by Being Worse* (BOA Editions), which won the A. Poulin, Jr. Poetry Prize. His poems have appeared in *Best New Poets*, *Best of the Net*, *Copper Nickel*, *Yale Review*, *New Ohio Review*, and elsewhere. Recently a recipient of the Inprint Verlaine Prize in Poetry and a former Editor-in-Chief of *Gulf Coast*, Justin is pursuing his Ph.D. in Creative Writing (Poetry) at the University of Houston.

Originally from Galveston, TX, **Lupe Mendez** (Writer//Educator//Activist) is the author *WHY I AM LIKE TEQUILA* (Willow Books, 2019), winner of the 2019 John A. Robertson Award for Best First Book of Poetry from the Texas Institute of Letters. He is the founder of Tintero Projects which works with emerging Latinx writers and other writers of color within the Texas Gulf Coast Region, with Houston as its hub. Lupe earned his MFA from the University of Texas @ El Paso. Mendez has received fellowships from CantoMundo, Macondo and the Crescendo Literary/Poetry Foundation's Emerging Poet Incubator. Mendez's work can be seen in print and online formats which include the *Kenyon Review*, *Gulf Coast Journal*, *the Texas Review*, *Poetry Magazine* and Poem-A-Day from the Academy of American Poets. Mendez is the 2022 Texas Poet Laureate.

Jennifer Nessel (they/she) is an emerging writer based in Baltimore. Their work has appeared in *Defunkt Magazine*, *Apple in the Dark*, *Flash Frontier*, and others. In 2020, "The Corners of My Mouth," was nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *Defunkt Magazine*. When they aren't bothering their cats, they run a book review blog on Instagram @ajennyforurthoughts.

CONTRIBUTORS

W. T. Paterson is a three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, holds an MFA in Fiction Writing from the University of New Hampshire, and is a graduate of Second City Chicago. His work has appeared in over 90 publications worldwide including *The Saturday Evening Post*, *The Forge Literary Magazine*, *The Dalhousie Review*, *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, and *Fresh Ink*. A semi-finalist in the *Aura Estra* short story contest, his work has also received notable accolades from Lycan Valley, North 2 South Press, and Lumberloft. He spends most nights yelling for his cat to “Get down from there!” Visit his website at www.wtpaterson.com.

defunkt magazine

ANTHOLOGY II

Featuring poetry by
Chibbi Orduña and
Anna Maria Morris, non-
fiction by Lupe Mendez, an
Interview with poet,
Justin Jannise, and a
mini-magazine of Write
About Now prompted
poems, printed alongside
their inspiring prompt.