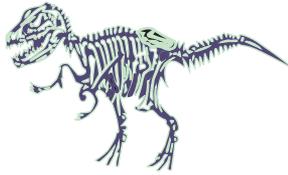


# DEFUNKT MAGAZINE



VOLUME TWO



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Birdtrash

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## LANDSCAPE WITHOUT CHILD

Anthony Barilla

The thing about Cat is that sometimes Cat will knock a jar off the windowsill and smash it on the floor or gnaw on the corner of an album cover like you imagine a Child would if you had one and for some reason you believe that if you had a Child it would teach you patience as if it were born with that one job and Child (or in this case Cat) was your Cross to bear, and when you picture Cross it is always made out of railroad ties although you are well aware that the train did not run to Judea back then and now railroad ties are mostly used for landscaping - even a piece of wood has more jobs than you can ascribe to Cat or Child - but on the other hand railroad tracks are just another kind of landscaping so perhaps everything (including Cat and Child) does have just a single purpose and, while your Catholic lack of imagination does not ascribe much detail to your stained glass mental picture of a Child you never had, Cat is standing there among shards of broken glass patient and real like this was the work Cat was born for.



**ROSEMARY & SALT**

Jonathan Hinojosa

## **BOWIE**

CD Eskilson

How many things become a knife:  
shark teeth, twilight dragged in grass, and David

with his lapis eye, scoring petals  
as they bloom. His blade homecoming

on my skin, the length he enters  
me. The length he peels to rusted

spring that prunes time off my  
hands. I can't count the thousand years

that flash inside his smile;  
by tens, perhaps, fingers curl to claws,

til I harpy legacy, or longing.  
I don't want his capture, my release, but

revelation off my ribs. Which song  
taught me to shriek? Which scar

the length of trying in a back room,  
the lipstick tube I stole, the cosmos burned

against my fangcracked face.  
Which song won't let me disappear?

I rock, I try to roll far from inheritance  
and slaughterhouse what lingers,

back flat against a wall to block  
my preening wings. My body

begs for blackout. Because what  
can I offer other scary monsters? Because

what am I when someday another  
halfwit boy with witcheye down me

carves into my dusk. What

can I do but whet whatever

glints at me from the dark.

## **MIDNIGHT**

Vivian Wagner

The moon's  
hanging out,  
looking at  
Orion obliquely,  
thinking of  
ordering a drink  
for him, or perhaps  
wondering what  
he looks like  
when he's  
wearing only  
cologne.

## DEAR SISYPHUS-

Michael J. Galko

You should see the shit  
they have us at now.

As in your trough  
there are only two states  
    one or zero-  
almost up or down.

So far as we know  
we angered no one,  
except maybe  
that crazy boyfriend.

There was a girl- his girl?  
on the bus-  
    seen from the street-  
whose blue eyes glimmered  
a green spark as she receded-  
just one of the quiet desperations  
filling our lives.

So I write again, to implore:  
    Do you need help  
    with your boulder?

For you can see  
by my pen's wobble,

that I am still eager  
    to set my hands  
    to a task  
of some gravity.



**FOXY**  
Erin Mulvany

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## LET SIMMER FOR 30 MINUTES (A Luc Bát)

Joshua Nguyen

Like when folks pronounce bánh  
mì as BOND mì. Or when some folks hum  
FOE instead of ph . Or say  
you go out of your way to hold  
a door for someone old  
but they glare & say O, you young  
folk & your kpop! Tongue sticking  
out as they walk by, flicking  
a finger in your face.

## WE CLUTTER

Oak Morse

we are the eye contact that becomes uncomfortable.  
we look away like we have low self-esteem because  
we have low-esteem. we make you feel nervous,  
even though we do not mean to. we are the fast name  
introductions that bomb rush out of our mouths  
while shaking hands. we are the other person's name  
which we will forget as soon as we do not say it right.  
we are the over-enunciated words, the squint they give  
us back. this is the other side of english, chopped and  
confused. we are the words that stick to the side of our  
mouths, the burst of spit that lands on your face when  
we are struggling to get one word out. we pray about it.  
we pray about it. we pray about it. we are the hand  
movements that are out of sync with what we are  
saying. we are *you know what i am saying, you know what  
i mean!* we do not know what to use first: tongue, teeth  
or breath. we run out of breath trying to test it out. we  
are the kings of repeating ourselves. we are the nods  
you give us as if you understand us the second time  
around. we know it is hard on you, but harder on us to  
deal with it. of course we pray about it. we pray about it.  
we pray about it more than ever when the stakes are high  
and we need the foundation of words to serve us like the  
sun serves daylight. so we are left to find our own little  
way through the dismay, so we tell statements, not stories,

the fastest you have ever heard. we are the conversation that runs short and the smile we have because we are glad it is over. we are the biggest comedians, jokes we can only make out; we have so much life within us yet none in front of people. we pray about it day and night. we are the phone conversations that are hard on your ears. we are feedback we don't want to hear, the cringe of an echo, the dread of a cold call, pull our hair out if we have to break down complex information, shoot us before you make us publicly speak, we can't get past the phone interview for a job. we have a degree, but cannot verbally deliver. we are crossed fingers in hopes that our words fell out right, but unfortunately our facial expression remained neutral. we dash from confrontation, we call it no drama. we absolutely get ourselves, but sometimes we don't. we do not even know it's a speech issue, we think it's just a small issue, something we haven't fixed yet. we are all over the place, cannot contain the words so they won't spill out at the same time. we even trip up asking God for help, but we still pray about it. we pray about it. we pray about it this confusion we cannot fix, this circus that lives in our mouths.

## HOW I REMEMBER ARIZONA

Carolyn Adams

The ground, rock and sand,  
all one color.  
My mother, kneeling,  
wrapping stones at the burial site,  
each separate square of fabric  
receiving its proper weight.

She was young then,  
in shorts and a sleeveless blouse,  
leather sandals.  
She crouched in the sun,  
its rays merciless and free.  
She left the skin of her face,  
her arms, her slender legs  
exposed to its frank attentions.

The business of parceling stone  
was a serious task,  
for each slice of limestone  
had a purpose.  
Unknown to me at the time,  
but a purpose all the same.

**(UNTITLED)**

Raquel Abend

When i was a girl  
my dad collected Whiskey bottles  
one beside the other  
disciplined, en fila india,  
over the kitchen pantry.  
He would polish them patiently  
every afternoon  
Jameson, Maker's, Dewar's, Jack,  
until one day he got married again  
and all those bottles disappeared.



## FIRST DAY OF WINTER

Carolyn Adams

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## TERATOMA

Elizabeth Keel

1

It began in August with pain. I was at a Heart concert in the Woodlands With my future in-laws and my fiancée. The hurt crashed in like a broken rocket, flaming abruptly in my midsection. Hot as the death of the summer.

I've known pain my life.  
Cooked my hand, Cut my  
leg open to the bone. I *was*  
a fifteen year old girl.

But in the womb, Ovaries and testicles are the same thing. They become one or the other, in the sea-changes. So when I doubled over, protective of my guts, The pain was equal to getting punched in the nuts.

It went on for an hour.  
Then it stopped. Then  
it came back.

That peekaboo pain would dance a tarantella in me throughout the fall.

We worried at first that I might be pregnant. (Nobody say the word "ectopic." Or "miscarriage." Not out loud.) Greg and I braved a Target on a Sunday to get a test.

The place was filled with screaming children:

Sticky, crumb-crusteD little people shrieking they *needed* a new thing.  
Oh, God. What if we *were* pregnant? We would need all the new things.

Pee. Pause.

Not pregnant.

I submitted to a blood test. Let the ultrasound waves wash over me.

2

Wept and waited on the doctors to make up their minds. We joked that they would have to tell me if it was the Alien from *Alien*. Just so long as it wasn't deemed to be all in my mind...

No. *Something* was in there. I dreamed of it.  
Became increasingly possessive of my pain. Monitored down to a decimal point.  
It's a 5.1, now. We're all set, it's just a 2.  
It's at 9.86, babe. Don't expect me to talk.

I had to lay on my side carefully, Drawing deep breaths when it was about kick. I'd catch myself with my hand hovering over that hip, Protectively, Like a mom.

Like most girls, I had anticipated feeling that feeling someday,  
Of another, inside. But I'd never predicted feeling it in that  
way: Under furrowed-brow, medical conditions. For the low,  
low price of outrageous expense.

Results rolled in at last. A man I was meeting for the  
first time, The doctor who would eventually operate, Cheerfully with-  
drew his hands from "under my hood" To tell me I had a growth the  
size of a baby's head. To the left of my uterus.

I couldn't deal with that. Not that phrase combined with that  
*sentience* in there. It was October by that point, so we  
nicknamed it The Pumpkin. And when it hurt, Which it often  
did, in steady streams, We said it was "tricking." A joke, as it  
wasn't a treat.

3

That was easier on Greg, Who grew apprehensive about the  
distant look I'd get, Trailing off of our conversations to mentally  
drop out of my brain, Down to my lower left side, Mesmerized by  
its hot orange agony.

"Pick a day," they said. "You're gonna be down n'  
out for four to six weeks." Too big to retrieve  
laparoscopically. It required a C-section, Like the  
mother of Macduff.

We chose November 2nd. I spent Halloween weekend  
with friends, Strolling among mums and sugar skulls in  
San Antonio.

The Pumpkin was strangely quiet. It didn't say much, let me have some fun. And then, almost like a reassurance, It pitched a fit the night before. Endless knocks at the Porter's door.

They give you good drugs for surgery. I was super unconscious. When I awoke, the pain was a different being. It was no longer round, or centralized, A radiant sun I had swallowed. Instead it was horizontal and vertical, An orderly grid of tidy slices Neatly stitched up with glue.

Greg was there, being good in a crisis. There was also footage waiting: A photograph of a bubblegum pink lump Double cupped in my doctor's hands. It had wrapped itself around my ovary like a Gobstopper. To be safe, they had removed the fused pair: The intruder and my means of making a real baby. Surprise. Menopause will come early.

4

The nurses said I couldn't go home until I walked. So I hauled myself up to brush my teeth at the sink a full day early, John Wayne swaying in an open-backed gown, Desperate to rip away the catheters and IVs.

At the two week check up, we heard the verdict. The Pumpkin had been a teratoma. "A tumor which grows other mature tissues and structures inside of it."

*Tera*, as in the earth.  
And the Greek,  
*teraton*: Meaning  
monster.

My little Pumpkin had cast an incantation: Built its own  
proud mess of skin, hair, muscle, and brains From the  
loose building blocks of life Which women are heir to.

Skin, I think of armor.  
A baby's cheek.

Hair, I think of beauty.  
Greg's eyelashes. A  
lone cat's whisker.

Muscles, for strength.

Brains: For thinking. For  
writing.

All together, they form the four humors, The  
elements, The seasons. Four things my body thought I  
needed a little more of, And tried to forge for me.  
Was there something more  
Hidden in that unsought gift?

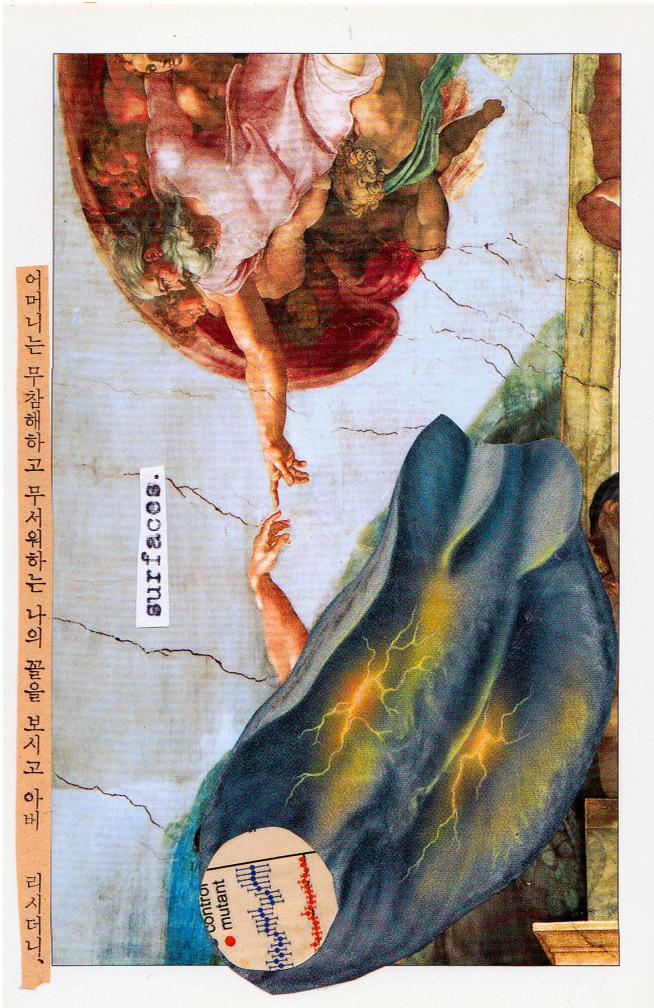
Things which fancy science  
And co-pays cannot yet  
see?

Intangible invisibles, which I woke up without.  
That might explain how the orange flames of pain  
Became an empty blue.

A shadowed gaze at the mirror, The  
too-loud scrub of the toothbrush.

I cannot shake the memory of that Other inside.

The monster banished From the warm caverns  
of its original maze.



**CONTROL MUTANT**  
Ashley Mills

## **PANTHER IN THE BACK ROW**

Gerald Cedillo

Mornings we rose from our assigned desks, hands fixed  
in pockets, cat-eyed, refusing to recite the pledge of allegiance.

Punks. Radicals who tapped our heart to repeat the words  
'one' and '...and justice for all' -- sacred to Metallica fans.

We sneered at anyone without a ready sneer, without ready  
fists. Squares, goodies, the well-heeled, twee, pop-music

Disney channel set. Had we inherited the spirit of traitors?  
Kicked out of class for reading the Communist Manifesto,

for turning middle-schoolers on to new exciting vocabulary  
like the System and the Man. Drawing hammers and sickles

on the back of Texas history textbooks: This town's too small  
to model the new state and too big for a commune, so some of y'all

will have to just go on livin' your Capitalist lives until high school.  
There cannot be many cold wars quite like being young.

We are offered only illusion and innuendo. Everyone  
a spy struggling to get some needed information out.

*Non-violence doesn't work. If they send you to the hallway  
throw a chair and flip a desk. Remember, solidarity brothers.*

Panther in the back row, young revolutionary failing  
algebra the third time that year. Saturday mornings spent

cleaning classrooms with the janitor. *One day, comrade.*  
And, still, this is the only place propitious for a fascist.

With whatever power in short supply. Nothing definitive.  
Our little feuds sure to be forgotten and all the cages

one day emptied. When the set course of time will still be  
interrupted long enough for a surprise lesson in empathy.



**UNTITLED**  
David McClain

**PRAYER**

Alexis Mercedes

I prayed silently for a savior.  
I called you God,  
caressed my vision of us into convulsions.  
My errant lips kissed the hollow cathedral  
of your chest where your ribs meet in the middle,  
the overlap of bone and underneath: the heart.  
    My slack jawline, my softened skin,  
    your jugular pulsing under my lips.  
    I prayed there, in the space  
between your chest  
and my longing.  
I confess  
I don't know how to love without worshipping.

It was pure tender,  
lying prostrate,  
palms pricked with sweat.

You do not ever forget how it feels to be losing something: the ebbing  
away. A startling tingle in your scalp,  
a silent scream erupting from the bellows of your stomach and then  
    the fresh pour  
        of grief that  
            streams  
                from the head to the  
                neck

to the chest, now  
cleansed, now

spacious,  
a hollow region of its own, and yes, it means that  
now you will be  
on your own.

Try to pray your way out of this  
one—

the god of your childlike love  
is no longer living.

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## GEORGINA

Rebecca Danelly

Georgina knows every father  
is criminal.

Georgina knows the power of the garter pinching her thigh,  
the constant pinch reminding her any pain can be brushed aside.  
Georgina knows that a black dress  
gives a woman a witch's power to heal, to curse, to transmogrify.  
She knows that when a father won't keep his oxygen mask  
on his face, even though his O-sats sink without it,  
when like a child, he tells his daughter *fuck off*,  
when he can't accept death as his bedmate,  
when he hates his daughter because she is not his,  
but his dead wife's daughter,  
that a daughter, like a witch,  
must be mutable.

Georgina knows a dress turns to white to signify love,  
that love can't be so easily signified.  
See how she glows like a single icicle  
hanging from the branch of a naked pear tree.

Georgina knows how to change back to black,  
how to keep her face straight when a bully mocks her.  
In her black dress, she knows how to tell him to keep his hands  
to himself. She knows a father can pout and shout like a two-year old,  
but she outmatches his dying tantrums.

Georgina knows love is sometimes best dressed in green  
like all growing things when spring thrusts them up and out,  
that the best soil, the richest most nurturing soil is mixed with shit,

## POETRY

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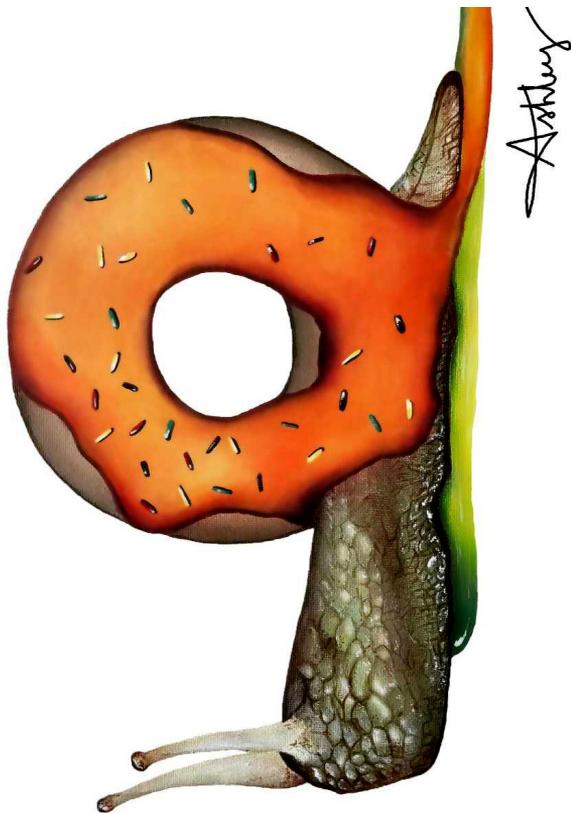
that a father if dying, and lonely, and terrified can be full of shit,  
that the other hand of growth is rot, that the rotting must decay, that decay,  
no matter how much you try to ignore it,  
will bring out the dogs.

She understands that barely breathing,  
he will go only the way he wants.  
Georgina knows that death can be answered,  
that a bully must be what he has served.

*after The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, and Her Lover*



**PINKY PERFECT**  
Ashley Mills



**SLOW AND STEADY**  
Ashley Mills



**PINKY PERFECT**

Ashley Mills

**TITLE**  
**EL ACEBRIJE**  
Author  
Maite Don

A cacophony of music could be heard from all around the barrio. It wasn't unusual to see all the doors wide open to let the early, cool breeze in while everyone swept the dirt out of their houses and onto the littered street. Chip bags were stomped flat and fluttered a few inches with the slight wind snaking its way through the hot heat of the sun. Neighborhood kids could be seen kicking around plastic liter bottles of Coca-Cola and Pepsi. The soccer ball they had been playing with got punctured by a truck that sped by the street one day a few weeks ago, the driver yelling at them angrily and ignoring the children's cries of injustice and pain from dodging the truck.

There was one particular little boy who really wished he could play with the soccer ball again. He was always seen in stained clothes and his nose had a small dirt spot on it. He'd wear the same outfit several days in a row, but nobody really knew if it was because his mother didn't care or if he didn't listen to her. A lot of the people in the barrio would keep it between themselves, but they were mostly of the opinion that the mother didn't care as she was often spotted drinking caguamas with the other drunk men from the neighborhood. Nobody knew the true reason why she was always hanging out with them, her little boy in tow, but they could very well assume. The little boy would be forced to wait for hours on end while his mother drank to her heart's content. She didn't have to worry about paying for the alcohol, it just kept coming while she was in their midst and she took advantage of it.

Sometimes the little boy would slip away after his mother had gotten misty eyed. He knew when her mind couldn't tell reality from fiction and when this happened, he disappeared swiftly. He wasn't afraid of the dark. He learned that as long as he kept to himself and was quick-footed, he would be fine. He could outrun most drunk, slurring men and he avoided shady looking adults by hiding in the shadows. Sometimes during these

escapades, his eyes caught a multi-colored tail swishing around corners, but every time he tried to get a better look, it was gone. He liked to think that it was a cat that somebody had spray painted and now it was roaming the neighborhood, looking for food. At other times, he'd make out a pair of glinting eyes staring at him through the dark, but they would disappear as soon as he got close enough to investigate further.

When he was able to escape, he let his feet take him to his grandmother's house, not even thinking of where he was going because he knew the way by heart. He walked by the group of kids who were still kicking the plastic bottles under some orange streetlights and thought longingly of the soccer ball they lost. If he could have it his way, he'd wish for a ball that would never be destroyed. A ball that would protect them from bad people and a ball that would never disappear no matter how hard or far away they kicked it. The little boy walked into his grandmother's kitchen with a smile on his face, proud of the ball he wished he was holding in his hands.

"Ay, mijo," his grandmother said, looking at him with pity. "Where have you been? I haven't seen you in so long. Are you hungry?" The little boy could smell the aroma of freshly made red enchilada tortillas and papas con chorizo that his grandmother was using for her sons and husband's cena. He nodded eagerly. It smelled so good.

His grandmother turned to the stove and made him two enchiladas with ease. She asked him to wash his hands in the sink and admonished him for being out so late and wandering the neighborhood by himself. "Don't you have school in the morning?" she asked. "And where's your mother?"

The little boy shrugged. He didn't need to say anything. His grandmother knew exactly where his mother was, and she knew he definitely had school the next day. She shook her head sadly. She had always wished she could take the little boy in, but her house was too small, and it was already crowded. He wouldn't have a place to sleep and she was already so busy taking care of her other grandchildren that made her thinning hair turn even more grey by the day. She wished that the little boy's

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**TITLE**

Author  
mother would snap out of it and take care of him properly, but she knew her wishes were futile. Nobody was prepared for her oldest son's sudden death at the factory he worked at, especially not the little boy's mother. She was still trying to move forward with her life without him, but her actions harmed her son. For now, all the little boy's grandmother could do was care for him as best as she could.

The little boy gobbled down the enchiladas and patiently waited for seconds. His grandmother had busied herself with the cena again when she started asking him some odd questions. "Have you ever felt like there's something protecting you?" she asked him. She turned to see the little boy looking at her quizzically. "You always have something looking over you," she told him assuredly. "You can't see them, but they can definitely see you. They're like your guardian angels that make sure you don't get in harm's way."

His grandmother gestured towards a wall that had portraits of all of the deceased people from their family. "They look over us as well, but they can't protect us, so they send some creatures called alebrijes." The little boy nodded understandingly. He had heard of alebrijes before during one of his classes. His teacher had been reading a book about how one particular alebrije kept saving a little girl from getting hurt. Nobody really knew what the alebrijes looked like, but they were unique to each person they protected.

When his grandmother turned around and saw the little boy absentmindedly scratching his head, she asked him when he showered last. "You should take a shower here before I walk you back home," she said. "I think there's even a spare outfit for you to wear since you spilled soda on yourself the last time you were here. I washed it for you."

The little boy felt a dread settle in his stomach. He didn't want to shower. He hated showers. Every time he took a shower at home, his mother boiled the water too hot and he ran and hid when she set the water for him in a bucket in the bathroom. He didn't like the feeling of the hot water on his skin. She waited for him impatiently and when he wouldn't come in, she yanked him by the arm from his hiding spot and scrubbed

him roughly while rinsing the soap away with the hot water. His mother ignored his cries of annoyance and told him to suck it up, that it wasn't that hot. She made sure to move her feet out of the way, though and she never dipped her skin into the water either.

His grandmother did not notice the look of panic on her grandson's face. She finished the rest of the tortillas and put them away in the fridge for an easy grab the next day. While his grandmother was still distracted, the little boy snuck out of the house, ignoring her shouts behind him. He was not going to wait to find out if his grandmother boiled the water too hot as well.

He kept running until he started getting a small pain on the side of his stomach. He stopped on one of the dark corners leading back to his house, but he knew he wouldn't be able to go inside. His mother always locked the door and ignored him when she found him curled up in a little ball outside on the doorsteps. She merely shoved him awake with the tip of her foot and motioned with her head for him to go inside. A small part of him really wished the door would open when he reached it, but it didn't. He sat down on the stairs and looked up into the sky. Despite living in a big city, the stars were shining particularly bright tonight. The little boy could actually see them, and he felt tears start welling in his eyes. He hadn't wanted to leave his grandmother's house. He had wanted to spend more time with her, but he got scared. He didn't want to feel the heat of the water on his skin and he was still hungry. He sniffled and wiped his tears away, but not before they left a trail down his grimy cheeks. He tried to hold back another wave of tears when a lone figure stumbled into his view. He hadn't heard any footsteps earlier and he quickly shrank deeper into the stairs, hoping they could hide him.

"Niño," a deep voice growled. "Is your mom home?"

The little boy stayed silent and hoped his crying hadn't given him away. He tried to make his body as small as possible and wished the shadows would turn him invisible. Even if the man rounded the corner, the little boy felt like he wouldn't be visible.

"I know you're there," the man said, stumbling a few steps closer.

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**TITLE**

Author "Answer me."

The little boy cowered against the stairs and he squeezed his eyes shut.

He just wanted his abuelita.

There was the sound of some more uneasy steps and the little boy felt a strong grip on his forearms. "Why don't you answer me? Don't you know it's rude to disrespect your elders?" the man demanded. His grip tightened as the little boy tried to think of how he could escape.

"We're going to go look for your mommy," the man said, dragging the little boy up. "And once we find her, we're going to ask her for the money she owes me, okay?"

The little boy kept silent, but this angered the man.

"Answer me," he demanded, shaking him violently. "Where's your mother? Where is-" the man's sentence petered off suddenly and he let go of the little boy with a yelp, as if he had gotten burned and his eyes widened in horror.

The little boy landed back on the stairs and started rocking back and forth, hiding his face between his hands. He tried to ignore the man, but he found that he couldn't. The man kept getting louder and louder until a white brightness broke through the darkness and the man's screams. A silent void fell suddenly, and the little boy decided to peek through his quivering fingers. The brightness was blinding with a warm, welcoming aura. The little boy knew he should be scared, but he felt like he was enveloped him with calm. He felt safe and at peace for the first time in a long time.

He reached out tentatively to touch the brightness; he was mesmerized by it. It looked like one of the stars had fallen from the sky and landed right in front of him. As soon as his fingers broke into the halo of light, the brightness disappeared, replaced by millions of little spheres of light. He watched in amazement as the spheres lifted the drunk man and placed him against a nearby tree. The man had passed out. In unison, the spheres started spinning around the little boy, causing him to gasp in shock.

Within seconds, the lights had rearranged themselves into a crea-

ture the little boy had never seen before. He had seen starving dogs on the streets, and he had seen feral cats that hissed at him as he walked by, but he had never seen this tall creature. It seemed to have the body of a large jungle cat with its face shaped like butterfly wings and its fur was the colors of a glorious sunset mixed into one. Its eyes were round and dark with an eternal depth that was home to thousands of universes and its mouth seemed to be keeping all the secrets in the world. The creature nudged at the little boy with the side of its head and flicked its tail at him.

Without thinking, the little boy clambered onto the creature's back and held on tightly. A pair of wings unfurled from either side of the creature and carried him high into the sky. The neighborhood that seemed so big to the little boy shrank into tiny square pinpricks of light. He could hold the barrio in the palm of his hand from this height. While gliding, the clean air made the little boy laugh. He had never felt this kind of rush before. He felt free and like nothing could hurt him up here.

A small roar built in the creature's chest as it started to fly back down in lazy circles. It landed softly in front of the little boy's house which was now devoid of the drunk man's presence. The creature regarded the little boy. Its eyes were unreadable, but its tail kept flicking from side to side. The little boy's eyes traced the tail's path, hypnotized. The creature let out a gentle mewl, snapping the boy out of his reverie and he nodded, as if he understood completely. In complete silence, a mutual contract was made between them both. A thin, single gold thread stretched from the creature's neck and into the little boy's hands. He held the thread tightly, as if they were reigns and he smiled happily at the creature. The creature gave a bigger roar this time, causing the little boy to jump and he let go of the thread, completely startled. The creature disappeared as suddenly as it appeared, leaving the little boy in the dark again. He rubbed his eyes rapidly, hoping to see the spheres of light, but they were gone.

"Mijo! Mijo!" Panicked voices rounded the corner and his grandmother and mother fell on their knees in front of him. "Are you okay? Did anything happen to you?" his grandmother asked, her wrinkles cut even

deeper with worry. She held him close to her and he could feel her chest rising and falling unevenly with shallow breaths.

The little boy nodded slowly. Was he okay? He felt tears coursing down his cheeks that he had not noticed before and he wiped them away, surprised. Nothing bad happened to him. The drunk man was gone because the strange creature scared him away.

“I’m sorry, mijo.”

His mother’s voice broke him away from his thoughts. His mother had uttered that phrase for so long, but it was never true. Countless times, she had uttered those words without any meaning behind them. They were just a phrase that she knew would hold him over until she found a different way to let him down. There were so many times when he would fall asleep outside the house with dogs barking constantly while the bright lights of cars passing disturbed his restless sleep.

She knew that she hadn’t been the best mother and still wasn’t. Even as she held out her arms, she was hesitant. Deep down she knew she was going to let her son down again but, she wanted to be there for him. She wanted to move past her pain and help her little boy, but she didn’t know how. She knew she couldn’t be his rock if she couldn’t even sort herself out. She had seen the many times he’d fallen asleep on their doorstep and she’d just force him awake to go inside while she was in a stupor. At least she had the sense to get him inside even if it was at a late hour.

She felt a shame her little boy could never know about. Her suegra knew, though. She knew everything. When her husband passed away, she had tried to use up all the money he had left for her and their son. She wanted to go somewhere far, she wanted to escape the pain that was tearing her apart piece by piece. Her husband had always been her anchor and grounded her, but as soon as he was gone, she spiraled. Her son became an afterthought that would knock timidly on her door and run away when she threw her belongings at the door to scare him away. This is when she started to ignore the tears and the audible stomach rumblings he would emit and try to keep silent.

She never realized that he was hurting, too. He lost his apa.

Instead, she turned to alcohol. When her suegra found out she was trying to get her hands on the money, she moved it to a secure account. It wasn't a lot, but it would help her nieto when he really needed it. In the barrio, the mother began to ask men for money. She wanted the money to drink her life away and many felt sorry for her, so they just let her borrow the money, but it ended up turning into something more physical. That's when the finger-pointing and head shaking started, but nobody wanted to interfere with a woman who was in grief. Everybody coped in different ways and her way was drowning in alcohol.

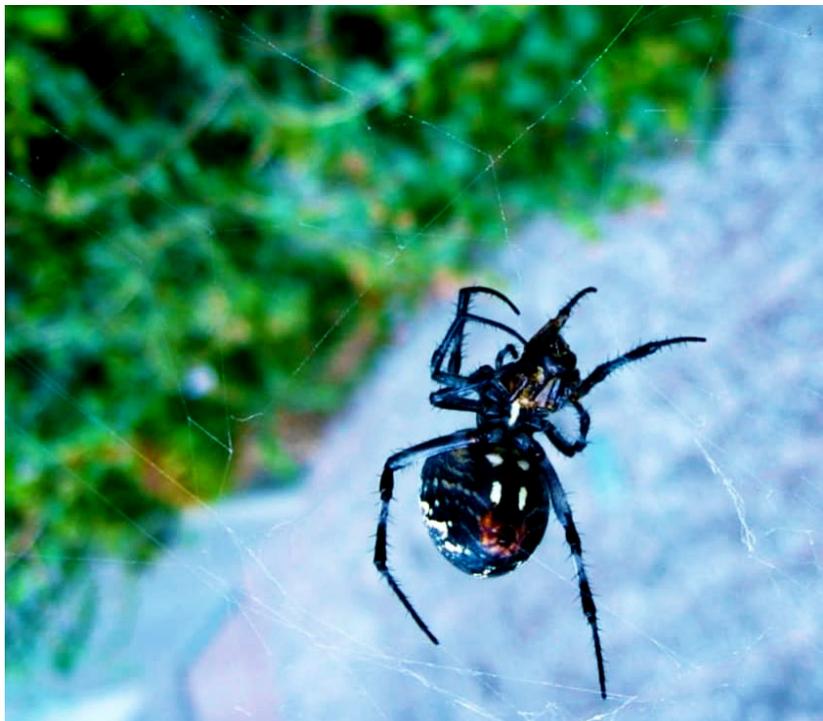
Tonight it felt different to the little boy, though. It felt like she meant it and he wanted to trust her. She held out her arms for him, but he wasn't sure. How many times had he walked into those arms before, praying for them to comfort him? He was only met with her cold lies and her arms never felt like the warm embrace he envisioned in his mind. His mother burst into tears when she saw his uneasiness and her arms started to tremble.

"I thought I was going to lose you tonight," she sobbed. "That man was after me. He should have never found you. It should have been me!" She sat on the edge of the stairs and wailed. All the pain she had been hiding from losing her husband poured out through her eyes. She knew that she should have never treated her only son like this, but she was repressing her true feelings and taking them out on him. It wasn't until she was faced with the harsh reality that she might lose him that something in her finally snapped. She didn't want to lose her son, but she didn't know what to do.

"I'm sorry," she repeated in a quivering whisper. "I'm sorry for everything." Her eyes were swimming in tears and dark with regret. Seeing his mother's pain out in the open allowed the little boy to finally walk into the warm embrace he had always envisioned, and he tenderly laid his head on her shoulder. "I promise to try to be a better mother for you," she said with a hidden doubt in her voice. At least she was there for him tonight. It was a step in the right direction.

Tears started flowing down the little boy's face again. "It's okay," he told her. His little hand patted her back and for the first time he felt like things were really going to be okay.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw little spheres of light twinkling like fireflies. A soccer ball materialized as the lights spun rapidly in a circle. Neither his grandmother nor mother noticed, but he saw the ball roll a few times until it stopped right by his feet. He smiled through his tears at the lights that ascended into the sky slowly, waving at him in a continuous spiral until they merged with the rest of the stars.



**TRAPPED**

Ann Privateer

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## VIOLENT MOUNTAINS

Christopher X. Ryan

The boy was tall for his age and other children avoided him; he was soft-spoken yet overly inquisitive; he was supremely uncomfortable with the word “no” even in his own mouth. His obsession with blades ate at him like a malady.

It had begun a year earlier when he met his uncle for the first time. Sitting cross-legged on the hallway floor the boy noticed that among the items protruding from the man’s battered brown carry-all was an unusual oversized knife bearing a deeply oleaginous sheen.

Show me this, he had said.

It was a gift from the boy’s grandfather, the uncle told the boy, when he himself had turned sixteen. In the shed outside he demonstrated to the boy how the knife could whittle the densest wood and etch the finest letters into steel. But the boy was under no circumstances to touch the knife.

When the boy asked why not the uncle said that there were laws about this sort of thing. Laws of nature, he corrected himself. Not police laws. But those too in truth.

“What if I don’t want to observe those laws?” the boy asked. Then you will struggle, my friend.

The uncle had for many years traveled widely and thus had accumulated a quiver of stories. At dinner he told the boy and his parents a story of a recent hike up a fourteen-thousand-foot mountain with what he called a knife’s-edge traverse separating the false summit from the true peak. Just days before the uncle had crossed it another hiker had been swept off by strong wind; the body was never found.

The boy sat listening while pressing his butter knife into his palm. A knife that could not cut seemed a waste of metal to him. A knife was destined for greater things, for testing principles. Such as the one his uncle traveled with.

After dinner, while building a complex puzzle depicting a church

spire, the boy told the uncle how he frequently encountered a wretched old man escorting his equally elderly dog along the river banks so that the canine could sniff the rocks and lap from the eddies. Should the boy have a knife like his uncle's he could slash at the man from behind, the boy said. The dog's leash would likely slip from his grasp and the man would be swept downstream. Perhaps, the boy continued as he examined closely the contours of a puzzle piece, he himself could take the dog home and be heroic in a minor way.

When the uncle asked why he would want to do such a thing the boy blushed and said, It is probably a bad idea; he was small and the old man would merely tumble forward and scratch his palms and curse out the child as he so often did the others who dared cross his concrete veranda. The boy promised to abandon his plans and instead spend his time on the dirt mounds a half-mile downstream.

The uncle was relieved but it did not end there. In the days thereafter the boy begged the uncle to buy him a knife like his own. The uncle deferred to the boy's parents who stood in the middle of the living room staring down at their boy, already troubled by his somber countenance and predilection for marring the garage walls with sharpened sticks. The boy sat in his father's armchair staring back at them while pressing up and down on the chair's cushion, the springs having been compressed and kinked through a decade of his father's rising and falling. The seat did not have to be so uncomfortable if only his father had taken the time to understand the nature of metals.

We'll go on Saturday to purchase you a Swiss army knife, the uncle said as he feigned a bareknuckle blow to the boy's chin. That night the uncle spoke to the boy's parents in hushed tones at the kitchen table, the points of their elbows and clasped hands forming three triangles on its surface. A boy like that, he was saying, but the rest of the dialogue was lost to the screaming of the insects in the fields. The next day the uncle continued on his travels, leaving on the boy's night table the Swiss Army knife. It was a great disappointment to the boy. The blade did

not lock and the tiny tools were facsimiles of proper ones, good only for play or a minor exigency such as removing a splinter. With time the Swiss Army's knife's tools were damaged or lost and then the knife itself was lost and the boy did not bother to search for it.

In his youth the boy became restless; he hummed with a steadfast low-wattage enmity. His obsession was tempered but always present. His parents dictated his trajectory toward higher learning but after a semester of college the boy found academia not to his liking nor the other students relatable. He sold some savings bonds to purchase a used station wagon and prepared his exit.

He'd made only one friend, a boy on the lower floor of the dormitory. This boy spent his off-seasons hunting in the forests to the north of the university and had in his possession a knife that he claimed was taken off a German soldier in the First World War. The student said there weren't but a handful of these knives left for discovering, most having been lost or destroyed in battle or tossed into the ocean on the voyage home. Fantastically heavy, single-honed, cold-forged, and bearing a drop-tip, two forefinger holes, a deep runnel, and fine ancipital serration along the blade's top, it resembled something crafted from a demonic spine and entombed in brass, a crude and storied tool of death whose design ensured that when one retracted the blade it left a wound so unholy it had virtually no chance of healing. A trench knife, the student said quietly to the boy as if to not awaken the implement.

Once the boy had conveyed his last answer onto his exams he sold back his unread books at a fraction of the price. From his dormitory he took bedding and pillows and half of his belongings. After breaking into his friend's dorm room and absconding with the trench knife, he fled. He said goodbye to no one; he did not disenroll.

The car ran well and had a spare tire but the boy purchased a second, some basic tools, a first aid kit, a small fire extinguisher, and a camping stove. That first day he drove through the night to Maine. He'd been there once and wanted to know if he was remembering it correctly;

he was. He continued on to New Hampshire and then Vermont. He circled the lake to New York. He traced the rim of the country. He passed Menonites working their fields and herds. While sitting on the hood of his car eating a wilting sandwich he conversed with one of them who was standing in a muddy pasture mending a fence. The man had forearms like a blacksmith and wore heavy fireman's boots. He warned the boy of a police trap just beyond town.

The boy drove west albeit slowly. Men in orange hunting gear stood at the edge of the road waiting for him to pass. He saw two deer hanging by their necks from a trestle, spinning whenever a crow arrived or departed. He ate at diners where locals conversed with truckers with familial ease on matters both political and agricultural. The boy used no maps and no device to guide his station wagon.

He slept in fields and school parking lots; when the nights grew cool he purchased more bedding from a thrift store. He learned to perform basic engine repairs and change the oil. If a train came into view he would pull over and wave to the conductor.

He kept going. The trees became sparser; sunrises filled his mirrors and sunsets his windshield. The station wagon struggled with the altitude of the Rocky Mountains. The boy shivered in the car at night and drove with the windows low during the day. The mountains grew smaller; the trees grew sparser yet then disappeared entirely. One day he passed only two cars going the opposite direction through a valley of hardened clay. The rear tires wore down to a thin membrane and eventually split one and then the other. He was forced to use the last of his money to hire a tow truck. Now penniless he stopped in the town where his car had been deposited.

He went from business to business in search of work and found a position washing dishes in a piano bar run by a blind man of some renown. The work was easy but the gloves he was required to wear ate away at the skin of his hands. At night he held them up to the air to let them dry while watching the stars score the sky. The talk in the restau-

rant's kitchen revolved around the owner's penchant for groping the women on his staff. It is true that the man was not particularly selective in his tastes although being blind and thus guided by touch he preferred flesh to bone, youth to years. He played the piano from five until eleven each night and his performances always drew a full house. His wife was also blind but their two sons were not; they often wandered through the kitchen in search of something to do or food to abscond with.

When one of the piano player's affairs grew into romance he left his wife. The boy arrived at work to find the restaurant closed. He was still owed a week's pay but did not want to wait so he entered through a cellar window. He knew the safe was hidden behind a false panel in the supply closet. It was loosely affixed to the joists. The boy pried it loose with the trench knife, the work adding more nicks to the storied knife. The safe was small and flimsy and could be carried out of the restaurant beneath his shirt. Along the way he filled three milk crates with food and water and supplies and after restocking his car he used the trench knife to pry open the safe and with the money inside purchased new tires that afternoon and drove on.

He arrived at his uncle's doorstep a young man. The uncle asked many questions. Where he had been. Why he had not contacted his parents. What had happened at school. The boy answered tersely and was indifferent to the uncle's pleas to telephone home. The boy's father was by then a wall-eyed alcoholic forced into retiring from his science teacher position, his mother still a bookkeeper in the town hall. The father and mother circled one another in their home at night and ate cold meats with potato mash made from a prepared mix. The mother had not baked a cake since the boy had turned sixteen. Dead moths accumulated in the flour. The boy did not care if they lived or died and was confident one would die in a car accident.

The uncle allowed the boy to live with him a short while but he had recently taken up with a new girlfriend who seemed to be slowly moving in, arriving with a bagful of belongings every couple of days or so. The

uncle was as unlike from the boy's father as was possible. He now fancied himself a sailor of sorts and kept a boat on a vast lake in the middle of the arid Utah plains. The water was placid and the sailing slow but the voyages with the uncle on the boat were pleasant and quickly concretized into memories the boy would hold onto until the end. The girlfriend sat reading with her bare feet on the bench as the boat cleaved the water. The boat, yet unnamed, left almost no wake. The girlfriend wore sunglasses and said little to the boy and was strikingly beautiful. Rising one morning before the two of them he passed their bedroom, its door open, and saw two forms writhing about beneath the covers. That afternoon he packed his car, taking with him the money in his uncle's wallet and boxes of goods from the refrigerator and pantry. He bid no one goodbye.

In the desert he met a community of New Englanders who'd fled the winters. They lived in the shadow of the Arizona hills and from the fields had diverted a creek that farmers had themselves a century prior diverted from the river two miles distant. They welcomed the boy if he was willing to work; he was willing to work as long as it did not tire him out. When they asked what he was saving his strength for his reply was oblique. He was not an artist or writer like many of them. He was not a craftsman or wilderness guide. He had the knife but no real respect for it, though it was passed around and awed and reviled in equal measure.

One man, honing the knife for the boy as barter for an oat bar, said, The knife only disappears with sharpening. This struck the boy as profoundly terrifying and worthy of long bouts of contemplation. It seemed to him a waste to cut things with a knife that would only vanish with use but such was its purpose—its dharma, some of his new fellows might say. He committed himself to learning the craft of honing and returned to the man with pleas to instruct him, offering as trade a sweatshirt from his university. Although the boy's skills improved with time the man grew frustrated at the boy's concomitant hurried approach and listless demeanor. The last time the man spoke to him he said that the boy was of no tribe and though that would normally be of no matter here, it was. The boy



## **CAROTID ANEURYSM**

Jonathan Hinojosa

frightened him.

By now the boy's youthful fat had fallen away and he came to resemble his father. He tried to grow a beard to mask his fair if not effeminate complexion but the hair sprouted in patches. Because of his height he slouched to meet others in the rare event of a conversation. His clothes decayed in the desert air and he traded goods for a pair of overalls, which he detested, but he was by now a beggar and had little choice unless he wanted to venture into the city to thieve from department stores.

Another community sat farther up-creek and with them the boy sought sanctuary. To prove the knife sharpener wrong in some manner the boy took up with a teenage girl who enjoyed her own filth. Despite the grime she was possessed of a remarkable prettiness and her body lithe. As he wooed the girl the others spoke disparagingly of him and cautioned the girl and then implored her and after a couple weeks she too became repulsed by the boy's inertia. Indeed when the group went foraging in the forest or hiked upstream to search for fish he remained behind only to later take advantage of their quarry.

He ate one last meal with them but the fish was undercooked and he grew sick but not so sick that he couldn't lie near the central fire and work every last defect from the trench knife's blade. No one knew his name; at times he himself had forgotten it. By the time the girl's body was located he was in New Mexico.

He called his uncle but when his new aunt answered he hung up. What he didn't know was that she had news of his parents who had by then taken to spending their lives in separate parts of the house. They were unwell; the boy was needed.

The boy spent a week in a small town from which Mexico sat in plain view and did his best to befriend local youths. They did not believe his young age but he proved it by showing them his driver's license. His intention was to cross the border but the area was thick with militias and federal agents and his distaste for all but the blandest cuisine made the decision to remain stateside easy. He traded items he'd stolen from the

communes for more suitable clothes. A girl cut his hair with his own unwieldy knife. His scalp bled but with the butchered coif and new attire he quickly adopted the guise of the counterculture. The others convinced him to destroy his car and identification so under a frigid night brilliant with stars they drove it into a gulley and set it and his license on fire, then hiked back at a steady pace while chatting glibly of their travels.

The youths quickly schooled the boy in sourcing food from waste bins behind stores and restaurants and after filling their rucksacks they made their way toward the freight yard. Soon the boy felt fully attached to these youths, referring to them in his mind as a coalition. He was impressed by their grasp of the rail system and hobo culture. They themselves were not hobos and took great pains to avoid these men who traveled in small packs in search of small jobs, liquor caches, and camps to raid in the night. The boy tried to follow the youths' discussions of politics and culture but was intimidated and embarrassed and kept his opinions to himself although chided for remaining neutral. They told him what to believe, whom to ally with, and who the enemy was. The boy memorized this information. The youths prided themselves in their colorful hair and tattered clothing which over the next days the boy came to realize were carefully orchestrated ensembles. Even their destitution seemed a construct. At one point the boy emerged from a service station bathroom to find one of the youths extracting cash from a machine with a card given to him by his parents in case of emergency.

The trench knife was always on him. It slapped against his knee almost musically, residing in a sheath made from an old suitcase and a rivet kit stolen from a hardware store. He'd hammered the rivets home with an iron tie kicked up from the railway bed.

They traveled by train for weeks from Marfa to Las Cruces to Tombstone then north to the brink of Nevada. At first the trains frightened the boy and he asked if there weren't other means by which to travel but soon he found it exhilarating. He enjoyed watching the sunrise while dangling his feet over one side and then watching it set from the other.

They leapt off in small cities and hid from the yard bulls then sprinted into town. One youth was caught, beaten, left for dead. A quiet settled over the group.

As they gathered for soup heated on a gas stove the boy came to think of the girl he'd cut open in an arroyo, particularly the angle of her limbs on the hardpacked sand. It was not an attitude that could be created consciously by the body. He was angered by her death: she hadn't even fought. He wondered now whether that had been the knife's virgin killing.

By now his mother was in the hospital, having taken an excess of sleeping pills with wine, one pill after the other in a cascade of nebulous repetition. The boy's father heard her body hit the floor in the night but was not able to drive in the dark and equivocated until early morning. The uncle flew out to attend to them. He had heard nothing of the boy, had nothing to relay, nor did they ask. The boy was at that moment thousands of miles away, sitting at the edge of a freight car as the train trundled through endless fields, the grasses so tall they occasionally touched his outstretched feet. He held the trench knife parallel to the horizon and tried to match its serrated top with the jagged silhouette of the distant mountains. He thought there was a violence to everything, even those unyielding rocky spires. A euphoria of sorts came over him, despite the rashes and filth and hunger and a rotten tooth that throbbed relentlessly.

When they arrived in Santa Fe the boy was indistinguishable from his companions. In truth with his height he lorded over them almost shepherd-like as the cadre entered town with the collective mien of a band of marauders. Crowds hushed as they swept through neighborhoods, unfamiliar with this brand of insouciance and dispassion. Only children dared taunt or question them. On the outskirts of the city a meeting of the various antiauthoritarian factions from all North America was to take place. Their movement was taking form: principles were to be established, a manifesto drawn up, a secretary appointed to document events for posterity. The boy listened intently, absorbing key phrases and terms and the names of their targets. He understood little but felt destined to serve their

cause.

After five days the city seethed with the various bands. The police were ordered to empty the camps in the woods. A small riot broke out. A pistol was produced and street lights were shot out to create an advantage. Police cruiser tires were slashed one after the other. Stores were looted for televisions only to be thrown through windshields. A filthy girl not unlike the boy's victim ran topless and crying through the streets with no one in pursuit. Local residents arrived with their hunting rifles and orange vests but were told to go home. Inspired by the melee the boy ran frenzied from one skirmish to the other with the trench knife in hand, slashing blindly. Twice he cut a fellow traveler. Thrice he stabbed un-armed policemen in their hamstrings as some sort of signature attack. He screamed and spat. He tasted the blood of others in the air.

When firemen arrived with hoses to drive back the horde the travelers dispersed. The boy crept through the now-destroyed camp where he stumbled into cacti and leaped over enraged scorpions before cutting his leg on the jagged frame of a car door that'd been repurposed as a hovel wall. He could not walk. He dragged himself through a midden where dead animals and garbage festered. He bled profusely while staring up at a pale night sky.

Lying there he found himself talking to a nonexistent friend.

Did I do a good job in life? the boy asked.

Not exactly.

What's on the other side?

The same thing again and again.

Will I be remembered?

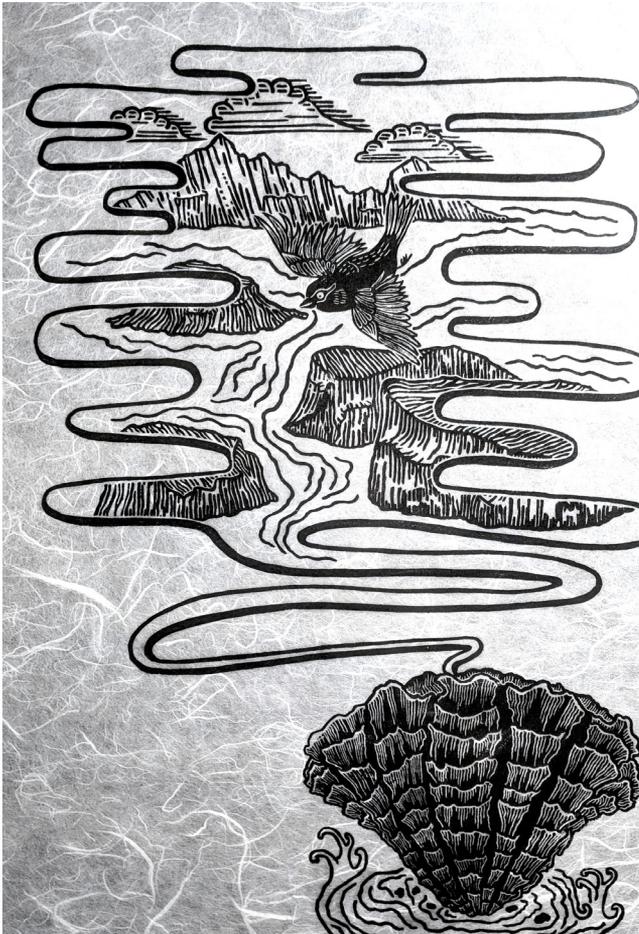
Your story is the knife's story.

His body was discovered two days later, seated upright in the driver's seat of a minivan. Still no one knew his name.

Many months would pass before the uncle received notice of the boy's death. He took it upon himself to retrieve his nephew's remains, confirming the boy's identity by a photograph found on his person. It

depicted the boy and the blind pianist. The boy's only other known possession was his knife. The uncle took in its scent of iron, either from the metal or the blood of others or both, if they could be considered separate now. He placed his fingers in the forefinger holes and felt the blade lunging earthward under its own gravity.

Though he was near to sixty years old the uncle continued to ascend mountains for pleasure albeit at a much reduced pace. He carried the knife to the top of a remote peak where he planned to bury it in a cairn of jagged rocks but as soon as the rocks were arranged he changed his mind. He carried the knife farther up the trail and standing on a ledge hurled it into the abyss. He stood waiting and listening for the sound of the blade breaking apart on the scree below but no such sound ever came.



**SHÉN**

Jonathon Hinojosa

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## A BONSAI IS NOT A GARDEN

Ana Emilia Felker

*There's a tiger in the house  
that rips the insides of whoever looks at him to shreds.  
E.L.*

They look like small cockroaches. Your first impulse is to drown them. As soon as the jet of water falls on the earth, they leave in an exodus in all directions; most, by the wall towards the kitchen window. They could go into the house, the exiled, better to change their strategy and let them live out here.

It's eight o'clock and although the sun is already stored among the trees, the air boils with animals so horrendous that they prefer not to be seen, they only sound, like the cicadas. Watering the garden takes much longer and is less relaxing than you thought: the sprinkler does not cover the entire surface, you have to move it and move it every few minutes. The basil agonizes but still gives off a dry smell. You must avoid destroying this garden, you need the money.

It does You do not look it now, but the place where you grew up was more garden than home. Then the green surrounded us: in front there was a broad and leafy pine tree that had grown a second trunk. A Siamese pine. Behind it was a lemon tree, a good night, and behind all of that, a little cellar. When you came back from school, you threw yourself into the grass and sucked the lemons.

Our favorite clouds shift, the red ones, those that look like dragons in flight. The sound of the sprinkler is detonating, provokes a kind of hypnosis that in each click brings images of the past.

A cascade of dry shit ran down the wall from the nest to the ground. We had Swallows and when one of them went into the house, you all chased her from one place to another wanting to avoid crashing into

the window of the room. After a while, although badly hurt, your mother managed to free her with a broom.

It's been years since you were in a garden, the same ones you've spent in tiny apartments killing cockroaches, since you were in a garden. It gives you the impression that a foreign garden is always familiar because both hide their claws. Your bonsai are not gardens, they are domestic landscapes. The difference is the thickness, the possibility of hiding or concealing/ment; what the leaves and the earth offer; the invisible life that leaves acrid traces in the ears, nose and skin. Not only what is there but what can arrive. The garden is open to predators.

It took you days to start watering. Convinced that the wind sounded like rain, you postponed your task. Tomorrow. Tomorrow. But the leaves began to turn yellow and before the imminence of a call - how is everything in the house? - You are afraid to lose this too. It's almost eight o'clock and finally you go out, your icy house skin touches the hot air of the garden. In the garden, the tomatoes have holes, you do not know if was from the pecking of the birds or the digging of the worms. Maybe at this point it's better to leave them there.

The birds communicate, the trilling saturates the space at a distance and so close that they seem to scream in your ear. It's half past eight, you scratch your whole body, a trace of tiny mosquitoes. You think it was a mistake to accept this work, and yet there is something about the sprinkler stutter that transports you.

Before, regardless of whether it was day or night, you used to lie face down, hugging the whole earth with arms and legs. At this age it is impossible for you, it even costs you to be barefoot in the grass. Look at these ridiculous boots with so much heat! Now for you the earth only presents dangers, and the night is a curfew.

As you watch the sky fill with dragonflies, you think you can locate the moment when the need to protect yourself from something or someone began.

It started when you saw me.

An unexpected sound makes you jump. Calm down, it's just the cat. She

threw something that was on the table. You go in and check the rooms, closets, behind the bathroom curtain. The drawers of the kitchen are open: the cat likes to sniff, that's how you were as a child. You leave the door open for a second and you can see the her tabby slip out. It seems her bright eyes will add to the depth of the garden. You must find the cat, you need the money. But now you have a hole in your stomach. While the sprinkler does its job, you wash dishes with your eyes fixed on the window, pending the evening.

You return to the garden with constant frights and swipes that try to scare away insects. You are no longer sure if the tiny paws that you feel walking through are a product of your fear. It almost darkens and you still need to water the deepest point that the focus does not reach: the rose-bush and behind it.

The word dragonfly has always caught your attention, you would prefer to pronounce it rather than see them. Dragonfly: summer insects, wetland insects, mosquito, blood eater, bird's food, devil's horse, an ancient form.

Remember what it was like to have a garden to play with.

It was your birthday, there was a party. Many children and their parents came. Red and hurried, you opened the bathroom door. Inside there were two men with wigs putting balloons in their pants. They turned to see you with gestures hardened by their makeup. You went to tell your father, he was in the cellar looking for a rope to hang the piñata. Apparently he hadn't heard your arrival because he jumped. He kept something behind some woods and pulled you into the garden.

The night of your birthday you could not sleep. You were tired of tossing and turning in bed and guessing every object in the dark room. Your mother had given you a poster of the Ursa Maior, the Bbig Ddipper, which that shone in the dark. Below, on a table, there was a lamp and the polaroid that you had been given at Christmas. You opened the curtains to look for the constellation that bore your name, but it was cloudy. About to go back to bed, you heard a noise outside. It was neither not the crickets nor the nocturnal birds, it sounded different, they moved woods. When

turning on the light of the room, from your window you saw a shadow leaning out of the window of the cave.

There was a little girl standing in front of you on the other side of the garden. It appeared so suddenly that you did not even scream, you could not move. After a while of observing her, you took a step to the right and she did the same in perfect synchrony. You did not know if she played to imitate you, if she anticipated your movements or you hers. You raised your hand to say hello. And I greeted you back.

Then you ran under the blankets: What was she doing in there? In that room there were only tools and forgotten objects. You asked if they had let her out alone and at that time, if she would have someone to take care of her, if she would have eyes, mouth, skin because you could only see my shadow.

A sadistic impulse: see an anthill in formation and drown it. You are watering quadrants: spaces in memory. The cobwebs on the bushes resist the water, form fat drops, magnifying glasses. Everything is wet, almost everything. And the cat... nothing. If you only remembered her name, maybe she would respond to it.

The phone is ringing and you have doubts. If you answer, what will you tell them? That this is not your house. That you only take care of the garden and neglect the cat? And if you do not answer, they will think that the house is uninhabited and that would be a problem. It could also be the owner. Even so, you let it ring, first the ring and then the answering machine. The mechanical voices of strangers echo on the walls.

You go back outside where the water keeps coming out, so much that sometimes it makes puddles that the earth takes to absorb. You would like to soak up as you did as a child.

The sound of the sprinkler, the mosquitos without mercy, the croaking of the crows, again make you think of me. Night after night you greet me from the window. On that particular night, the sky cleared and some stars appeared. Your parents had fallen asleep, it was time to go through the garden, open the door with trembling hands and turn on the

light. Getting there required all the courage you had. You were ready to face me and you were disappointed to discover a room full of triques. Nothing but woods and tools.

The apparent emptiness did not discourage you, you were sure something was happening in that room. You called me without saying my name, telling me it was safe to leave, that you would not hurt me. It was enough to turn the light on and off, move one object and another, so that the portfolio that your father had hidden behind the wood appeared. It was closed with a padlock. An alternative was to use the tools to open it, maybe destroy it with a hammer, but then your father would know you had been there.

Someone was coming. From the window, the lemon tree was surrounded by silence and grass like the fangs of a maw. You looked up and the shadow of the girl, my shadow, was in your room. We had exchanged positions: for a moment you were the girl in the cellar. We repeated the specular routine: you raised your hand and I did too. Then you lost the courage, and you just wanted to go back to your bed. But you were determined to find answers. Now you were a detective with two missions. You sensed that opening the padlock would unveil the initial mystery. During nights, you expected the snore, the deep sleep of your parents to cross the garden and return to the cellar to try different combinations to open the portfolio. Every time you turned on the light, you saw me look at you from your room, we could not occupy the same space at the same time, but we shared the secret of the search.

1990. Your birthday. The date of your birth. It took you several days, but there you were in front of the open portfolio. There you were.

There is hardly a brightness in the sky. Under the bush there is a blue bird. It was the cat, Sshe wanted to play with him and killed him between her fangs. It is too hot and you feel covered with tiny insects that the scratching does not scare away. You stand on the sprinkler to get rid of them.

Where is the cat?

You need to water the corner or you're going to die all in a chain reaction. From the dryer to the orchard, this old garden is going to go to hell. It's 9:30, the clouds move fast, the oaks are a black spot, the dragonflies come down to the ground, you're worried about stepping on them.

In a blink it has completely darkened, and you still need to water the corner of the rosebush, the space that most needed water. You watch carefully the line where the terrace light ends and the black begins. It's silly, it would take you a few seconds to pull the sprinkler there, run to the house and then come back out just to close the key that is near the spotlight. But the darkness paralyzes you. You know it's better to water at night because the water evaporates less, but you would not mind wasting all the water in the world as long as you did not go to the corner at night.

You observe from the illuminated space to give you courage. You feel trapped, you cannot go back to the house or stay here. You cannot remember, nor completely forget. Your legs tremble, you touch the warm and sharp grass. You take a step forward with wide eyes wanting to light. You had not thought that the eyes have gotten used to the darkness. A foreign force pushes you towards the abyss of the grass. You stay face down with that terror that you have kept inside as a garden without light.

Needless to say, you know what was in the portfolio. Who are you lying to? You know it. Let the memory reveal itself by shaking the polaroid. A lamp that turns on and wakes you up, a poster that goes off, a voice that calls you by your name. A flash that captures you with nothing but your tremor, under that constellation, next to that lamp; with nothing but your fear under dad's permanent gaze. You were the skin of those snapshots that you should not see, that you should have forgotten, that you thought were a bad dream. But they were stored in the dark field that I inhabit as the only duplicate.

You do not feel it coming, when the cat is already on your back, fitting her

sharp nails. Gea, her name is Gea, remember, you take her off and stand up. It's 10:00 and you only distinguish the dark silhouettes of the plants, you advance imagining snakes on the ground, you advance towards the corner without remembering that the light is behind you, the focus reaches to illuminate the wooden fence where your projected shadow appears. You raise your hand, and I raise mine too.

coming to an end and re-forming,



## RE-FORMING

Carolyn Adams

## A TRIP TO THE MIDDLE EAST

Catherine Vance

I cared about him like he was water. Didn't know what could be essential until I knew the wonder of quenching. He shaved his beard, but in that Middle Eastern way it made a distinct boundary on his face like the meeting of continent and ocean on a map. I traced it with my finger. I put my mouth against it and felt the sandpaper of it and the smooth of his skin at the same time. He had a dimple in his chin that was so deep the razor wouldn't go there, and liquid brown eyes.

All the men I have dated since my divorce were younger than me, but Saheen was the youngest, it was nearly a scandal how much younger. I told only a couple of people the truth. Even now it is hard to say his age, but between us it was transparent. People might think boy toy. For him, they might say cougar hunter. It was none of that, not at all. He looked 42, and I looked 52, so he would always say there was only ten years between us. We never attracted looks in public, even if we were glued side to side or holding hands.

We both had had trauma. I was solving his for him, and he was solving mine. That's what it was, then it became a work in progress like a normal developing relationship. And then one day, it turned on a dime. I questioned something he did. Why did you get me these? Did you read what was written on the card? Those are friendship bracelets, little girls wear them. This is not what we are. I'm giving them back to you. Pay attention, it's important to me.

I overreacted, it was a sweet impulse he'd had. But I wanted to speak freely, not stuff back responses the way I had in my marriage. I don't want to hurt you, he replied, and since our relationship has not progressed to a deeper level, maybe we should just be friends. I will wind up hurting you, and I love you too much to do that. Who says they love someone but doesn't want to trouble themselves to work on it. Maybe someone still so young, and I was medicine for past pain. To actually ne-

gotiate a disagreement took it out of the fantasy, it was not something he bargained for. And so he dropped me off a cliff.

It surprised me, how devastated I was. I had been acting like it was something real. We will go at your pace, it doesn't matter. This is yours, he'd said, and brought my hand down.

You have to know, the husband I'd just divorced was my first and only love. I had no experience, old as I was. It thrilled me to hear Saheen tell our future, like it was a certainty... We told each other stories: a Moroccan kiss, yes I know, not by that name. Well, this is what I'm going to do to you, I whispered in his ear. I had never been so explicit, so brazen, in my marriage. But I was nearly ready to travel in my new world. I would go to the Mideast, and soon. I was just afraid of meaninglessness. My ex-husband's secret life was full of that, so I was stalling. I needed the emotional piece to be layered in, whoever I was going to be with now.

Sometimes I wish I had found out  
What I found out back when I was  
In my thirties. I could have divorced  
My husband then, at approximately  
Your same age, and with my skin  
Plump and moist, my bones limber,  
Everything eager as you, sweet friend.

That's not what happened.

Saheen had found me online, was the first to reach out. I think maybe the way he worked it was to "like" eight or ten women, all older, and maybe someone would reply.

I was one. He was handsome—dark curly hair, that small quiet smile. He spoke Arabic and Turkish and English fluently. And an orthopedic surgeon at a major hospital. Surely that career, that education and skill, spoke to maturity.

No harm in a thank you, so I answered back. "Sorry, you're sweet, but too young." But the ice was broken, and we bantered. He encouraged me. "I like older women," he said. "My last relationship was with a 58-year old. It lasted three and a half years." If true, and I believed

it was, it gave him credibility.

My daughters were older than he was. But I was attracted to him as a man and liked him as a person. The first time I met him, at an expensive steakhouse, I brought a list of pros and cons for discussion. This was crazy, wasn't it, though we'd heard of it happening. This age difference, a few celebrities we knew about.

For example, there was Emmanuel Macron. Yes, the President of France married his teacher. LOL. We texted this exchange. Will you be my teacher? LOL. I think likely you will be MY teacher, I said. The course is Playing With Fire 101. LOL.

You are so adorable and funny. Why are you not with someone? At the restaurant he was nervous, but smiled and asked to take a picture of my list. The main "pro" was joy and connection. The main "con" was that it would be a disservice to our future selves, so untenable the age difference would be over time. We decided to go with joy.

Oh my god, he was incredibly sexy. I felt incredibly sexy with him, high and happy, like he was a drug. Just wanted to kiss him, touch him, all the time, like I was twenty. Every time we saw each other we could hardly wait to get out of wherever we were and find a dark place to park the car. I climbed on his lap and he pulled me closer, laughing. How could it be that I have this much desire at my age, I wondered. So deeply physical. I wanted to take a bite out of it, scoop the want from my belly with the palms of my hands, like it was something I could gather. But it was not just lust. I craved to be close to someone, to be valuable to them, desired in tangible ways.

I have been invisible to you. Taken for granted. I sobbed to my husband.

Something has been wrong with me, I was invisible to myself. It was like a separate world, this man said.

I thought just about Saheen, him. Not his ethnicity, not where he was from. But when things fell apart, it became a question again. He was a Middle Eastern man. Did he think differently than "American" men?

Had I been objectified? Had I again not mattered in and of myself? Was I just a “type” that Middle Eastern men go for? Blonde, blue-eyed, fairly slim? For some, the traditional thought of a Middle Eastern woman puts her in long sleeves and a hijab, maybe even a veil. A man might want her sexually, cover up please?... He was not Muslim, but still. Don't you want to get married? I asked him. Have children? Do you like Middle Eastern women?

The very idea of the Middle East signifies things we are conflicted about. Westerners go there in awe, or fear, needlessly sometimes. The region draws us, sometimes repels us. We are not neutral about it. It is sensual, or it is severe. Perfume and poetry. Rumi and fire. The desert, the oasis. Souqs and mosques and natural caverns to rival rock features anywhere in the world. There is a saying in Arabic, he told me. That all you need in life is water, and the color green, and a beautiful face...

But also, there are bombings and violations. Human rights restrictions, fundamentalist thinking, kingships and dictatorships. Terrorism. And it's not only what they do. It's the double standard we have. More than half of all Americans are in favor of a Palestinian state. Our own existence built on breaking free from oppression, yet at times we look away from Israel's cruelty to their neighbors. There's history, some old bond we are honoring. There are things we choose not to see. Saheen would bite his lip, then put one hand around my throat and kiss me. He could have choked me, but I was never afraid.

The end of my marriage was full of broken china and shattered glass. I took my fingernails and dug them into Will's arms. I want to damage you. This feeling is not my fault. The things you have done deserve punishment. My body so full of anger and something violent that was also strangely sexual. I screamed and attacked him. Yes, I took my fingernails and dug them in his arms, raised little divots of dark red blood. Satisfying. I admit it.

There were times though, that love and sorrow made us sink down on the floor where we stood. Nothing was hidden any more. We reached for each other and cried. The way he tasted so familiar it was

like part of myself. I tried looking for redemption, but I could not get deep enough to reach a place where I knew him again and was calm.

Things we want and might not be able to get. I live in Houston. People here think of money when they think of the Middle East. The promise of oil and oil riches. Oh, the compromises we make, the overlooking we do, in order to have it. You'd think America had enough, we wouldn't need to cultivate cultures we don't agree with. Our relationship to UAE, to Saudi Arabia or Qatar, based on desire. This delicate dance can be dangerous...What do we really want? Do we really need what we think we do?

Sexual angst, I called it. Knew it was a thing that I was desperate to ease. I thought I was over the pain of Will's betrayal, but my therapist said not. You are still grieving, let me make that clear. She said what I was doing was part of working it through.

I'm trying not to be stupid. I don't want to make a terrible mistake. I do hope to have a new long-term relationship with someone. Not just a fling.

Yes, the therapist said. But the wanting, the pull, it's a trauma response. Your body and brain are trying to time travel to the place where something was wrong and figure out what. Want me, want me. Have sex with me.

Saheen would say the most outrageous things. Habibti, gorgeous! I miss you. Your eyes, those eyes! I want you. Oh my god. I was watching you walk away and your ass is amazing. I called it cheesy bullshit. I loved the cheesy bullshit. I would put my hands over my head and twinkle my fingers. Bring it. Sprinkle it down on me. Good morning beautiful woman he said every day, texting from the hospital.

You can't erase what happened in a marriage. You want to move forward but you can't keep your subconscious off the pain, tongue on a broken tooth. I wasn't closed up in the marriage box anymore where all was quiet, where I did not acknowledge things were not as they should be. Whatever life a person has it usually seems normal. Wearing a hijab

and not driving is normal, for some. I got used to deprivation. It has to be pretty horrible to make you leave.

I thought it was Saheen himself I was after, but he was just a sign I had come unstuck. Let's revisit chemistry, deflate anxiety, try and fix the unfixable. All I know is that his desire matched mine. Give me, oh give me. Come here to me.

I keep thinking of the Book of Job. The man, blameless and upright called. Why God did you set me as a target so that I am a burden to myself? Seemingly a pawn in the battle between the Almighty and Satan. Absolutely everything lost—wealth, health, family. Cast into such despair as to feel nonexistent. I am nearly dead, what would it matter if I actually died?

And so it was in a sense for me. On my knees in tears thinking of what Will had done. How could my husband forget me like that, and why. Why, the love he claimed to have for me, was it not enough to save him from such actions?

I took a paring knife and pushed the point of it into the web between two of my fingers, made it go all the way through to the table, relishing the trickle of blood, the pain. Stop that, Will said.

OK, then, I said. I was filled with ferocity and loathing. Put your hand down here then, you fucking bastard. I gestured. You be me. He did it, and I stabbed the web between his thumb and forefinger with the knife point.

You told me to do it, I said. I felt nothing but pleasure as he cried out, looking down at his hand pinned to the wood. You didn't think I'd do it, did you? Grab some tits now, I said. Go ahead. Use that hand. Other times I felt the impulse to rend my garments, yes dramatically and in a Biblical way. I was destroyed and needed to look like I was. Naked I came and naked I shall return, blessed be the name of the Lord. Ashes and sackcloth be my J.O.B. Oh Will, how could you have. Never mind, I'll be fine. I still have some looks, some spark, all my wits. Fuck you, you sick S.O.B.

In the end, all was restored to Job, everything cloned back: the daughters, the sons, the flocks. Was it a burning bush type trick, nothing really lost? Did the lights go off in the theatre and then come on again, all the actors back on stage on the stage, back on the testamentary page, or was this a true second coming? Was there mercy? Can you suffer and pass the test, then receive justice in the end?

And so Saheen. I'd felt...maybe this is a restoration. Justice come round. That that kind of passion could be possible again. My younger life blooming forward like a miracle. It's what I deserved. It was what I'd been cheated out of.

Habibti, those kisses! I was in the OR and I was thinking about you! Not good LOL! You're adorable. I feel so at peace with you. I want to take you to New Orleans and we'll have sex in the shower at the hotel. I can't wait to see you. Something gone from my life had come back again. Why do you like older women? I'd typed the message on Match before we met face to face. Was there something that happened to you when you were young? Did you get sexualized in a certain direction?

Yes, and yes, he replied.

Because of Will, what I now knew about his childhood abuse, I just had an instinct. I was cute enough, I suppose, despite being old. Saheen was not the first thirty30 something to be interested. Bae. U sexy. It was ridiculous, and mostly I ignored it. But I was drawn to Saheen, even as I tried not to be...If I was to act on this, it would be out of a sense of vanity and curiosity.

You're so wise, he responded. You're adorable. I like talking to you.

Someone has to be the adult, I said. If you like older women you need someone about 46.... Not me...And so the curtain of silence must descend. Goodbye, I will remember this...

What?! he said.

I heard from him a month later, out of the blue. It made me strangely, crazily happy. Oh my, I was wondering about you. Did you find your perfect 46 -year old yet?

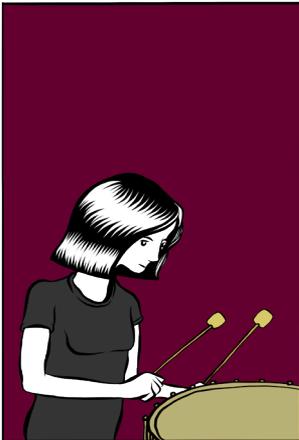
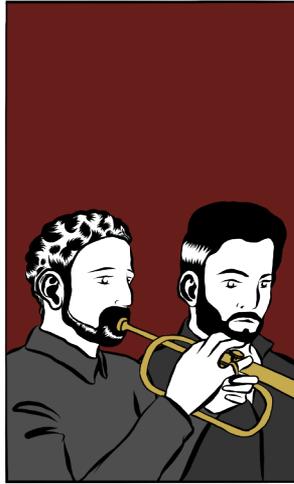
No, not yet. But we can be friends. Why not two interesting

# Boléro



**BOLÈRO**

Ruslan Kalitlin



\*Please view while enjoying "Boléro" by Maurice Ravel

friends having interesting conversation over dinner?

At the end of the evening he walked me to my car and kissed me goodbye. Another kiss. Three soft deep kisses. We could have stayed right there. Immediately, oh immediately, I was gone.

Any two lifetimes intersecting is damn miraculous  
Why should we second-guess the rare feeling of this  
Choose your own adventure playing out in the universe?  
Some serendipitous match that elicits the simplicity  
Of real joy, of mere but not-at-all-to-be-discounted Life?  
My fingers laced with yours, everything a focus on lips.

On the second date he told his story. He was half Turkish/Lebanese. His father followed Greek Orthodox traditions, was a doctor. His mother was the 8th generation descendant of Stephen F. Austin, one of Texas' founders. Daughter of a Methodist minister. When he was seven they returned to Lebanon. Little American boy suddenly submerged into Middle Eastern society. Spoke only English at the time. That was his first trauma. He was there until he was fifteen.

He'd come back to the United States a Middle Eastern man entirely, still had an accent and was marked by harsh events. People walking around with uzis in the marketplace. Once someone invaded his family's home, and Saheen was the one who took the pistol from a drawer and shot the man in the leg. He was twelve. That he had done it: yet another trauma. "I became a doctor not just because of my father," he said. "I want to help people, not hurt them."

But the defining incident of his life came when he was fourteen. We were sitting at a picnic table in Hermann Park near the Museum of Fine Arts. Had just seen the Van Gogh exhibit, which was passing through. The iris and the windmills and the wrenching portraits. Golds and blues, paint thick laid with a palette knife. We ate devilled eggs, which I had brought, and dolmas, rice in grape leaves, which he had contributed. "I was horny, the way fourteen-year old boys are," his story began. "Wondering what it was all about.... My friend had an older brother who was twenty, and he took us to a brothel. We lied about our age. They had a

book with women's photos and you could pick out who you wanted. I went with a Ukrainian woman—white, blonde. So that was my first time. And I was absolutely smitten. Right then I said I was in love with her, fell on my knees, wanted to marry her, all of that.”

We were sitting close, our bodies pressed together. There was a homeless man lying on another table nearby, his backpack under his head. I took Saheen's hand and stroked it as he continued.

“I was a mess. I didn't want to leave her. But. This woman, she went and got water for me and sat beside me on the edge of the bed. She put her arm around my shoulder and explained things to me, so very kindly. Sympathetic. But I had such a hard time getting over it. I kept thinking about her. I went back to find her after two weeks, but they told me she had gone back to Russia. And so that was the start...”

Whore with a heart of gold. Saloon girl with a low-cut bustier. Only this was not some heart-warming period Western movie. It was child abuse, is what it was. If it had happened in this country now, someone could be prosecuted. I don't think it's a trauma, he told me. It was just an experience.

No, I said, it's a trauma. You're still working it through. You would be different if this had not happened. You were cheated out of your adolescence.

I don't mind the way I am he said. Here we are. You're amazing. I've never liked women my own age. They are annoying. He told me he didn't have a girlfriend until he was 22. She was 39.

I see you as a boy, cute kid reading Harry Potter  
And playing soccer. I would have smiled  
To see you. Sensual ideas years in the future.  
To know each other now seems intended we might  
Say in some cheesy way. This relationship frames  
Something about time, the long neglect of eons  
Versus the swift condensation of recent history,  
The absolute wanting of touch on a given day.

On one of our outings we went to lunch near the bay. Rode a ferris wheel

and visited the photo booth, then drove to a local park looking for seclusion. We meandered on a trail until we found a platform deck overlooking a wetland. Benches. A light breeze. Birds wheeling. I want to sit on your lap, I said.

Ooooh, sit on my lap please, he said. I straddled him and we kissed like mad, his hands sweeping under my clothes for skin. There was no one around, but I did not care if there was.

I love you, he said, shocking me so I sat up straight and pulled back. I put my hand over his mouth. Don't say that. You can't possibly. That's what you said to your Ukranian prostitute. You're just proving that it was a trauma. Your brain was not fully developed. You're only now firming up your adult brain.

He breathed. Looked out at the cattails shuddering in the wind. OK, he said. I take it back, just since you want me to.

If I was a stand-in for a Ukranian prostitute, what was he a stand-in for to me? The whole time we were together it seemed incredible, like something I wasn't supposed to have. Where he's from, in Lebanon, one of the main wonders is the Ruins of Baalbek. Old Roman temples originally to Venus and Bacchus. Goddess of love. God of wine and pleasure. Co-opted through the centuries by Islam, Christianity, used by many. Maybe I was just a visitor, borrowing the temple.

Don't be sad about it, I tell myself. This didn't work. But it can, with someone. Don't think you have to be a tourist at the temple. You went back to the ruins, you saw how beautiful it was, should have been. Keep moving, now you know what to look for.

Ask someone who lives in Syria or Iraq where Houston is... Hey, it's in the United States. But is it near Connecticut? How far from Chicago? They likely don't know, any more than we know Mosul or Islamabad or where is a near-mythical place called The Land of Uz.

The Bible says Job is from the land of Uz. Scholars figure it is somewhere in Jordan between the Dead Sea and the Gulf of Aqaba. For Christian Westerners, Jordan means the River Jordan, chilly and wide.

Cross it and you have come to salvation. Westerners don't know geography either. They can't see the map or picture the landscape. Any more than I knew I was living in the moonscape of infidelity. You just draw a blank.

A boy, Saheen was/is still just a boy. A fourteen-year-old orthopedic surgeon sitting right beside me who just got back from the brothel and doesn't know what to do with the intensity of it. And me: I was/am just a young woman, twenty-five maybe, longing for that same intensity. No experience except my husband. If he didn't want me, I breathed myself into the night sky and just went to sleep. I thought it was work, it was fatigue, it was the stress of parenting...

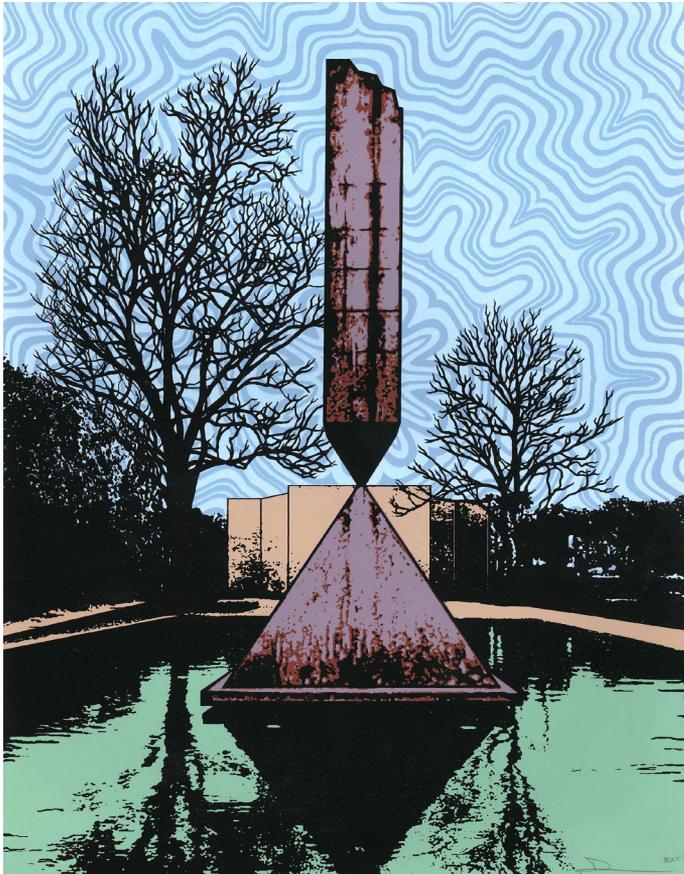
Oh, habibi I miss you. I wish we had carried it through. This is yours, you said. How do I know now who to trust? How do I know what is beautiful and not just insane boyish behavior or trauma reenactment, some urge to understand and master the broken past?

What was Saheen to make of losing his virginity that way? What was I to make of all those years when I thought I had a faithful husband? Cheated out of something. Take us back to the break point, both of us. Take us back. Give me, oh give me. Let it start again and make sense this time.

Tomorrow, death will be in my face. If not missiles from Iran, trained in this direction, maybe just a mirror. I'm hating myself for saying no, bad idea. Chances are I'd elder myself out of your picture and be devastated when turn away you must.

But now, wind back the clock. Encompass this moment. Come here to me my love. I am not old, you are not young. We are just wounded; we are just brave, or stupid.

Oh God, bring your justice. I shred my clothes. Bring justice to me, Please. And peace.



**BROKEN OBELISK**

Birdtrash

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## HOUSE OF GRAINS

Amy Stonestrom

Dad stirs his oatmeal slowly on the stove. I stand by the silver toaster, watching it like a falcon would for a twitch in the grass. The thing is from my parent's wedding day in 1955. More torch than toaster, it tends to set off the fire alarm without warning. I won't eat burnt toast anymore.

What is left of the World Trade Center still smolders in piles thirteen hundred miles away. My husband and I saw the wreckage ourselves from his client's office window, just a week or two before I peed on the little stick. Heard the scraping of the piles and the backup warning beeper of the heavy machinery all night as we tried to sleep. I'm not sure how I feel about growing a baby in my belly while the world catapults into the maze of God's pinball machine. Not sure how I am going to swallow the toast either, sick as I feel.

Dad clears his throat and turns from the stove. Tyker! The toast he says.

Dammit. Dammit again. The last piece took twice as long I say holding up the black bread.

I throw it on the counter and grab another slice out of the plastic bag.

Fer cripes sakes! Eat that Tyker. Don't waste bread like that he says.

I can't swallow burnt toast. Hormone-laced tears spill from my eyelids. I can barely swallow toast at all. Buy a decent goddamn toaster I say and then mumble something about carcinogens.

But I know what Dad sees when he looks at a bag of bread.

As a kid I'd ride through the fields on the bench seat next to Dad from farm to farm collecting dried up holsteins, fat hogs and skittish sheep in his long maroon trailer. That's how it was done on the threshing crew, he'd say when he was finished telling me again. Every August, after each head of wheat turned golden from dancing in the sun, Grandpa Bill would

drive the team of horses with the binding machine, the freshly cut stalks falling into messy rows. Dad, aged nine or ten to start, would come behind on a hay wagon with cousins and neighbors smelling of sweat and earth. They bundled up armfuls of wheat or oats, tied them into shocks with twine and stood them up on end in windrows.

There was an art to stacking the bundles you see. You made a tent kinda-like with three leaning in on each side, that was six, Dad said. Another man would put two on each end and sometimes with wheat they'd put one across the top, to preserve the color. Eight or nine, depending.

He added that this wasn't a task for sandy soil because if you had a dry spell—you wouldn't get squat.

The women, who stood over the wood fire stove in the kitchen, with wet foreheads and tired eyes fed them well and plently.

That was only half of it. The shocks were left to dry in the sun and the wind for weeks until the farmer who owned the threshing machine could get to Grandpa Bill's farm. Weather depending, the crew would go out again on the hay wagon in their overalls and straw hats. They would dismantle their houses of grain and put the shocks back on the wagon. Garter snakes slithered underfoot while mice scampered from the shocks. The big threshing machine waited for them at the edge of the field. Dad and the others would toss the bundles from the wagon and the lead man would feed it into the machine careful to keep his fingers. At the other end you'd have a pile of grain and a pile of straw. Most of the grain fed the cattle during the long, sterile winter, some went to the market to feed the people.

There are too many people to feed now, to do it this way anymore, I said to Dad. I wished hard for the stomping team of horses and eating Grandma's peach pie with the neighbors under the shade tree near the kitchen. That was one way of looking at it to Dad's way of thinking. Or, maybe, there were so many more people because we didn't do it this way anymore, he said. Mmm hmmm, I said and nodded, but I didn't know what he meant.

But now, waiting on my new piece of toast, hand on belly, staring at the plastic bread bag stamped with at least a dozen preservatives, maybe I did.

Hand that to me Dad says, and I give him the cold burnt toast, not taking my eyes off the orange coils of the antique toaster. Butter knife in hand I hear him scrape black flecks into the sink. I glance as he spreads some butter. It does not sink in. He takes a bite. I hear a click and press the black lever. This time, nothing is wasted.



**PLUMERIA LEAF**

Jonathan Hinojosa

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## GRAUSTARK—An Interview with Bryan Washington

Vinh Hoang

It's a Tuesday afternoon in Houston. The clouds painted a lake's reflection, and I sit outside Black Hole Coffee with my questions and a matcha latte. Bryan walks up. He's chill, and the weather agrees—no rain just light breezes in what has been an otherwise scorching summer. We shake hands, sit down, and begin after he's granted me consent to record our interview.

"I'll start off with some easy ones. What books are you currently reading?"  
Vinh Hoang (VH)

There's a pause. He gives me a look that we're both familiar with. I laugh. I could tell this was the kind of interview where Bryan would be humoring me, and I would thank him for it.

"That's hardly an easy question, yeah? Well, some books I've really enjoyed recently are Ocean Vuong's *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Xuan Juliana Wang's *Home Remedies*, and Pitchaya Sudbanthad's *Bangkok Wakes to Rain*. They're all really great and each of the authors is just deeply thoughtful in how they're constructing the worlds that they're trying to portray. And I think that we're just really lucky to have them."

Bryan Washington (BW)

"Are you watching anything currently? Any shows that you follow really religiously?"

VH

"I think lately, as far as the things I follow religiously—I don't know when this is gonna go out—"

BW

"Hopefully pretty soon..."

VH

"—okay yeah, the [US] Women's National Soccer Team. They're playing as we speak. I'm still waiting for the English translation of *Terrace House* for the next season. I'm all caught up, but I think as far as like shows I'm really

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there for, it's that there."

BW

"Any hobbies outside reading and writing that really influence your writing?"

VH

"I cook a lot. In a lot of ways, it's the same energy and just a different means of expelling it or getting it out there. I think a lot of the same sensibilities that you use when you're constructing a world on the page I think it'd be immediately translatable to when you're cooking a meal for yourself or for others. As far as just being conscientious of the moment that you're in, using all of your senses to try and get a certain feeling or a certain idea into a tangible form. So I think that, you know, cooking is pretty...I think it's pretty huge for me as far as things that immediately correlate to writing."

BW

"Yeah, I follow your Instagram—"

VH

"—oh no—"

BW

Busted.

"—so I know you're a huge foodie. To bring it back to your book and how it's been making waves since March..."

VH

I had some incoherent babbling and some pauses as I tried to figure out my question.

"...Food is a cultural marker, how does that find its way to writing for you?"

VH

"That's a tricky question. I think that—"

BW

"—it is. It was tricky getting to it."

VH

"—yeah, it's tricky getting it out because you're trying to describe how do you get a community into your writing. Because when I'm cooking, I'm of-

ten thinking about the community of the cuisine of the flavor palette. Like, my role inside or outside of whatever it is that I'm trying to put in front of me and the same thing when I'm eating out. I think in Houston we're really fortunate in that the scale and scope of diversity of cuisines that you have here is unparalleled as far as the States are concerned.

"And, I think, that when I'm writing about food, and fiction specifically, yes you want the sensory details and yes you want to establish a place and time for each of the characters and ambience of the meal that they're sharing because you're trying to build a world and food is a part of our world.

"So I think it should be part of the world on the page, but simultaneously I think there's a way of writing about food that doesn't allude to the human toll that a meal can take, that the creation of a meal can take. Specifically if you're in restaurants let's say like especially around Houston, it is labor that is putting the food in front of yourself, myself, and others; and oftentimes it's labor from folks coming from marginalized communities. And within those communities, they're not being paid aptly for that labor let's say or given voice for that labor let's say. They're not the folks that are being penned about in a lot of the prestige mags or the glossier mags. Or you might not see them in the front of the house, right? The front of the house of the restaurant may present a very different face or very different façade than the realities of what's going on in the back of the house.

"So I think that being not only conscious of the food itself that I'm trying to describe or trying to put on the page but both implicit and explicit structural ongoingings that are responsible for bringing those meals from where they're coming from to your table or to each of the character's tables, and they're role within those structural ongoingings for better or for worse."

BW

"So, let's dive into your backstory a bit because I checked your website, and you know you only have your pub credits. So I'd like to know a little bit—"

VH

Bryan laughs.

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"You can try."

BW

"—so how did you begin? Where did you go to school?"

VH

"I went to undergrad at the University of Houston, and I took a class with Mat Johnson. That was when I first started writing. Were you—?"

BW

"I never took him."

VH

"—did he leave beforehand?"

BW

"He left before I took a class with him."

VH

"Well, he's a great guy. He's rad. I just had the chance to take a course with him. And he took what I was trying to do or what I thought I was trying to do seriously. And it was cool to just have him in the room taking people seriously. I think that can be a rare thing in a writing program."

BW

"Did you pursue a grad creative writing program?"

VH

"I did an MFA at the University of New Orleans."

BW

"Did you always know you wanted to be a writer?"

VH

Without missing a beat—

"Absolutely not."

BW

"Great."

VH

"Did you?"

BW

"I don't think so either. I think you mentioned before that you didn't consider it as something you could do until you got paid for it. So

how have you been handling the reception for Lot?”

VH

“I think we’re still very close to Lot’s launch, so the answer that I give now will probably be very different from the one [I give] two or three years from now. I’m glad that folks are reading it to begin with because I think that a reader’s attention or the attention of anyone when you’re sharing a story isn’t something to be taken for granted.

“For me, the book came out in March, but we finished it maybe six months beforehand as far as final edits are concerned. And we sold it maybe a year before that. And I finished writing it maybe six months before that. So while we’re very close to the release—I finished the book or an iteration of the book sometime ago—I think that when I’m thinking the reception of Lot, which is not really something that I think about too often because I like having other things going and of course you have the rest of your life.

“I usually view it—the book and a few different versions (there’s a version that my agent and I worked on, there’s a version that we sold, there’s a version that was released, and then there’s the version that each reader is taking with them)...I think that as someone who aspires to create stuff or someone who’s trying to tell stories, I think it’s helpful to do so with the knowledge that the book that you wrote or the story that you wrote isn’t necessarily going to have a one to one correlation with the story that the reader takes. Partly because it might not be the story that they need at that moment, and that’s not what they’re taking out of it. Partly because they’re reading or their life experience and so on is going to give them a very different visage of what you’re trying to put on the page.

“And I think that’s a really great thing, but I think it’s also something that you can tie yourself up in knots about if you spend too much time looking at reception or looking at reviews or looking at criticism for better or for worse. So I try to keep a pretty staunch separation between the reception and the work because I just think they’re two different muscles and they’re two different avenues. And I don’t know that combining them or aligning them too closely for me myself is the best way to go about trying to make something.”

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BW

"You mentioned just now this idea of stories as having not had their time yet. As in a person is not ready for a story yet at a certain point in their life. Did you encounter some stories in undergrad and now you look back and you're like "I kinda get that now." Do you have any of those?"

VH

"All the time. I think that the works that I return to often are texts—irrespective of whether they're poems, whether they're novels, whether they're short stories, whether they're graphic novels—that I can read differently each time that I return to them because as you know time passes for everyone, you're a different person than you were a few years ago.

"I would hope that you're getting different things out of the text, or you're seeing nooks and crannies that you hadn't seen before. I think even without all of the certain intangibilities you bring to it as a reader, by merit of having read it already, there are certain things that you're just gonna notice that you hadn't even if it's only because you have a general idea of what the plot's rhythms look like and what that structure looks like. So you're looking less for major milestones and the sort of niceties of each paragraph and of each sentence. So there are loads of those works."

BW

"I want to talk about one particular story that I just remembered from your collection—"Bayou." So, just a brief note, we're both in agreement here that chupacabras aren't real in the sense that they don't actually exist like an actual creature that you can hold, right? But the idea of a chupacabra exists, right?"

VH

There's a sly look on Bryan's face.

"How would your question change if I said that I believed in them?"

BW

"Do you believe in them?!"

VH

Bryan laughs.

"No."

BW

“Okay, because it might change some things, you know? But I guess for the sake of this question—within the context—“Bayou” feels like it stands apart from the rest of the collection because it involves this really out of the ordinary thing, the chupacabra. Obviously, ordinary—the buzzword—is relative here. What went into the crafting of that? What ideas went into the crafting of that story? It feels like it’s a little different in that vein compared to the others.”

VH

“I think that half of that I’m sure is stemmed from how the collection was sort of put together, right? Because when I was originally writing the stories, I hadn’t thought of it as a cohesive collection. They were just individual stories, and some of them shared a narrative or narrator because that was a voice that wasn’t too difficult for me to work with.

“And “Bayou” was outside of that sort of linked or what you can now look at and call a linked story cycle. So I didn’t really have the considerations of the rest of the stories of the rest of the collection. When I was writing “Bayou” I just wanted that story to exist in the way that I wanted it to exist, and I tried to write it. So that was just what I was considering, but, as far as the rest of the collection is concerned, I partly just shoe-horned that story because I wanted it to be there. I wanted it to exist within the larger context of this very specific iteration of Houston that the stories were trying to portray.

“And I wanted it to be there because I think that there’s a sort of malaise that you can fall into if you’re a young or a younger or a young-ish person growing up in a predominantly suburban area, this sort of stereotypical motif of “nothing ever happens here,” like “the same thing happens every day,” and so on.

“I think that that narrative of normalcy is a privilege that’s really only afforded to white characters and white authors the overwhelming majority of the time as far as American literary fiction is concerned. And I wanted to see what would happen if you took some of those same tropes of unreality or the magical thing and imbuing it into a narrative, and you put them

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into a neighborhood that was predominantly black and brown, a significantly more diverse neighborhood than you would find in a lot of narrative arcs that are trying to stick those elements into their stories. And I felt like Alief would be just a really interesting place to set that story. I just wanted to see what it would look like. And I was lucky in that I had an editor and an agent who were supportive of that.”

BW

“I liked that, and I liked a lot of the stories in the collection. It’s nice seeing a version of Houston. I think you’ve written about Houston for a new generation of writers—”

VH

Brian blushes here and waves off my wild praise.

“—okay so maybe that’s a leap—”

VH

We both laugh.

“—But I don’t think I see much of Houston in writing, that and from a POC writer. I think the last thing that was written about Houston that I didn’t even read was Larry McMurtry’s Houston [series], apparently. I’ve never really heard of it, and so it’s nice seeing this. I guess I want to ask you—I know you have this refrain, what works for you wouldn’t necessarily work for somebody else, I totally agree with that. How would you describe your process? Is it boring? Do you have a weird thing that you do? I know some writers who eat like three cheesecakes before they start writing. Do you have anything like that?”

VH

“Yeah, it’s funny. I mean I think the process of sitting down and thinking that anyone has anything to care about like sixty thousand or seventy thousand words you’re putting on the page is funny in and of itself. But I think the process is pretty boring. I mean it’s not very interesting. I try to make it as much when I’m in the project—like once I’m in the middle of a project, like right now I’m doing novelettes right now, so I’m in the middle of something—I try and structure it as close to what for me would resemble a work day as possible.

“When I’m generating stuff I can usually, I’m good for an hour and a half to two hours at a time, after that I’m just usually just typing and not very useful on the page. I usually try and stop when I’m generating stuff right when I’m on the cusp of knowing what’s going to happen next because then I know about where I’m gonna start the next day. I’ll have thought through it, at least through a certain point.

“But when I’m editing, the day resembles something more akin to a nine to five. Like I’ll work for four hours, take a break for lunch or whatever, and then work for another three or four hours and that’s the day. Because I just think they’re two different headspaces and very different muscles for me.”

BW

“I think it’s interesting that one of the things that was mentioned about your short story collection was this idea of setting. You’ve sort of introduced Houston into a landscape, the capital L literature landscape, and people have been mentioning that. This idea of Houston, Houston as a setting, and setting as a character. There’s this writer named Matthew Salesses, I don’t know if you know him, and he works for Pleiades.”

VH

“I do.”

BW

“Yeah? I was reading some of the stuff he wrote on their website. He’s been trying to redefine elements of craft, and one of the things he wrote about—setting—was very interesting. I was thinking about that in relation to your collection and how people have been talking about it. He says that, ‘though it has somehow become common to praise setting for acting “like a character” of its own (a compliment I get on my novel set in Prague), this is often a veiled way of praising work from unrepresented communities if it caters to the white gaze.’ What is your take on that?”

VH

“I agree entirely. I think there’s a way in which, and I ask if you experience this as well, where if you’re writing as someone from a marginalized community, a white reader might look to your work or look to

your text, irrespective of whether it's a more realist fiction or not, as a sort of anthropological guide or a sort of means of mapmaking for them.

"I think that a funny thing about *Lot*, which I should have seen coming but I really hadn't foreseen, was the way in which the attempts to describe a diverse Houston were more often than not relegated to very telling details from the reviewer or the critics. In which case they would focus on the drug-dealing in the collection or they would focus on the sex work in the collection or they would focus on the poverty in the collection or really just anyone who was living below a sort of middle class echelon financial line, which is super fascinating and telling, again because it presumes that all of these things aren't in every major city on this planet or that all of these things aren't in most communities in the states, let alone Texas or Houston alone.

"It reduces the idea of a narrative told by someone coming from a marginalized community or a narrative about folks within or from a marginalized community to those sort of five or six tropes or ideas and not allowing them to stem beyond it. I don't read too many reviews, but it's a rare review that doesn't sidestep or entirely ignore the scale of the diversity of Houston for three or four tropes that are lazy.

"I think that when someone who is writing from a marginalized community, or even a white writer who's writing white characters within a marginalized community, it can be very tempting for folks who aren't familiar with those communities to just be lazy, which is really boring and frankly I think it's a disservice to folks living within those communities and also a disservice to the reader because readers are really smart. They're more often than not willing to do the work of putting together the world that's put on the page, and it's not gonna be limited to three or four tropes. It's gonna be the entirety of the world, so it'd be a great step if white writers and readers could do that too, or at least give them the benefit of the doubt."

BW

We pause to contemplate as birds chirp, and the engines of the local traffic pass us by.

"Sorry it was a mouthful of an answer."

BW

"I feel like you were sort of navigating territory that is not discussed too often. I find it interesting that Matthew brought it up because he's also trying to redefine other craft elements, but specifically setting as it relates to your novel. It has been something that was talked about. If an alien comes to Earth, they will remark about the differences between Earth and their homeworld, but if the alien is coming to their own planet, they're not going to notice the strangeness of their planet. It's the stuff that's blind to them."

VH

"That's a great analogy."

BW

"It's not mine, it's Matthew's. So thank you to Matthew. I know you're working on Memorial right now. What is a question or idea that you've been thinking about that has interested you?"

VH

"That's a really good question, and it's a sort of funny question because it's one that I feel like writers know at a certain point but actually articulating it is an entirely different thing. I think, for fiction specifically, I'm most interested in telling narratives about queer characters and from queer characters. Specifically because those are the stories that I enjoy reading and it's a privilege to have the chance to write them.

"Something that is usually always in my work, even if it's only nominally in there, I try and like really stick it in there, is the ways in which communities come together or the ways in which they don't come together. What a life looks like in a city or in a space that's made up of many different people from many different places from many different walks of life, belief systems, and so on. I think that's a large part of the reason why I set so much work in Houston just because I have ample opportunity to do that because we live in such a diverse city. I think that it's just what I'm most interested in as far as fiction is concerned."

BW

"I was at Ocean Vuong's reading, and he said a lot of things that



**UNTITLED**

David McClain

were just—”

VH

Bryan does the mind-blown gesture.

“—Just the best.”

BW

“A lot of ideas that are still mixing.”

VH

“Me too, he’s so good.”

BW

“Just this idea of the form kishotenketsu he talked about and the way that we tell stories, how it’s conflict based, and that feels like it’s sort of doing violence, in a way. Has that sort of changed how you’re approaching stories now? Was that something you were thinking about before as well? The way that we’ve been telling stories, I guess, we can say that it has done damage in a way. Are we sort of recognizing that? Do you think we’re taking steps away from that? Now that Ocean’s brought this to attention.”

VH

“That’s a great question. It’s a tricky question too. It was certainly something I was thinking of prior to the event with Ocean, and I think that he has clarified that idea and injected it into the public consciousness so that it is something that folks reading and evaluating capital L literature in capital letter coastal cities are conscious of.

“I think that, as a readership, I don’t know that you can’t help but feel grateful to him for doing that and going out of his way to do that from venue to venue whenever he’s had the platform. Personally, over the past year and a half, two years, I’ve been almost exclusively drawn to writing fiction. I suppose that doesn’t mean much because I’ve been working on the novel, like the same thing for the past year and a half to two years, that doesn’t rest on the idea of an explicit violence that’s being placed upon marginalized communities irrespective of whether it’s structural violence or familial violence.

“And I’ve been drawn to trying to write narratives where the implicit

conflict isn't a lethal one. I don't want to write narratives in fiction right now where I'm worried about whether this queer character is gonna die, you know, whether they are gonna have a disastrous outcome to whatever romantic situation that they're in. Or if I write a poz character, I don't want their mortality to be a question that's the crux and the endpoint of their particular narrative because while if you're writing characters from marginalized communities, if you're writing queer characters from marginalized communities, of course there are factors and there are circumstances that are simply going to implicitly be a part of their story, but I'm not interested in them being the explicit point or the explicit conflict point of their narratives.

"I think that the idea of whether narratives whose crux and endpoint are of violence or conflict, in particular those whose crux and violence are of violence or conflict against communities of color, the big word I think in that idea is like the 'we,' right? Because that idea of 'we,' insofar as folks who are writing those narratives, only within living memory began to expand. For the longest time 'we' was like white men only within the states, and then this 'we' white men and then some white women were writing.

"As that 'we' has expanded to include marginalized communities or rather as marginalized communities have sort of fought to get to the point where their narratives could be in that conversation, the bounds of that "we" have changed. And folks within those marginalized communities have been very aware of the violence put upon them or that can be put upon them by a narrative or a story. So, I will always have to take my hat off to Ocean for putting those ideas in this country's story, publications of record, so that they're there and that they can't be ignored—the ways in which a story can enact violence even if it isn't implicitly violent and how many kinds of stories there are to tell and how we can expand the bounds of the stories that are being told."

BW

"So, 'we'—"Alief," your story, I think that's the only story in the collection that has a 'we' narrator. I think you do explore this idea of marginalized communities retaking their story, and you do that in that story

as well. I think at the end, you write, “we made this story,” so they have ownership of that story in a way. The other two things I thought of were—I recently just started watching *Nanette*, the comedy special with Hannah Gadsby on Netflix—”

VH

“—oh I haven’t seen it yet, I’m so far behind. It was like a year ago.”

BW

“She’s amazing—”

VH

There was a long silence here where I was trying to recall some ideas that Hannah talked about and relate it to Bryan’s writing. I came up with nothing and skipped that thought. It was still a long silence.

“—Do you have another project in sight after *Memorial* already?”

VH

“Hmm...I think I see what you’re—no.”

BW

We laugh.

“—No, I don’t. As far as another long-term project?”

BW

“I know that these ideas are with you right now, and, after *Memorial*, I’m just wondering if those ideas will filter out to the next project for you.”

VH

“No, yeah, the answer doesn’t change. I think that I could not have written *Memorial* prior to writing *Lot* because I did not have the skillset that I needed to pull off what I’m trying to pull off with that book. And I knew that while I was writing *Lot*, like around the middle point of that, I had an idea of the kind of story structurally that I wanted to tell, even if I didn’t know what the narrative would look like, I knew that there was a structure that I was interested in. And there were ideas that I wanted to try and explore, but I didn’t know what that would look like in the midst of writing *Lot*. But I knew that there would be something or that there would

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be a project that I would try to pull that off with, irrespective of what it was—a book that was published, or just like a manuscript that I just did because I wanted to see how it would turn out or what it would look like. “Now that I’m editing Memorial with my editor, we’re in the midst of that process, I do not have a similar...”

BW

We laugh.

“...idea to sort of lean into or any sort of inclination to lean into. And I think that that’s okay. I think that that’s fine. I think that it’s, one like it’s just the biggest privilege to be able to have anyone care about a story you’re writing, I think, and to be in a position to talk about it, but as Ocean alluded to, to do that once is a lot, to do that twice is a lot, to do that three times it’s you know it’s great and lovely, but if it doesn’t happen that’s okay.

“I think that there’s a way in which our current iteration of the American literary fiction machine extracts so much from writers but specifically writers of color and writers coming from marginalized communities with the expectation that if you’re not producing, that you’re doing a disservice to whatever discourse is currently in vogue and it’s gross. It’s really gross. I think it’s fine if you’re done for a little while, if you’re done for a long awhile, or if that’s the story that you wanted to tell. I mean sometimes one story is enough. The overwhelming majority of the time, one good story is enough, I think.”

BW

“You mentioned graphic novels earlier. Any tops you’d recommend?”

VH

“Right now, I’m writing a column for The Paris Review about various graphic novels, so I find myself returning to a lot of stuff that I just came up on and stuff that I think, as far as narrative is concerned, they hold their weight against any text from this supposed camp.

“But I’m really big on Love and Rockets and the multiple arcs within Love and Rockets, I’m really big on Adrian Tomine and his work, whether that’s from the early arcs of Optic Nerve to the cover work that he does for both The New Yorker and various films within the Criterion Collection, the

way in which he can just tell a story in a few frames, I think, is just really marvelous.

"I'm really into Naoki Urasawa's work, whether that's 20th Century Boys or whether that's Pluto. I think that he's unparalleled as far as storytelling is concerned as far as the range of emotion that he's able to discern within his characters within his environment, there's just a lot. Right now, as far as serialized stuff, I'm really into Monstress from Marjorie Liu and Sana Takeda. I think it's really really great, I think that there's a lot of really cool stuff that's happening right now."

BW

"Would you ever write a graphic novel?"

VH

"I don't think I have the skillset for that right now. I just don't think it's something I could pull off right now, but if I had a story or idea that I think would lend itself to that form, and I can't draw for shit, if there were someone willing to put up with me, and we could work together to put that on the page, then I would strongly consider it. But I also think it's okay if that's a muscle I don't end up flexing. I'm just happy to be a reader."

BW

"Thank you so much Bryan."

VH



