

A collage of images featuring a woman in a gold mask and a man in a suit, set against a background of a large building. The collage is framed by a red border with a white geometric pattern. The central image shows a woman wearing a gold mask and a gold chain, looking up. To the left, a man in a suit and tie is visible. The background is a large, white, classical-style building with many windows. The collage is set against a red background with a white geometric pattern. The text 'PLE', 'R', 'N', 'Y', 'S' is visible on the left side of the collage.



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FROM THE EDITOR

Looking back, I think it was a weekend morning when this all started. I was eager to write from an epiphany of an idea. I had a few lines ready while waiting for the coffee to brew. Yet, with coffee in hand I suddenly thought that anything I could ever say had already been said, written, or expressed. In that thought, I sat with my cooling coffee in hand trying to find a way around this unexpected roadblock.

I went back and forth between reasons why someone would pick up anything I could ever write, to existential *what would even be the point*. I must have sat like that for an hour before I concluded that no one will say it like I will. And thus, Variant Literature Journal was born.

It was the realization that we will all have our own take – variant, if you will, that motivated this endeavor and I wanted to see it. We have received work so diverse in form and experience, from raw enamor to well-done profundity, innovations defying standard writing conventions, and even translations! That's what Variant Literature Journal is all about. I have been consistently elated by the diversity of submissions and experiences being conveyed in our contributors writing, which is coming in from all over the world.

Your contributions provide us with the opportunity to forever learn and become better writers. All we ask is that you submit your best and submit often.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Lybe Rypner". The script is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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Jeffrey Fisher

Hope

Are you a promise
 Or an apparition
A way of life
 Or simple attrition
An ideal to strive for
 Or to petition

At night alone
 Without a place
Without a home
 I wait for you
Wondering how far must I roam

What type of vision
 With what precision
Must I express
 For your collision

Are you a witch
 Hiding in a deep dark ditch
Maybe the light
 Or are you just a wish

Emma Johnson-Rivard

Connection is Context in the Internet Age

Signed up for Tinder on Easter.

Might've been ironic if I'd ever been a church girl.

Sad to say god never took this atheist anywhere.

Is this thing designed sleazy?

Or can I just say

Hey, girl

Wanna talk poetry with me?

Anastasia Jill

Out to play, out to lunch

Catch me in a paper cup,
drink me awkwardly, a boxed wine
until you miss me a little bit less;
mourning is a team sport, I suppose.

Eat me like cake at a party
in a hotel downtown, feet planted firmly
on the same concrete from which I jumped;
You have no idea what you're doing, do you?

Sing me like karaoke at the same bar
that serves a glass full of sea,
salt is bloating, but then, so is grief.
you're still missing me but tell people
"I loved her so much"
The same way you'd tell people
"She's always just out to lunch"

when I would sit in white rooms
talking to myself in a tinfoil hat,
watching the starlight in a bulb
That weren't really starlights,
just a bulb in a bedroom.
I'd watch that bulb bloom,

Staying out to lunch so long,
I'd learn to play with big boys
who lived in their little ruin.
Everyone knows it, but
you'll never tell tell them
the real way I died.

Steve Gerson

woman suffocating under skyless clouds

bovine in her way
dressed uniformly in muddied russet
glazed cow-stare straight
like vacant windows in farm outbuildings
black as eyeless sockets

she endures self-stockaded
as if muzzling stray blades
of grass on barren browned fields
downward gazing under leafless trees
every day a late fall

not always so numbed
she once effervesced
I recall her eyes uplifted yearning
after passing planes flying elsewhere
contrails etching sun-streaked paths

but life intervened siloing her
a romance denied her moans lowing
a career curtailed cowering
friendships family all plowed under
climate changes in her soul
till tariffed by slights her sights low
she ruminates suffocating under skyless clouds

RC deWinter

The glittering road of no return

you showed me the path
all glittery with promise
no potholes
no mud
nothing hidden in a tangle of undergrowth
no hilly goat path
just a straight shot
neatly enclosed with rosecovered lattice
to your heart

but
in the japanese tradition
although you showed no evidence
of a particular admiration
for that culture in any other respect
you said no shoes
my feet must walk to your love unshod

i was almost ready to do it
unlace my boots
abandon them to the roadside
take that barefoot journey for love

how clever your trap to cripple me
render any change of heart moot
for as i bent to bare my feet
i looked closely at that glitter of promise
and saw the ground glass embedded
in that straight smooth shot

Ishita Sharma

The most outstanding fact about the universe

I once saw on TV
a scientist
who was speaking generally
about science-y things
and generally speaking
I am not a science person
and while I respect them
I have little interest in science things
or scientists
so I went to switch the channel
and at that exact moment
the presenter sitting across the scientist asked:
what,
in your opinion,
is the most astounding fact that you know?
and this stopped me
because I wanted to hear her answer to this interesting
question;
after a pause
she did not look directly at the camera
instead choosing to look at the presenter
did you know
she said
that there are atoms in your body?
the presenter laughed
of course
what else would my body be made up of?
I did not have to look at the TV to know that the
scientist was smiling
well
she said
do you know where they came from?
the presenter remained silent

*the most astounding fact that I have ever known is not a
fact, essentially
she began
but the story of every atom on the planet
the ones that make up the sand and the sea and the
grass
they come from stars.*
the presenter leaned forward and so did I
stars
continued the scientist
*are mortal
like us,
they die,
and are unstable in their last few years
and a star's death
is much more dramatic than a human's*
the presenter smiled
is it now?
the scientist nodded, *it is
the stars
I am referring to
collapsed and exploded a long time ago
and scattered themselves across the entire universe
and in that moment
I wondered if she was a scientist
or a poet
and then?* asked the presenter
the scientist's lips quirked upwards as she replied
*they become part of gas clouds
ones that condense will form
another star
which will lead to formation of another solar system*
so, she smiled
where do your atoms come from?
the stars, the presenter replied
yes, the scientist replied
but I'll tell you something better

*the universe is within us,
your atoms
my atoms
and the atoms of everyone watching us
came from stars
you're connected and relevant without even having to
try
you are made up of stardust and essentially, the
universe
and that
is the most astounding fact
I can tell you*
the presenter smiled and the scientist smiled wider
and later
when I switched the channel
to something less scientific
I wondered if I should feel small,
tiny and insignificant,
and that is how my mother found me
sitting on the sofa
and when she asked me what was wrong
I said, *I'm smaller than the stars*
my mother is a very literal woman as such
and her natural response was
of course you are
and she left the room and it is years later but
I still think about the scientist and what she said
and I still think that stars are big
but now I think
they are in me
so I am big too.

Choya Randolph

A Little Girl Trying to Talk to God While Being Distracted by Denial

The sky is falling
It left the stars behind like daddy did
As if each star were an abandoned child
Burning with anger
Until it explodes

I can hear the pieces hit the ground
Or were they a fist to a mother's face?
No
It must've been the sky
Because the moon looked bigger
As if it were a peephole to heaven
The sun less yellow
And more orange
As if the sky were bleeding
And the blood blended with sunshine
To fool all living creatures that everything is okay
But I still hear them
I think

Last week
The sky hurt Mommy
A big piece
Fell from its height
And gave her an eye
That matched the night
No one said anything about it
Not even stepdaddy
Who usually yelled
Like burning stars
But I knew the truth

Yesterday
For the 6th time this week
I waited outside
Wondering what piece would fall
So I could pick it up
And throw it back to its home
Maybe if I returned a fragment
It wouldn't hurt anyone
Maybe a child wouldn't explode
Maybe Our Father which art in heaven
Would catch it
And heal mommy's face
And bring a star's daddy back
And make sure step daddy's voice is as quiet as a
mother's secrets

I waited but didn't see anything fall
I had to go home for dinner
Stepdaddy was home
Another piece of sky must've hit mommy
An abandoned child shone less bright
As if not angry
But putting pieces together

I know the sky is falling
I just can't see the fallen pieces
I couldn't find the peace that hit mommy
Maybe it didn't hit mommy
Perhaps the sky isn't falling
But everyone moving closer
To God:

Benjamin Gossman

When the Worst seemed Overly Eventual

I think often of the future I warned myself of;
How a moment before many sunk to a depressive gulf.
Only past all of them,
Living in my finer after,
I more certainly forgive my tinge of death;
The guilt and regret I let lead to engulf
A mind no longer drowning to survive.
No vast abyss seemed so reviving,
No place as inviting,
Beyond these phases of latent ruination
Warped into all the possibilities alive
I sunk from seizing as my time.

Jack Spencer

TEST SIGNAL

Don't Wait Now!!!

fragment the bubbles rising off ... limbic system

//**SEND** out for food. //**SEND** out for friends.

v e n o m & p o i s o n

rearrange them into one, all-caps, post-rational #HATE

#HATE #HATE [SHOUT] on twitter. #HATE #HATE

this surpasses sex. this surpasses sex. #HATE #HATE

v o m i t & f e c e s

these SHOUTS ///NEW surpass sex

collated through machine learning: an index #HATE

all its + /// LUV U ;) /// weaknesses©

the better to \$€£ you with, my dear. (**GIMME**) #HATE

c o m m e r c e & [QUANTITY!]

it warms the **heart** that (shh!) corporations ↑ #HATE

[IT IS PEOPLE, TOO] //RESCIND //RESCIND //RESCIND

s u g a r & s p i c e


thoughtful enough to curate their {new} line #HATE

in conformance {so hot!!!} with latest sense of self.

//**SEND** out for #**VALUE** {too hot :{}

#**VALUE** = N/A //ERROR -[HATE]- recall

l a t e x & g r 8 t e s t

! : DESIRE ! : SELF ! : 

we dream of spreadsheets ! : MICKEY MOUSE© {so hot!!!}

[LUV THAT ASSET] //if quality < [QUANTITY!] //then

#HATE //MORE (**GIMME**) ↑ // MORE ↑ SHOUTS

But Don't #**VALUE** Take My **heart**//word For It!!!

smash that like button

follow (**me**) I'm (**me**) please think of (**me**) this is (**me**)

(**me**)(**me**)(**me**)(**me**)(**me**)(**me**)(**me**)(**me**)(**me**)(**me**)(**me**)(**me**)

(**me**)(**me**)(**me**

the better to \$€£ you with, my dear. (**GIMME**) #HATE

c o m m e r c e & [QUANTITY!]

Kalyani Bindu

Fugitive Presences

You leave traces of your meek presence
in the grotto of my inner eye -
fossilized possibilities,
lackluster remnants of time.
My lungs silently detonate in an asthmatic swell.
Fetishes return as you materialize.
A shadow burns my back.
The blue drone in your mouth is a fly in my eyes.
Hands pierce a river of plasma.
Our napes sing a transcendental song.
You leave traces of a lonely muse,
harpooning fugitive presences.

Lindsey Schaffer

Untitled

My hand guides the bristles
Skimming the water in a cool lapis
to calm the rippling flares
that ride upon peaks of tiny finger waves

Beneath the surface
the tangled roots of water lilies careen slowly
through fractals of
sequin sifted sunlight splashes
of vermilion that trickle in honey embers from overhead
brush

“What keeps my heart awake is colorful silence”

I blink and a canvas appears.
Monet sets down his brush.

Travis Stephens

ANOTHER TRAGIC POETRY DISASTER

Reports today of a poetry spill on the 5. Highway Patrol has all lanes blocked, a real mess in both directions. It was a truck which somehow left the highway to fly nearly over the railings to the open fields. They are treating it as a possible terrorist incident. This was highly refined poetry. PhD quality stuff.

We've all become used to poetry. As I drive the girls to school we pass tankers of it, warehouses and that big MFA factory. It's all part of the literary industrial complex.

The nine-year-old, fatalistic, points at hurried, unmarked vans. *"That one. It could be carrying sonnets."*

"No, Elizabeth." I say, *"Don't scare your little sister."*

At the spill, even before the cleanup crews, there are protesters. One stands before the camera in a Cowboys jersey.

"It's poison," she says. *"No one even knows how much poetry is too much. How many parts per million. They give you a little when you're in grade school and next thing you know you've got shelves of the stuff."*

Reporter: *"What should be done?"*

"Ban it."

Reporter: *"But there has always been poetry. It's mentioned in the Bible."*

"Then control it. Keep it in silos somewhere like Minnesota"

or North Dakota where there are no people.”

To become certified a HAZ-LIT Response Team must take 16 hours of training with an annual refresher. Receive a three-ring binder and certificate. First you must learn to correctly identify poetry. Some of it is easy. Haiku. Villanelle. You learn to look for indicators: iambic pentameter, trochee. It is the free verse that gives people the most trouble. It comes in many permutations. It mutates. I have read that scientist have found some in everything we eat. In the soil. Scraps of paper blown through fences. In the sweet flesh of Montana trout. Traces remain in stoppered amphoras beneath the Aegean. Bits of poetry in every word we say

Lisa Montagne

Lending Books is a Risky Business

I once had a book
By Alice Walker
With bent
Corners
And a Coffee stain
On its cover.

It contained the seeds
Of my Womanhood.

I also once desired
A certain clever boy
With hair like a seal's back,
And a neck I wanted to
Sink my teeth into
Deep.

One night,
I took him the book
As an offering.

Then,
He took me.

I never saw
The boy or my book
Again.

Twenty Years
And I still
Miss that book.

Peter Dietrich

A LIFE STORY 2

As life came tumbling from the hills,
With silence all but banished,
The world indulged in secret thrills
While modesty had vanished:
Bare creatures walked,
Dark shadows stalked,
Foundations paved the way,
The tribal race
Picked up its pace,
Dividing night and day;
Yet as the roots began to hold just as the bubble burst,
The sky became the mirror for each wild unquenchable
thirst.

As life set off to take a walk,
With bare feet still quite normal,
The first clans met and tried to talk,
Before the laws grew formal;
Children were born,
Lovers not forlorn,
Old neighbours staked their claim,
Secrets were sought,
Colours duly bought,
And nobody was to blame;
Yet as the march picked up its pace just as they neared
their goal,
The landscape laid out endless trails to deceive the
hapless soul.

As life began to hold a view,
With words sprung from the light,
The world sat up then split in two,
None wishing to be right;

Meetings were held,
Old fears dispelled,
New rules were strictly planted,
Coy votes were cast,
Fair laws soon passed,
Great anthems then duly chanted;
Yet as the views churned up the lost just as the young
were ageing,
The empty halls spoke tragically through the drama
they'd been staging.

As life shrugged off the clinging dream,
With visions disappearing,
The world released a primal scream,
Noise captured as soul-searing;
Stories were told,
Sagas unrolled,
Immoralists came out fighting,
Plotlines were drawn,
Characters outworn,
Lone authors struck by lightning;
Yet as the webs captured soft prey just as the dream
unfolded,
The restless audience arose and with one voice harshly
scolded.

As life forsook its solemn vows,
With silent fascination,
The world spoke up as truth allows,
Defying desperation;
False pacts were shed,
Enemies quickly wed,
Allies ruthlessly ripped apart,
New arms were made,
Old feuds repaid,
Arrows straight to the heart;
Yet as the promise broke its wings just as the stars

were falling,
The survivors gathered defiantly with a brand new life
now calling.

Daniel Casey

Pours Out of Me

If only you
held guns
with the same
contempt
you hold
straws.

Fewer would
be gone.

We'd be
quenched,
but for those
in need
of exact
means.

I suppose,
this implies
the right
for straws
over
demise.

Lauren Rhoades

Chili Dogs, Klezmer, and Jesus

In high school, I belonged to a co-ed offshoot of Boy Scouts called Venture Crew. We were a group of a dozen nerdy but outdoorsy kids, led by a squadron of over-involved moms who orchestrated our ski trips, hikes, and wilderness survival lessons. My Venture Crew friends loved to ski. Some had season passes and would go every weekend, hiking up into the bowls just to make fresh tracks through waist-deep powder. I didn't have a season pass, and would only go on the big group trips, though I secretly dreaded them. I would rather have stayed at home, drinking hot chocolate and reading *Jane Eyre*, waiting for the world to thaw, oblivious to the combined privileges of living close to the mountains and being able to afford a lift ticket. Reluctantly, I would hunt through my family's basket of mismatched mittens and hats and scarves and ski goggles. I hated the scratchy elastic cuffs of my ski jacket, the clinginess of my woolen long underwear, the stiff plastic ski boots which felt like vice grips on my shins. The day of fun lay before me like a series of unpleasant chores: waking up early, inching through traffic, catching a crowded bus from the tundra-like parking lot to the lifts, alternatively sweating and freezing throughout the day.

But as much as I dreaded the ski trips, I wasn't a bad skier. For me, anticipation was—and still is—the worst part of any major outing. Once I was there on the mountain, amidst the pine trees with their snow-heavy branches, breathing in the clear cold air, the sky a blistering blue, I relaxed. I had entered a far-away Narnia world with my friends, away from our parents and teachers. I liked squeezing in next to my crush on the ski lift, zigzagging down blue and black runs with my

best friend Sarah. My muscles burned, but in a good way.

At lunch, we would click out of our skis and clip clop toward the lodge, where the moms would distribute smooshed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, plastic bags of baby carrots, Oreo cookies. A few more hours on the slopes, and then finally, gloriously, the day would be done. In the parking lot, we would unstrap our ski boots, peel the goggles from our wind-burnt faces, and pile into a minivan for the trip back to Denver. But before our descent, we would always stop at the A&W in Frisco, just fifteen minutes down the road. I'm sure we only went there because it was convenient; we were hungry, and it was just off the highway, on a frontage road between a gas station and a Taco Bell.

Like any other fast food joint, the A&W was outfitted with brown tile floors and hard plastic booths; it smelled of grease and ketchup. But unlike other fast food joints, the outside illuminated sign glowed with the daily special and a Bible verse, like *Jesus = Peace with God / Romans 1:16-17 / Chili Dogs & Floats \$1.99*. As a kid, I spent a lot of time thinking about religion and spirituality, probably to an unhealthy degree, but even I was baffled by this un-ironic blend of consumer capitalism and Bible-speak.

The discordance didn't stop with the sign. Inside, the aroma of those \$1.99 Chili Dogs mingled with the piped-in, old-timey sounds of klezmer music. Klezmer—the traditional music of the Ashkenazi Jews of Eastern Europe. I recognized the musical style immediately, though I had never heard it played in a fast food establishment. Just years earlier, when I had been studying for my bat-mitzvah, my grandfather, the son of Romanian, Yiddish-speaking Jews, sent me thrifted cassette tapes of various klezmer bands. I played them

in my stereo at home. I liked the whine of the clarinet, the plucky, minor harmonies of the string instruments. Klezmer is simultaneously mournful and joyous. To me, it sounded like *Fiddler on the Roof* and every hora I had ever danced to—inescapably Jewish.

Next to the cash registers where we placed our orders for hamburgers and fries (I don't think anyone ever ordered the chili dog) were the brochures. *Jews for Jesus*, they read. *We are Jewish people who believe in Jesus, and we want to tell everyone about Jesus the Messiah*. Yahweh was spelled out in Hebrew letters, alongside excerpts of scripture and information about attending worship services with the local group of Messianic Jews.

I had never heard of Jews for Jesus before entering the Frisco A&W. The name was like an indecipherable clue in a crossword puzzle, an oxymoron. I had always thought that the indisputable difference between Christians and Jews was that Christians believed Jesus was the son of God and Jews did not. I knew with absolute certainty that my Jewish family did not believe in Jesus. The closest my mom ever got to celebrating Easter was buying the discounted chocolate bunnies the Monday after (she liked to bite their ears off). And I knew that my dad and stepmom—both cradle Catholics—would never in a million years consider themselves Jewish. The blood and the body that the priest sanctified and served to them on Sunday mornings at St. Thomas More Catholic Church seemed light years away from the Shabbat challah and grape juice my mom blessed at our dinner table on Friday evenings. The fact that many Catholic and Christian practices are rooted in Judaism was irrelevant to me; the two traditions operated in completely different spheres of my brain. In my mind, a chasm divided people who did and did not

believe in Jesus. My Jewish mother and Catholic father were proof. They had divorced when I was three, unable to bridge whatever differences divided them.

But I was not pondering religious philosophy while slurping my root beer float. The cultish atmosphere of the A&W became an inside joke between me and my Venture Crew friends—none of whom were Jewish or even particularly religious. It even became part of the appeal. We laughed at the photos of black and white religious figures on the walls, at the strange music. We ate at a large round booth with a view of the parking lot, recently plowed and lined with mounds of dirty snow, as the late afternoon sun sank below darkening peaks. We never stayed long. Ski traffic on I-70 was usually horrendous, and the moms persuaded us to finish our root beer floats in the car.

I've wondered why, all these years later, the meals we ate at A&W are more vivid to me than the ski trips themselves. I know now that the Messianic Jews—including those who call themselves Jews for Jesus—are considered by the Jewish community to be an insidious brand of Evangelical Christians masquerading as religious hybrids. Jews for Jesus was founded in the 1970s by a Jewish man who converted to Christianity and became a Baptist Minister; they target ethnically Jewish people in order to convert them to believe in Christ as savior and messiah. But as an adolescent, those Jews for Jesus pamphlets, as funny as they may have seemed, struck at some deep desire within me for wholeness and unity. In her essay on Jewish identity, Adrienne Rich calls herself "split at the root." At a time when interfaith marriage was rare, Rich was raised by a Gentile mother and a Jewish father. Internalized anti-Semitism left Rich feeling unmoored, her identity divided. I, too, felt myself to be split at the root, divided

by my parents' bitter divorce, and the custody battles and religious indoctrination that followed. With my mom, I was Jewish. With my dad, I was Catholic. Like Rich, I would often wonder if it was possible to reconcile these two parts of my identity, to "bring them whole," like the best friend necklaces Sarah and I had bought at Claire's: two broken halves of a heart which fit together like puzzle pieces.

Though the Jews for Jesus A&W—with its klezmer meets New Testament meets chili dog ideology—was a joke to me, there was something seductive about the solution it offered. At that point in my life, I was, in a twisted sense, a Jew for Jesus. Bat-mitzvah-ed and attending mass. Fasting for Yom Kippur and giving up candy for Lent. My inherited religions remained neatly compartmentalized, because picking either Catholicism or Judaism would have meant turning my back on one whole side of my family. But the Jews for Jesus had a different message. You can have it all, the pamphlet seemed to say, you don't have to pick just one. It made an impression.

These days, I simply say that I'm Jewish, which is the truest answer. But I wonder what would have happened had I picked up one of those pamphlets, tucked it inside my ski jacket, and called the number inside. Would I have believed their faulty promise that I could be a Jew who openly celebrated both Christmas and Hanukkah, Easter and Pesach, and with equal parts fervor?

According to the Frisco A&W Yelp page, the restaurant shuttered in 2013 with an average of 1.5 stars out of 5. The dozen or so reviews complained about the mediocre food and the overt religious propaganda. *Can I have a burger without Christ, please?*

one reviewer asked. But I'll always remember the place with fondness. The fries were hot, if not very crispy; the booths, upholstered in orange vinyl, were cozy. Jews for Jesus A&W was a respite, a purgatory of sorts, in between the ski slopes and my suburban home on the high plains. Here, I didn't have to choose who I was or where I belonged. I simply existed, surrounded by friends, and one ski trip closer to summer.

Jose Seigar

My Plastic People

Website

seigar.wordpress.com

Social Networks

facebook.com/jseigar

instagram.com/jseigar

Galleries

<https://www.flickr.com/photos/theblueheartbeat/albums/>

10 Unknown Facts about My Plastic People:

1. Most of them are women.
2. Most of the photos are spontaneous, without previous planning.
3. Shop assistants are usually curious about what I am doing. It is nice to interact with them.
4. My favorite plastic people live in UK.
5. My first plastic people photo was probably taken in Venice, Italy.
6. Recently, I miss faces in plastic people; there is a new tendency to show headless or faceless. I think it is sad and terrible.
7. In my plastic people you can see traditions, beliefs and values from the towns they were taken.
8. I really enjoy finding the reflections of the buildings behind me, especially when the architecture is interesting. I don't work with double exposure.
9. People normally stare at me when I take photos of shop windows. Some can stand behind me until I finish the shooting.
10. I hate the tag with the price on clothes, though sometimes they can enrich the composition.



Artist Statement

This set belongs to my most personal, serious and ambitious project so far. I try to give dignity and humanity to the plastic people around the world. As a street and travel photographer, I have had the chance to take photos of shop windows in many cities, and there I have found the inspiration for these images. They tell me tales and stories about life. They always show me their human substance. Every photo creates a fantasy. Their faces, looks, eyes, clothes, shadows, and reflections portray them as the modern society.

In this selection, we find these beautiful women surrounded by reflections of their cities. Reflections always help me to make complex photographs. I'm not afraid of complexity. I like getting richness. I don't try to follow conventional compositions. I just keep loyal to my eye. If I need to break rules to show an image, I just do it. I feel my plastic people are free. There is even some chaos in the worlds I portray.

These ladies seem all to be feeling different emotions or sensations, such as confidence, arrogance, sadness, dreaming stare or challenging poses. Viewers can realize there is a human touch inside them. My intention is the humanization of mannequins found in shops. I feel the need to make them talk to the world. They all have a message to say. My visions are just the way they have to speak, working as a channel.

My visions have been influenced by pop culture. I have been attracted to the works of unique and strong artists. I guess they have deeply inspired me, even though you cannot see directly their prints in my photographs. What you can see is that I conceive art as a passion. I refer to artists such as the cinema makers like Pedro Almodóvar, Alfred Hitchcock, Robert Aldrich,



Quentin Tarantino or Lars Von Trier. In the music and performance category, I feel devotion for the threesome Madonna, Michael Jackson and Prince. Then, Frida Kahlo, Dalí, Picasso and Warhol are the painters that obsess me. The best photographer in the world right now is Mister Martin Parr; I must confess "he is the one". All these artists share something in common; I will call it strong views.

I have been participating in exhibitions and been featured in international magazines with this project. My Plastic People have become an essential part of my street photography. I owe them the world. I would like to keep on travelling to find more characters for these tales. It's so inspiring when I get to a new city, town or a village; and I go around walking, looking for them, the reflections, the saturated colors, the buildings and architecture behind them, the lights and shadows...It's exciting!

There is also a cultural aspect in them. They sort of represent the people from the country they were taken. Their mood, clothes, body awareness issues or make up show the traditions, beliefs and even values from the places. I would like to end this short essay about them, stating the universal human quality of this project, because as I said before, they have become portraits of our modern society. There is an analogy with the human nature.

Q&A

TP: As a travel photographer, what drives you to a certain location?

JS: I live in Tenerife and I travel to UK at least twice a year because I feel a special connection to the people and the urban/rural landscape. I have been working on a photo-narrative series entitled "Tales of a City" there



since 2015, these photographs reflect all my fetishes: street portraits, My Plastic People, abandoned objects, food and messages conveyed in the pop form with the use of reflections and saturated colors. I guess that I'm also engaged with their culture and lifestyle because of my university background, I studied English Philology at the University of La Laguna, in Tenerife. I admire their sense of humor and how they discuss about every single issue until they form rules or ways to approach each matter. I'm intrigued by their conventions and also the manners they assume them.

Apart from that, in my last trips I'm trying to explore "less common" places. Last summer I visited Hungary, all around the country except Budapest because I had already been there on a previous trip, so I captured the less known places like the Hortobagy National Park and I could photograph the impressive horse riders there. This summer I have been in Moldova and explored its never ending sunflowers/corn fields, the typical wineries and monasteries, and I had the opportunity to get impressions with my camera in Transnistria, the non-recognized Russian-like country or in the very rural Gagauz.

I'm interested in documenting traditions and how people relate to them. Lately I have been fascinated by the concepts of identity and the self. I would like to grasp what defines ourselves and with that in mind I'm planning my new projects. We are living in a world full of hashtags and labels so I want to link that to my photography, expressing with images the adjectives that define us.

Traveling is an enriching experience and it is still my main inspiration, getting closer to what I consider "exotic" can even inspire me more. So I suppose my



destinations are turning to less common places to document its customs.

TP: Do you seek diversity for your shots or does something else guide you to the mannequins?

JS: I love diversity and I like the idea of living in a plural and diverse society, respecting and even taking advantages of our differences. Learning from the people who are not like us would be the ideal.

My Plastic People in many ways represent us. Outside, they just wear what we wear, they use the same make up and hairstyle we do; even sometimes their body shapes simulate ours. Inside, they also show emotions and feelings through their faces just like us. They are a reflection of our modern society. It's like looking ourselves in the mirror, that's what we are.

In the shop windows we can encounter and analyze different concepts such as culture, tradition, identity, genre, urban tribes, social classes, economic issues, patriotism, stereotypes, male and female roles, and religion. They work as a metaphor of human beings. Their expressions transmit emotions and feelings. As the people they can be happy or sad, they can cry or smile, have their eyes closed or opened; and even decide to stare at us defiantly or in a submissive way. Just a glance of a shop window can say a lot about a place and its people. All these readings are possible. This is what interests me the most about my plastic people.

TP: What is required of you when you find a plastic person?

JS: It is exciting for me, so first I need to try to calm down and control the situation. The camera is the



medium I have decided to convey the story of My Plastic People so I need to use it right. Once I get the settings, I try to picture what is important to capture their personality and then I start making decisions. Does the reflection I have behind help or distract to set the context? Will it be a close up or I have some storyline in their clothes? Where should I position myself? Like a photographer at a studio I make some decisions and then, I shoot. I let my heart to speak, when I feel something special I'm sure the photo will keep that sensation too. I'm always drawn by passion when I take photographs of shop windows.

TP: Do you find yourself using products inside the shops to elevate the humanization already being placed upon them?

JS: I don't. I just adapt myself to the situations and contexts. I never interfere in the elements, even when I can do changes. I think I prefer to find my ways around the shooting. I'm more concerned about the point of view rather than trying to push the humanization. It's more challenging and appealing for me.

TP: Has there been an encounter where you were setting up a shot that attracted a lot of awkwardness or attention? What was that like?

JS: I sometimes find the designers of the shop windows doing their job and I'm totally in love with the process. I admire their work and I'm grateful because that work has meant a lot to me as a photographer. They create and art beauty in the display. Recently I have met an artist that works in shop windows design and we are planning to do a collaboration, so it will be a different approach to My Plastic People. So finally I will be able to document the process of creation of one of these artists.



TP: You've gotten a lot of attention from this project. Has it changed or maybe validated how you view yourself or work as an artist?

JS: My Plastic People have been an essential part of my work so far. They have called the attention of many publications, museums and galleries.

In London I had the opportunity to attend to the launch of Porridge Magazine, one of my photographs made the cover of the magazine and I met the editors and all the mag family. It was a blast! I have had the chance to do a solo exhibition in "Instituto de Estudios Hispánicos", and I have participated in several collective exhibitions in places such as "Circulo de Bellas Artes", "TEA FotoNoviembre", "Phe Gallery", "Tank Festival", "University of La Laguna Photography Awards", "Sala Fleming Gallery" and so on. In one of these exhibitions they were showing Salvador Dali's works at the same time that for me meant the world, I adore this genius. I have also shown my video pieces in different events. And I even curated the first Summer Art Market at a English Library which is over 100 years old.

In November, I will be showing a Plastic Woman in Rome at the Loosen Art Gallery, and a collective exhibition in Berlin organized by Purple Haze Magazine is also coming soon. Can't wait!

I'm glad that this project has opened so many doors for me. In a way I feel they put me there, it is because of them I have been able to show other series and my creation process has been evolving since then too. Recently, I have been experimenting with the video format, I have directed a short film and a video art piece.



My Plastic People project has also led me to look for the same views and perspectives in people, so the issues they have shown me are now the interests that I want to document about people's lives such as identify, the self, traditions, love or genre.

TP: Do you see an end in sight for this project? If not, what are the missing pieces?

JS: It's an ongoing project and I don't see an end right now to it. What's left? To be sincere if I find a new plastic person I will be willing and thrilled to shoot! I also revisit the same plastic people as much as I can, why? Because they as people evolve, I have seen my plastic people to wear different clothes, wigs or even going bald. Depending on these external factors their face expressions also seem to be affected. I like to document these changes because as I said, it is a sign of our time.

Finally, I have been tempted by many real flesh and bones models to shoot them as I do with My Plastic People, so that is also another natural next step forward in this project.

I'm sure that My Plastic People will give me new ways to keep up my motivation in them.

Brendan Connolly

#16

in the back of a cab to brooklyn jackie holds
a scarf over the lower half of her face and
says something i cant quite hear

her large brown eyes roll as i ask her
to repeat herself and the lights of downtown
manhattan blur beyond the window

i reach over and shut off the small
screen behind the driver/s seat

what did you say?

oh, it doesnt matter she says beneath
the wool, rolling her eyes again, though more
pronounced and to greater effect

can you pull your scarf down please?
i ask, it/s hard to tell how youre feeling just
by your eyes

she slowly reveals a slight smile in the
soft passing glow from outside and says i love
you

Ceara Hennessey

Everyone You Know and Love Will Leave This Place One Day

Jennifer Mayfield. Server. Westfield, New Jersey.

Jennifer is twenty-four when you meet her, with a face like a Renaissance era aristocrat. Her hair curls over her ears like little springs and you constantly have to fight the urge to pull on them the way you used to pull on the curls of your youngest daughter, the one that moved to Virginia a few years back with a man who was formerly her personal trainer. Jennifer reminds you of her; she will get annoying and cry a lot when she makes a mistake but, then again, she doesn't spend hours talking to you about the powder she puts in her drinks to stay thin and then hang up the phone when you ask her when she's coming back home. Jennifer is not the first young girl you work with, but she is the first you will remember; she quits after a regular pulls on her curl, not in the motherly way you wanted to, but in the unbecoming way men touch women in public around here. You still miss the way she would laugh at you whenever you spelled words wrong on your dupe pad, her giggles the windchimes that hung over your grandmother's front porch.

Andrew Webb. Bartender. Edison, New Jersey.

Andrew complains about the traffic, but refuses to leave Edison. You want him to get out of his mother's house; he is thirty-five, much too old to be burdening his mother like that. He tells you that his mother burdens him, that she was a mean drunk when he was younger and that this is just his form of revenge. But you will always remember the nights that Andrew came into the bar, already tipsy from the flask he kept in his car, and downed vodka tonic after vodka tonic. Sometimes he

just started yelling, his words jumbled, his actions jumpy. Other times he started fights, and when he spilled onto the street like a cup of coffee you shook your head and remembered that children always carry something from their parents inside their heart or brain or liver.

Daniella Betten. Bartender. Hillside, New Jersey.

Daniella is brash, and you love that about her. When you were younger, you were shy; older, you are quiet, preferring to tell stories through the expressions on your face. But Daniella talks. She talks to you and to the line cooks and to all the customers. She takes their toddlers in her arms and lets them play with her purple hair or the taps behind the bar. One day she gets caught by the owner and he asks her not to let the kids near the beer; after that, she just colors with the kids at their table while their parents get drunk. One day she asks you if you are afraid of her and you want to tell her that you aren't, that she may be twenty years younger than you but you want to one day grow into someone like her, that you are afraid of everyone to an extent. But you are sure she won't care about any of that so you just shake your head and take your drink to your table.

Brad Frank. Server. Clark, New Jersey.

Brad likes to try to take shifts from you. He wants many shifts. He wants all the shifts the restaurant has to offer. He argues that the restaurant is not even that big, that he can handle it. He proves this by jogging around the restaurant and telling you, *see, it only took me, like, fifteen seconds, I could work by myself*. You get so annoyed with him that you offer him your shift on a Saturday night. Historically, you have given people what they want even when you don't want to; Brad is no different from your mother or your high school boyfriend. He takes your shift and proudly crosses your

name off the schedule and replaces it with his own. On Saturday morning, he calls you and tells you he has a stomach virus.

Fiona McGraw. Server. Livingston, New Jersey.

Fiona told you once that in middle school people called her Fiona Macaw because she laughs like a bird. You secretly think that's funny because it is very very true; Fiona laughs a lot and laughs loud and her squawk bounces off the thin walls of the restaurant. The men make fun of her but you were always taught that no one gives women permission to just be and so you're gonna do that, gonna just let her be. Then, one day, you trip when walking to your table and the drinks spill off of your tray. While the bus boy helps you clean it up, Fiona just stands there squawking and you think of the time in your youth when your father shot the mockingbirds in your backyard for making too much noise.

Justina Kane. Server. Lodi, New Jersey.

Justina is interested in multi-level marketing. Actually, she is obsessed with multi-level marketing. The product she sells looks like eyeshadow, but she claims it is perfume. She takes her backpack out of the servers' storage closet and pulls out several quarter sized containers to show you. The perfume is artificially colored, and the colors don't even match their supposed scents. They all smell like a vanilla Yankee Candle. In person, she never mentions them again, but she accosts you on Facebook, begging you to join her team. She sends you a message one night telling you that a lonely single mom like you could use the community of sisters that she has found. You block her and get into the bath you just drew for yourself. You think about what might happen if you banged your head on the spout a few times and slid right under.

Vincent Palumbo. Bartender. Clark, New Jersey.

Vincent looks like your ex-husband. You believe them to be around the same age too. He is Italian, a little beefier than most of the men here, with a face that looks like it is pressed up against glass. You ask him after a week if he thinks you should go tanning, and he tells you that the best thing you can do is sit out in the sun for hours until you feel like you might burst into flames. You tell him you're half Irish - you'd surely get cancer of some kind. You begin to crush on him, which leads you to start fighting with him, so you can hear the way he yells at you. He yells just like your ex-husband did. One day he asks you to go watch a movie with him. You refuse, not because you don't want to, but because you know you are either too good or not good enough for him, and whichever one it is, you aren't on his level. It's never going to work the way you want it to.

Danny Keeter. Server. Columbia, Maryland.

Danny is new to New Jersey, and it shows. He doesn't know the roads yet; he's used to the easy straight highways back home and thinks that driving here is much too complicated. He begins dating a regular, a girl named Penny with a Mohawk and a motorcycle. He falls head over heels in love with her, and when she gets a job out in Nevada he agrees to go with her. He tells you he would follow her to the ends of the Earth. This is the benefit of being young and pretty and cool: men will follow you anywhere. Two months after he leaves, you are at QuickChek at one in the morning buying cigarettes and you think you see him over by the sandwich maker, waiting for some food he ordered. You consider saying something but you want to keep the fantasy of love alive so you leave without even glancing at him and call your daughter on your way home.

Kathrine Cole. Bartender. Plainfield, New Jersey.

Katherine firmly believes youth is wasted on the young. She laments her thirty-five years to you as if you weren't ten years older than you. She has big hair that looks like a pineapple and long nails shaped like little spikes. She claims to be sensible when you first meet her. She wants to be your friend; she invites you out to lunch and to the nail salon and one night, over to her house where she dyes your light blonde hair red like a stop sign. You're horrified but you secretly like the way you look.

Katherine tells you it de-ages you. However, being Katherine's friend also involves being her ally, a soldier in the war she is waging against those who have wronged her. She talks poorly of her ex-husband, of her teenage son who clearly has a developmental problem. One night, she comes in crying, her eyeliner running down her face, her cheeks stained black. Her son ran away, she explains, to spend time with his father. Everyone she loves has abandoned her. Everyone she loves has betrayed her. She refuses to work, choosing to instead get drunk on shots of Jägermeister. When the owner attempts to throw her out, she tries to kiss him. You find out later that she broke thirteen glasses trying to get her bag out of the storage closet. She texts you the next day and calls you a bad friend. You have no idea what you did to her and you will never find out. You never hear from her again.

Randy Barlett. Chef. New York, New York.

Randy is brought in to help revise the menu and renovate the restaurant. The owner has grown tired of the polyester coverings of the booths, the permanent ringed drink stains on the tables, and the crusted beer on the spouts of the taps. Randy is here to fix these things, to bring the restaurant to a former glory that you suspect it never had. By now you've been here eight years and the place has only been open for ten. Is it fair

to assume Randy will fix it all? You ask Randy himself if he thinks that it's fair; he tells you he's worked as a fixer for years, a Gordon Ramsey type, only with more charisma. You grow close to him because unlike the owner, Randy seems to value you. It changes your life to be recognized. He asks your opinion on his new menu, allowing you to step behind the line and taste the food he has made. Everything tastes buttery and smooth; you wonder how someone could be so skilled at something you always felt was mundane. He shows you drawings he made on napkins and dupe pads of how he wants the restaurant to look. He starts spending more time there than the owner ever did, talking to you and the other staff members, getting you all excited for how things are going to change. One night, you are home, watching television in your room without the lights on. He calls you, sounding panicked, begging you to come to the Ramada he is staying at. Without thinking about it, you drive there, believing him to be in grave danger. When you get to the hotel, he is sitting on the sidewalk in a bathrobe, holding an unlit cigarette. He throws the cigarette onto the ground without lighting it and gets into your car. He smells like beer, sweat, and bleu cheese. He asks you to take him somewhere, but your sudden discomfort prevents you from driving any farther than the end of the block. He asks what happened to your husband. You tell him you don't want to talk about it. He asks if your husband cheated on you. You tell him again you don't want to talk about it. He tells you that you're too pretty to be with someone who cheats on you. You circle the block and ask him to get out of the car. When you're back in front of the hotel, he unties the tie on his bathrobe and removes the garment halfway, turning his back to you. He asks you to rub his shoulders. He tells you he will tell the owner to fire you if you don't. You press your thumbs into the muscles underneath the blades and massage him, moving in little

circles. You press so hard that your thumbs turn red. He turns around and tries to kiss you. You ask him again to get out of your car. He tries again. Now, you scream at him to get out of your car. He calls you a bitch. You scream some more. Soon, all you are doing is screaming. He has gotten out of the car and is running into the hotel. You watch him scamper away like a coward, then you start the car and drive off. The doors lock by themselves.

Louisa Connelly. Server. Iselin, New Jersey.

Louisa is fresh, with clear skin and kind eyes, frizzy hair and a snaggletooth. You train her diligently, because you know she is there to replace you. You feel for her. You feel for all women, all women in this industry, all women in all industries, even the women who have wronged you, because being a woman is so unnecessarily difficult. You told your daughter this often while you were raising her, so much so that she accused you of believing the world is an evil place. You don't believe that the world is an evil place. Instead, you just believe in what you've seen. You walk out of the bar that night knowing you will never return. You light a cigarette as soon as you get into your house. You lay in bed, phone in your hand, pulling on your cigarette, watching the smoke dissipate into the air. Your daughter used to tell you she was afraid you were going to burn out one day. You won't burn out, you think. You'll burn infinitely.

Joe Baumann

Exoskeleton

From his bedroom, Troy Geddlestone heard his parents' annual August barbecue getting underway. As guests arrived, their voices floated down the hall, muddled like they were underwater. When enough of them had rang the doorbell, the wives decided to play beer pong. While the husbands congregated on the back porch, grunting out approval as Bill Geddlestone tossed steaks onto the grill, the women tramped down to the basement and slipped into the unfinished side, where never-unpacked boxes and old, abandoned televisions surrounded the ping pong table. The women's voices floated up through his heating vent to Troy's ear, so the noise sounded like a shitty, crackling radio, interrupted and blurred by the blasting cold air. He could hear his mother Judy fling down a sleeve of unopened red plastic cups.

"Shit," he heard her yell. "We have an odd number of people."

The doorbell rang. The men were all outside, so Troy took it as his duty to play doorman. Standing on the front porch, each holding a six-pack of some kind of fancy beer, were Ricky Parker and Padraic O'Brien. Maybe they were married by now and one had taken the other's name, or maybe they'd hyphenated, or maybe they weren't wed at all. Troy didn't catch a glimpse of their hands. He gestured toward the back porch. As he let Ricky and Padraic pass, the basement door opened, and Troy's mother crowed up the stairs: "Which of you is better at throwing a ping pong ball?"

Troy watched Ricky and Padraic negotiate, and a few seconds later Padraic passed his six-pack off to

Ricky, who departed toward the back deck. Padraic trundled down the steps.

"Good luck," Troy said to no one.

*

Three days before his parents' party, gargantuan insect carapaces appeared along the US coasts, several thousand miles away. Troy flicked through images of the bugs online. They were the size of small sedans, eyes prismatic and wings like thin slabs of stained glass. The pictures, according to bloggers and reporters who had made the sojourns to Jersey Shore and Myrtle Beach and Mendocino and the Gulf of Mexico, did not do the bugs justice; in person, Troy read, they elicited a combination of awe and fear, so real and gigantic that the very idea that they might stir to life left visitors' hearts pumping fast, sweat drizzling against their hairlines and lower backs. Authorities weren't sure what to do about the insects, so they cordoned them off while government officials raced to find entomologists who could study them.

Troy clicked on his favorite: a humongous red-hued dragonfly tilting in the sand in Presidio. It stood as if by magic, its four thin legs hooked against the white beach, spindles thinner than curtain rods, the rest of the body parallel to the land, the gossamer-wispy wings collecting afternoon light, peerless white and sapphire blues filtering through the shimmering glassiness.

One theory claimed that they were art, a massive conspiratorial project like crop circles or the various works of Banksy. Some said there was no way anyone could haul that many bugs—there were hundreds, thousands—to all edges of the continent and keep it

quiet. Plus, after the first expert managed to pull a teeny tiny bit of arachnoid claw from an onyx scorpion, testing proved that the bugs were not made of glass. They were made of bug.

Judy's voice filtered up through the vent; she was screeching out rules for the beer pong tournament. Troy's face flushed. Whose mother, on the cusp of forty, hosted a beer pong tournament?

His hands went to his cell phone. Troy's parents had given him the green light to invite his friends over later, after the adults had slouched home. They'd lamented, over dinner last night, that each year the barbecue became bereft of guests earlier and earlier. Troy had sat in silence, picking at his potatoes and meatballs, until Judy slugged him in the shoulder and told him to drag his own cavalry over to take the partying helm once she and his father's posse was down for the count. He'd nodded an *Okay* but hadn't done anything about it.

He did so now, corralling the phone numbers of half a dozen of his friends into a group message. After a moment's debate he added Nate, whom he'd tried to help understand Algebra II the week before, to minimal success (in Troy's mind) and a C+ on the most recent quiz (a grand success, in Nate's). Troy had sweated through the two tutoring sessions, unable to decide if Nate's ankle clacking three, four times against his was incidental or some kind of code.

He sent the text. It wobbled up on screen in a green haze. He leaned back on his bed and stared at the ceiling while the insect on his computer screen stared at him, the glass bubbles of its eyes catching the beach light and scooping it in his direction. Troy rubbed at his temples, wondering if he could peel off his topmost layer

of skin and find something else new and special beneath.

*

When his bedroom door unexpectedly popped open, Troy sat up. Padraic was standing in the doorway at an awkward tilt, one hand on the knob.

"Sorry, sorry," Padraic said. He was tall, dirty blond, somewhere between meathead and intellectual. "I was looking for the bathroom." He tried to offer a toothy, pathetic grin. "Too much beer, I think." He frowned. "I probably shouldn't have said that." Padraic cleared his throat and pointed to the computer screen, where the dragonfly was still enlarged. "Got any theories on those guys?"

"The bugs?" Troy looked toward his laptop. "Not really. I just think they look interesting."

"They're certainly something. Mysterious."

"Yeah."

"Not that we need more mysteries to boggle our minds, do we?"

Troy didn't know what to say to that, so he nodded. H was saved by shouting that echoed down the hall, his mother calling for her beer pong partner.

"Gotta go," Padraic said. "Haven't even used the restroom yet. Remind me which door is the right one?"

"The next one."

"Ah. Missed it by that much." Padraic paused.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Padraic offered a wobbling salute and pulled the door shut. Not until he was out of sight did Troy wave and say, "Goodbye."

*

Troy's phone buzzed. He looked down and was unsurprised to see that the first response to his invitation was a rejection, something hazy and indecisive, making a general claim about parents being lame and demanding a family movie night. Troy swiped it off-screen, not bothering to reply. This had become *de rigueur* with his friends: invite them to something too early, and they refused to commit. Invite them too late, and they already had plans. He'd yet to find the balanced equation, the perfect sweet spot, for success. More declined invites would roll his way, he knew.

Troy tossed himself out of his desk chair and pulled open his bedroom door. He could still hear the buzz of noise from the basement, periodic screeches of success. Shouldn't he be the one throwing back beers in someone's soggy, decrepit basement? He knew kids at school that drank, some of them even showing up to first period stinking of well whiskey or vodka, their eyes glossy and hair tousled from a night of partying. The jocks threw keggers all the time, playing spin the bottle and strip poker with their cheerleader or dance squad girlfriends in houses full of thumping music and no parents. Troy was never invited to these shindigs, but word of their rowdiness had certainly reached his ears; they sounded like something out of the movies.

The noise of the beer pong tournament flushed up the stairs as he walked past. Troy could see his father manning the grill, clouds of steam and smoke pouring into the sky. The other men were in scattered clusters, fists curled around amber beer bottles. Their noise was muffled by the thick doors leading outside to the back deck that got little use except for when Bill got up the gumption to plaster pork chops with his homemade barbecue sauce that Troy had to admit was better than anything he'd eaten at any restaurant in his life. His father had taught him the secret recipe more than once, but Troy always forgot.

He tossed himself onto the living room couch and plucked up the X-box One controller splayed next to the remote. For ages his mother and father had locked horns over where to keep the video game console, Judy arguing that it was tacky and ill-fashioned for such a thing to take up space in the family room, Bill countering by asking what better way was there to keep Troy from becoming a basement-dwelling weirdo than by keeping his favorite things on the main floor. Bill won.

Troy kept getting himself killed, his digitized super-soldier with impossible bowling-ball-sized shoulders getting mown down by mysterious gun fire when he approached a series of abandoned cars along a blitzed highway.

"Tough time?"

Troy looked up. Standing behind him, beer bottle cocked against his hip, stood Ricky Parker.

"Hi," Troy said, trying not to mumble or stutter. He pressed the pause button and left his soldier idling at the same save point he'd come back to life at over and over.

"Yeah, I guess."

"I haven't played this one yet," Ricky said, "or I'd offer what would surely be useless advice." He tapped his beer bottle and took a sip.

Troy caught a glance at Ricky's fingers: bare. No rings, no emblems. He wanted, desperately, to ask Ricky how he'd known that Padraic would want him—not just want, really, but like, even love—when there was so much danger in the not being sure. There was so much that could have happened if he had been wrong. How did he know to take the risk? How did anyone?

But before he could bring himself to say anything, a burst of noise broke from the basement: the door opening, a stampede of women ascending the stairs. Troy sat up and swung from the couch. Ricky started to say something but Troy was gone, hopping past him down the hallway. The last thing he wanted was to get caught up in explaining his summer activities or his non-existent love life to his mother's cadre of friends, answering their questions about whether he had a girlfriend yet. He heard Judy yell something at Ricky about Padraic being a great beer pong partner, and Troy felt a strange flash of embarrassment on everyone's behalf. His gut roiled as he slid into his bedroom, shutting the door. Like a despondent, worried character in a movie, he leaned against it, ramming his head and letting out a long, sorry breath.

*

Nate's text appeared on Troy's screen. It began: *Sorry, man*. Troy swiped it away.

The party had moved into the living room. He could

hear his mother whooping about her victory in the beer pong tournament, Padraic her stupendous—her word, slurred and gummy in her drunken mouth—partner. Troy pictured him and Ricky standing idly, perhaps sheepishly, caught in the spotlight of his mom's obnoxious celebration.

He googled the bugs again. Troy couldn't put into words why he was so piqued by them, addicted, almost, to looking at their glassy bodies shining against beachfront, tiny legs like syringes plunged into the sand and majestically, magically, keeping their exoskeletons afloat.

One of the bugs, he read, had broken open.

A caterpillar, massive and segmented, each one of its fuzzy hairs a tiny glassy spike sharp enough to draw blood, had cracked along its spine, a furrow like a split in asphalt. No one was quite sure why or how the crack had appeared; the bugs on the beach in Atlantic City had been cordoned off, patrolled by officers from the CDC who took their job overly seriously. The crack, one article said, was not wide enough to allow anyone to peer inside the caterpillar, not even for an endoscope to be shoved inside. But it was noticeable and real, shimmying down the bug's back in a jagged line.

Well, Troy thought, caterpillars do change.

He imagined the bug turning to slop inside a cocoon, but maybe these bugs did away with transitional phases and went straight from child to adult, larvae to monarch, bypassing the dormancy and difficulty of the muddy, goopy middle.

Troy thought the knock on his door, gentle, as though coming from a skittish animal, might be Padraic or Ricky, rounding in to say goodbye. It was, instead, his dad, beer-eyed and tight-lipped, wanting to let Troy know that there was plenty of leftover food.

"If you're hungry."

"Okay."

"Or for your friends."

"Okay." He did not tell his father that all of his friends had declined his invitation, a spool of shitty reasons, short, chirpy texts. Instead of bothering with replies he kept reading about the bugs. No updates on the caterpillar that had split. Someone had wrangled a way to set up a live feed of the carapace, which sat stone-still on the sand. The camera was zoomed in on the crack, sharp and jagged like the skin had been cut through with a dull bread knife. The line was dark and thick.

His father's eyes were glassy. The living room was still pulsing with voices, but they were hushed, fewer. The front door had opened and closed several times, cars growling to life and squealing away into the encroaching summer twilight.

"You alright, bud?" Bill's mouth twisted into a half-grin that was meant to be inviting but looked like something from a horrible circus clown.

"Yeah. Why?"

"You've been quiet."

Troy shrugged. "It's not my party."

“Of course it is. It’s your house. It’s your party.”

Troy looked at his father. One time, Bill caught him looking at pictures of male underwear models on his computer. Troy was listening to music—a YouTube playlist of Kansas, Boston, all those old bands named for cities and states—and had forgotten to lock the door. He’d been sussing out a sudoku puzzle and scrolling through a Tumblr page that collected photos of fit, attractive men in tight, skimpy PUMP briefs and UNICO trunks. He’d heard his father start to speak, something about laundry, but Troy didn’t turn around. Nor did he try to hide what was on his computer screen. He kept humming along to “Carry On My Wayward Son” and filling in numbers, pretending he had no idea his father was there. Bill hovered, his presence obvious like a sulfurous cloud, but he eventually backed away, shutting the door with a soft *tink* of the knob, and came back twenty minutes later, announcing his presence with a loud knock.

Troy wondered when his father would say something. He still hadn’t, months later.

Bill cleared his throat. “Well, the last of our friends should be out of here in no time. Tell your friends they’re welcome whenever, okay?”

“Okay.”

“Great.”

“Great.”

His father raised his hand and spun around like a child doing some silly, unfettered dance. He slunk back down the hall. Troy shut the door.

*

The hot, expansive night waited for him. Troy slipped from his room and watched as Ricky dragged a blitzed Padraic from the living room couch; he and Judy's victory had come at the expense of any last glimmers of sobriety for either. Once Ricky and Padraic and another couple that Troy didn't recognize had gone, Bill started cleaning up, plopping beer cans and bottles into a trash bag and gathering up smeary paper plates. His mother sequestered herself in the master bedroom, running a bath. Not long thereafter his father, giving up on his efforts to tidy the place up, entombed himself there too, shutting the door like he was sealing up a vault.

Troy ducked behind the bar and pulled a random bottle of beer from a cooler where they bobbed like buoys. He looked down at the label: a blond girl in lederhosen held a frothy mug in each hand. She smiled. He could almost see his own reflection in the dark glass. Troy grabbed a second bottle and clinked them together, giving himself a solitary toast.

Troy took the bottles into his bedroom, twisted one open, and took a shallow sip, the taste stinging his tongue. He forced it down. Then he opened his internet browser in search of any news about the bugs. Nothing urgent or breaking. He took another sip of beer, this one easier, smoother. He felt it gurgle into his stomach, a warm percolation like coffee roasting.

*

After the first two beers, Troy went back and pulled three more, this time cans of the cheap stuff his mother and her cohort had been slucking down in the basement. They all tasted the same to Troy, sour and slightly

metallic, as though nickels had sat soaking in the fermenter vats. His parents were deeply asleep, the sound of his father's buzz-saw snoring escaping through their bedroom door. Troy relished the way the beers made the world tilt and spin. On his computer, the bugs gyrated slightly in his wobbling vision.

After tucking himself into bed, following a teetered journey to the bathroom to brush his teeth, he stared up at the ceiling, thinking about Ricky and Padraic. He imagined them lying in bed, temperate and satisfied in the simple fact of their togetherness. While he hummed along to the music still pumping out of his computer, the volume dialed to a low whisper, Troy tried to ignore the fact that he should have been sitting in his basement, friends laughing and joking as they watched TV and talked about girls. Maybe they'd have unplugged the X-box and brought it downstairs to murder one another on-screen. One of them might offer a spliff of weed, which he would insist they take outside to smoke, the microwave oven heat of the summer night rolling over them. Maybe he and Nate would find themselves sitting next to one another in the cubby-hole of a patio buried beneath the back deck and their feet would clack together. Like something out of a romantic comedy their hands would eventually bop together, too, and, if Troy was lucky, a kiss would bloom between them.

He pictured Ricky and Padraic as they drove home, stopping at a red light, Padraic looking out the passenger-side window. Troy imagined Padraic's gaze as he watched a frozen custard place, bustling with activity, kids in jean shorts and tank tops clustered around cement benches and shellack-wired tables, laughing and joking and threatening to smear dairy product on one another's noses. Troy could see boys snaking their arms around girls' narrow shoulders under the sodium lights,

families of five crossing the street, kids' hands clenching dripping cones: life spinning about, the mid-summer night churning with laughter and sweat. Troy pictured Ricky pulling into an upscale apartment complex, three stories high and built like it belonged on a Parisian arrondissement. He watched them shuck their shoes and plunge into bed, rolling toward one another for a goodnight kiss.

Then he pictured the insects: the caterpillar finally cracking open, reconstituted as a monarch butterfly, its glass wings creaking and bending the light in a kaleidoscope of color. And the dragonfly, taking off, its fragile legs tucking up as it ascended, disappearing into the gathered sunset.

He shucked off the top sheet and felt the cool, conditioned air on his bare legs. Troy went to the window, slicing open the Venetian blinds with his fingers so moonlight spilled across his chest like a tireless white laser. Somewhere out there, he told himself, was a future, desirable and plump and forgiving. Somewhere was someone who would touch him and hold him and glance at him like he imagined Ricky and Padraic did one another. How would he wander through the maze of the world to find that someone was a mystery. Troy felt a fishhook through his lungs. People found their way to one another all the time. Why not him? If his parents and his parents' goofy friends, why not Troy Geddlestone? Beer thrummed in his blood. He shut his eyes and let his body sway as the music on his computer came to a juddering transition—from "Separate Ways" to "You're the Inspiration"—and told himself he wouldn't open them until morning, until a week had passed, until years were gone by, as if in darkness he could travel through time to a new place, a new world, where life was simple and direct and love was everywhere.

Christie Marra

Renewal

"When I came home yesterday I found this on my door." Ms. Randolph's hand trembled as she passed the wrinkled paper across the desk.

Libba nodded and scratched down bits of Ms. Randolph's story, struggling to focus on the elderly woman's words instead of the hands of the clock. 4:30. Damn Scott for being late again! He'd promised to relieve her by 4:00, but as usual he was MIA. Scott had been disappearing for hours at a time since his divorce, probably hoping the staff would assume he was fundraising or tending to other Executive Director duties. Libba knew better. Good thing, given all the times she'd had to fill in for him in the past year. If she told the Board of Directors how much of Scott's work she actually did, would they regret selecting him over her? Probably not. They'd probably tell Scott that she'd complained. Then he wouldn't renew her appointment as deputy.

Ms. Randolph pushed the wrinkled paper closer to Libba.

Libba knew what the paper said before she read it. The few notes scribbled on her legal pad – *missed court because husband left her without car, lost receipts for rent paid, still \$300 behind* – told her that the sixty-eight-year old woman had no way to avoid eviction. The sheriff's men would change the lock on her door and place Ms. Randolph's belongings on the curb, exposing her nightmare to neighbors and strangers alike.

Libba sighed. "Is everything alright, dear?" Ms. Randolph asked.

Damn all these broken people! And damn the people who broke them! Who broke Ms. Randolph? Was it her landlord, which from the information on the paperwork was some faceless corporation, a front for old white men who smoked cigars and vacationed in the tropics with their profits. They didn't have to look at a dozen Ms. Randolphs each week, leaning forward hopefully in their chairs, believing you had some magic legal beans that would let them keep their homes. Or had Ms. Randolph been broken by her husband, the selfish coward who left his wife to not only face the judge alone, but to figure out how to get to court in a county that cared so little about its poorer people that it couldn't be bothered to have a bus system. Loud, stinky, unattractive busses would disrupt the serenity of the countryside.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Randolph," Libba began, hiding her hand beneath the desk so Ms. Randolph couldn't see her digging her fingernails into the flesh of her palm. *You see, the legal system was created by men of privilege who generations ago sold their souls in exchange for eternal profit*, she imagined herself saying. "Without any receipts," she said aloud, "we have no way of getting the judge to reopen the case."

Ms. Randolph stared at her blankly for a minute, then moved closer to the edge of her chair. "But the man in the management office promised me he'd let me stay as long as I paid something, and I paid him \$550 when my social security check came."

"I'm sorry," Libba said again. "There's nothing I can do to stop this eviction."

Ms. Randolph's eyes grew wide and started to tear, and her chin trembled. Libba opened the middle drawer

of her desk to pull out a tissue, but before she offered it, Ms. Randolph stood and extended her hand.

"Thank you. I appreciate you explaining this to me."

As Libba shook Ms. Randolph's hand, she said, "Let me give you a list of shelters that are open, and churches--"

"No need, no need," Ms. Randolph said, waving her off. "I'll find a way." She nodded at Libba, her mouth set in a thin, straight line, and walked out of the office.

Libba wanted to scream. She hurled her half-full Coke can against the wall. "Goddamn men!" The pop of can hitting wall made her feel a little better. "Screw you!"

Scott's face appeared in her doorway. "Everything okay?"

Libba forced a smile and rolled her chair closer to the Coke can. She tried to nudge it under the desk, but it hit a chair leg and rolled across the floor, stopping a few inches from Scott's foot.

His eyes travelled from the can to the light brown lines streaking the wall. He shook his head. "You know, I would fire anyone else who had the type of tantrums you have."

"I'm sorry," she said, cringing, remembering all the times her father had chastised her for her tantrums. "I'm working on the whole impulsive anger thing. Really I am."

Scott sat in the chair Ms. Randolph had vacated.

"Seriously, Libba, I can't have you exploding all the time. The staff is starting to talk."

Not as much as they talk about you missing meetings to rendezvous with your new girlfriend. "Scott, I'm so sorry. But can't we talk about this tomorrow?" Libba glanced at the clock. "I was hoping to get on the road by 4:30, and it's 4:45 already."

"No, Libba," Scott said. "Every time I try to talk to you about your outbursts, you suddenly have somewhere to go."

"Scott, I---" The chirping of Libba's cell phone saved her. "Hey, Al, is everything OK with the kids?" She mouthed *I'm sorry* and raised her hands in a sign of helplessness. Scott stood, shaking his head.

"We will discuss this tomorrow." He closed the door behind him.

"The kids are fine!" Al said. "Your dress is here. I thought you might want to pick it up on your way home from work so you could take it to be altered tomorrow."

Libba bit her lip to keep from telling her ex-husband what she really wanted to do with the bridesmaid dress she'd paid \$200 for *before* the impending alteration costs. When Al told her he was in love with Joe, only a year after he'd divorced her, she'd thought, *Well, at least he can't marry him.* But then the Supreme Court changed the rule and when Al asked her to be in the wedding party, she'd said yes. What else could she say after six years of celebrating every birthday and holiday with Al and Joe, telling both of them she loved them an inappropriate number of times, and swearing she couldn't be happier for them?

"I'm heading out of town for the night. I'll pick it up tomorrow when I get the kids from you." She didn't understand why she still felt guilty every time she didn't do exactly what Al wanted.

"The kids are at my sister's this week. I've told you that half a dozen times." The edge of annoyance in Al's voice still hurt Libba, but not as much as it had when they were married, and it appeared when she diapered their twins too loosely or made the bed without hospital corners.

"I'm on top of it," she promised, running quickly through her schedule for the week. She'd have to miss her favorite dance class to get the damn dress altered.

"I'm sure you are, Little One." Al's voice softened, and Libba smiled. In spite of everything, Al would always claim a piece of her heart.

When Libba finally pulled her battered VW Bug out of the legal aid parking lot, the dash clock read 5:05. Stopped at a light, she shot a text to Calder: "Running late. Will make it up to U when I get there. Don't forget – 2day is Renewal Day!! ☺" She chuckled. Calder probably wouldn't even remember that they'd promised to renew their relationship each month. Maybe she'd design a sexy ritual for every renewal day. Throughout the hour drive, she considered different options.

She could show up in nothing but a thong and low-cut negligee every Renewal Day.

Renewal Day could be the day they played with new toys.

Every month, they could retie their relationship knot

– literally. She reached over to the passenger seat and ran her hand over the tangle of rope. Yes, retying their knot might be the perfect renewal ritual.

It was dark by the time she arrived at Calder's, and she had to feel her way through the trees and down the path to his cottage. More shack than cottage, Calder's place was just one large room with a small stove, dorm-room sized refrigerator and sink tucked into one corner, a curtain not quite hiding the dingy tub and toilet beside them. Libba felt a little sad every time she came. But when she saw Calder standing in the doorway, broad chest bare and mouth spread into a grin, excitement bumped sadness out of the way.

Calder was *the one*. Libba was certain, and so was Calder. "You're the yin to my yang," he liked to tell her. Yes, Calder was the hippie she'd always dreamed of meeting, unconcerned with convention, happy to forego his family's fortune to live his simple life, and finding Calder now explained why all her earlier relationships failed.

Fifteen minutes after she arrived they were naked, Libba bound to a kitchen chair, blindfolded, Calder lightly tracing circles around her breasts with the edge of a feather duster they had purchased for such erotic uses. He switched to the miniature whip they'd ordered, maneuvering it so that she moaned in pleasure rather than pain. Hands, lips, tongue and toys – he played them all until Libba lay flopped across the chair, an erotically spent Raggedy Ann.

When she'd recovered, Libba led Calder to the recliner and gently pushed him into it. She blindfolded him, pulled his arms above his head and tied his wrists tightly together, securing his ankles to the chair legs

with the thick rope she'd brought. She knelt, tugged off his boxers, and lowered her head between his thighs.

Before she began, she asked playfully, "You know it's our Renewal Date, don't you? Let's renew!" Lowering her head again, she started to giggle.

Calder said, "Yeah, um, about that."

Libba sat back and studied his face.

He stared at the far wall, frowning.

"What?" she asked. "You want to renew, right?"

Calder continued to stare silently at the wall.

"Calder?" She hated that it sounded like a desperate plea.

"Can you untie me?" Calder asked.

"Answer me!" She had no desire to make him comfortable.

"Libba, please."

"Answer!"

Calder squirmed, turning his head from side to side, and twisting his wrists and ankles in an unsuccessful effort to free himself.

"Well, Calder? Do you want to renew or don't you?"

"I...I...don't know."

"You don't know?" Libba grabbed one of Calder's

ankles in each of her hands and dug her nails into his skin.

"Hey! Ouch! Lemonade!" he screamed their safe word. "Lemonade!"

Libba dug her nails deeper into his flesh. "Why don't you know?"

"It's...I...It's just not what I want."

"Why?"

"I...no reason, really. I'm just listening to my heart."

"I see," she told him, slowly rising to her feet. "I can't help admiring a man who listens to his heart." When Calder continued to struggle to free himself, she added, "I'm game for one last round if you are." She leaned into him and started their final round while he squirmed. Finally, he stopped resisting. Once he was completely responding to her movements, she whispered into his ear, "I want to make our last time special. And I have an idea." She ran her tongue along the edge of his ear. "Don't go anywhere."

Calder's only knives were what Libba's mother would have called *butter knives*, their rounded, dull tips utterly useless. Libba dug around in the back of the drawer until she felt something sharp. She pulled it out. A corkscrew!

In front of Calder again, she ran the fingers of her left hand up his right leg, slowing as she moved up his thigh. When her free fingers reached the crease where his left thigh met his pelvis, she shifted the corkscrew into her left hand and dug the point into Calder's skin.

"Holy shit!!" Calder screamed.

Smiling, Libba held Calder's leg down with her right hand for leverage and twisted with her left.

"Ah! No! Ah!" Calder's high-pitched scream pleased Libba. She twisted until she felt the skin puncture. Red dripped down Calder's thigh as she withdrew the corkscrew.

"Stop...please...I ... I'm sorry .. I want to renew, I want to-"

Libba shifted the corkscrew into her right hand and deftly twisted it into the crease between thigh and pelvis.

"I'm so sorry," she said in her most professional voice. "But the time period for renewal has expired."

She twisted the corkscrew harder. The blood running down Calder's thigh exhilarated her. She began to understand how Scott felt when he made her cover for him at a lunch meeting of their board of directors so he could screw his girlfriend in the backseat of his car.

"Ah, Ah!" Calder wailed. "Stop! Please stop!" he screamed.

Libba watched two scarlet lines race to Calder's ankles. She felt surprisingly calm, better than she'd felt in years, stronger than ever. But as Calder continued to scream, she hesitated. This was wrong, completely out of proportion, and the pleasure she was deriving from it suddenly troubled her. She should wipe the blood from Calder's skin, clean and bandage the wounds she'd made, show him the kindness he hadn't given her. She stood and took a step toward the bathroom, trying to

remember where she'd seen the Band Aids and Neosporin.

"I...I, I love you Libba."

She turned back to Calder and stared at his blindfolded face. But instead of Calder she saw Al at the altar on their wedding day. *For better and for worse, until death do us part.* Or until Libba ruined her figure having children, time etched thin lines around her eyes, and she'd lost all strands of confidence she'd had.

"I love you," Calder repeated.

"Mother fucker," Libba whispered, and she jabbed the edge of the corkscrew into Calder's gut and twisted it hard and fast.

Thomas Jacobs

Fear

I wasn't even supposed to be in Berlin. There was an apocalyptic storm, the plane was rerouted, and I found myself with an eight-hour layover for a standby seat on the next flight to Madrid. I shot an email to my boss and set off on a walk around the terminals to stretch my legs.

I was just making my way back from B Terminal when I spotted Taslimah coming from the opposite direction. There was no one I'd rather have bumped into anywhere in the world. I practically shouted her name. She started at the sound but didn't at first see me. When she found me, she smiled, and the guts fell out of my belly.

"My God, Charley! I'm so sorry I didn't see you. I wasn't expecting..."

We kissed on each cheek. It was not everyone called me Charley.

"You'd no reason to."

"I thought you were based out of Madrid?"

"Yes. I was in London, but the storm – I'm on the layover from hell. But anyway, what about you?"

It had been a few years.

"I'm here. Not, you know, *here* here." She indicated the headphones kiosk just beside us. "Here, in Berlin."

"Who are you with?"

She flashed a closed-mouth smile. "I'm freelancing. I share a flat with a couple of others. Kreuzberg; you know. Are you still with *FT*?"

I nodded. "You're heading home?"

She nodded. "Walk me to the exit?"

"Of course." My heart sank. "Can I take your bag?"

She pursed her lips for a moment but her smile broke through. "You were always such a gentleman."

"You look – unrivaled."

"Charley." Her eyes were soft, her mouth firm. She took up her bag, pulled the strap back over her shoulder. "After that flight? I very much doubt it."

But I was right. She looked fantastic, stylish and very Berlin. Her hair was shorter now, chin-length and voluminous, black and iridescent as coal. She wore dark jeans, black flats and a white tank top under a black leather jacket. Her wrists and throat jangled with silver.

Once, for a few months, she had worn a ring.

She walked briskly; I slow-stepped. We caught up quickly. Not much had changed with me. I worked too much. Got *tapas* with sources and other journalists. It seemed there was no place on earth from which she had not reported.

We came at last to a stop beside the exit corridor. She would walk one direction, I the other. I probed for any detail that would warrant more conversation. I lingered until I saw the light turn behind her eyes. She was distracted now, scanning the television sets in the

nearby gates blaring CNN.

So I said goodbye. Let her remember me now as someone who knew when to stop.

To my surprise, she leaned in for one final embrace.

I held her, but she was limp in my arms. At first, I did not understand. When I tried, at last, to pull away, her weight came with me. People around us began to murmur. I took her by the arms and tried to get a better look at her face. Her lips were pulled back in a silent snarl of pain. Her eyes were wide, wild and red with tears, locked behind me.

I turned.

It took me a minute. Probably because I didn't want to see. An American reporter had been kidnapped and was being held hostage somewhere in the wasteland of Syria.

Taslimah at last found her voice.

"Jonathan."

*

Jonathan.

I'd known him well. Well enough. We were in the same class in J-school at Columbia. He was tall and good-looking in a maddening, easy way. His clothes always looked clean and seemed to fit right. I thought at first he came from money because that would explain it, but the opposite was true. He was from the Lower East Side, Jewish. Both his parents were public school

teachers.

We drank together a handful of times; we weren't close.

It didn't help that I knew he was in love with Taslimah.

*

I accompanied her back to her flat in a cab. The roads were icy; the cab crawled along in the snow. I managed to convince Taslimah that there was no way my flight would be leaving in the morning.

"I can be helpful," I'd tried to assure her over protestations.

She relented from exhaustion.

She had recovered some of her nerve by the time we pulled up to her building. I paid for the cab, shoving a wad of Euros over to the driver and thanking him in mangled Turkish. Taslimah was already inside the apartment vestibule when I caught up with her.

"The elevator doesn't work."

Her flat was on the third floor. It was wide and spacious, neatly appointed in Scandinavian austerity.

She set her bags down in her room, then came back into the living area, closing the door behind her. She went to the fridge, where a large calendar was affixed with heavy tourist magnets of Bruges, St. Peter's Cathedral. She flipped to February, ran her finger along the week.

"Everyone's out. I'm home alone."

"I can make coffee."

The words didn't seem to make sense to her. She raised a hand to her forehead, pressed the base of her palm into her eyebrow. "Yes. That's fine. No, tea."

"Tea." I filled the kettle; banged around in the cupboards.

I waited until the pot was ready to join her in the living room. Taslimah had pulled her feet up underneath herself. After a minute she pulled an afghan from the couch back and drew it around her shoulders. I set the teapot on the coffee table and sat across the low black couch from her.

"Are you – "

Taslimah turned to me with fire in her eyes.

"Am I what?"

"Nothing."

"You're disgusting, Charley."

"This isn't about me."

"How could it not be? Everything is, always." She shook her head. "I can't believe I invited you in."

"You don't even know what I was going to ask."

Her eyes narrowed. "How stupid do you think I am? Am I with him? Am I *fucking* him?"

"I was going to ask if you were in love with him."

“Go to hell.”

“This must be a nightmare. I mean, I knew him. Know him. It is a nightmare. It’s a nightmare, Taslimah, and I’m not in love with him. I can’t imagine...”

She did not look at me, only stared out the window. The windowpanes were starting to fill with snow. It was almost impossible to see for the storm.

“I should go.”

I stood. For some unfathomable reason, I felt compelled to pour her a cup of tea.

My bag was just inside the front door. I could get a cab back to the airport.

“I’m going after him.”

“What?”

She turned to me, wild-eyed. “I’m going after him, Charley. I’m going to get back inside and find him.”

I just stood there. Her expression had changed. The fear was there, still, but there was something else too, that regality, that override that I found absolutely intoxicating about her.

“It’s almost impossible to get in.” It was the obvious protestation.

She began to shake her head.

“But I believe that you can do it.”

I could see that this surprised her. She nodded.

"I can help. I can make calls. I can reach out to my – my contacts."

She thought about this for some time.

"Yeah, okay."

*

After J-school, I went to work for *Bloomberg*. Taslimah was a year behind us – me and Jonathan.

We met him for drinks one night. He was working for the *Times*. He had just gotten back from Afghanistan. I made a few self-deprecating jokes about reporting on the wolves of Wall Street. Characteristically, Jonathan hadn't laughed.

Somehow, Taslimah got him to talk about being there. About riding with a convoy that hit an IED, how he had scrambled out of a toppled Humvee and followed a nineteen-year-old gunner behind an embankment to wait an eternity for the future to reopen to them. He told it all like he was talking about a delay on the F train.

"Were you scared?" An absurd question. But I had to know. Was this the difference between us?

"Shitless." He gave a half-cocked grin.

"What was – what moved you? There. Most."
Taslimah.

Jonathan sat for a long time.

"The rural villages. The simplicity, the poverty. But it's something more than that."

He was quiet for a long time. I swished my beer in circles, ungenerous, bored. Taslimah wore an expression I had never seen before. She was ... waiting.

"There's this sense, in the villages, that – " He paused and again that half-grin graced his lips. "Do you believe in God?"

"I was raised Catholic, but I'm agnostic." My easy answer, and true enough.

Taslimah was slower to answer. I waited alongside Jonathan. It had never come up.

At last she shook her head.

Jonathan took all this in. He sat for a moment, clearly working out how much he wanted to let us heathens in. A long look at Taslimah steeled him.

"I thought I had fallen away from my faith, but I was overwhelmed in the mountains by the – " he searched for the right word. "The weakness, the vulnerability of life. It suffused the sand, the air. The wrinkly olive trees. I had the overwhelming sense of our contingency, just *radical* contingency; and it was paired with... gratuity. Gratuitous love. At any rate, I don't think it was just me."

*

That night in bed, Taslimah told me that Jonathan had offered to pass along her resume when the time came.

"When did this happen?"

84 "When we were talking."

"I don't remember."

"I doubt you were listening. You just... checked out."

We lay in the dark in silence.

"Is that what you want? To go to Afghanistan?"

"I'm tired."

"It's a simple question. I thought, you know – it just seems like it's going to be hard for there to be an 'us' if you're over there."

"I'm not going to Afghanistan, Charley."

"That's not the point."

"What's the point?"

"I just didn't know that's what you wanted."

Taslimah rolled to face me.

"What do *you* want?"

"To hold the powerful to account."

"Working at *Bloomberg*?"

"It's not forever. Besides, I'm getting a sense of how the rich – "

"I know, I know."

"I didn't know that was a problem."

"Good-night, Charley."

*

We worked side by side. Everyone we knew had heard the news – the world knew.

I messaged a buddy of mine, Karim, based out of Ankara. He had sources in the DoD, the Embassy, CIA. If she was actually going to go through with it, she would have to go through Turkey. He'd know who to call next.

-what's your interest? i'm triaging, C. my phone is exploding with this shit.

-Knew him in school

-shit sorry. Will see what I can find.

-k thanks. I'm with his gf. She wants to go in.

-talk her off that ledge. Jesus C you gotta nix that hard.

I looked up. Taslimah was huddled in her afghan. Her laptop was open on her lap. She was typing furiously. From time to time, she turned her attention to her phone, which vibrated almost constantly.

"Any news?"

She didn't seem to hear the question. I turned back to my own laptop, wracking my brain for someone, anyone, else to reach out to.

"No."

I looked up. She had withdrawn from the machinery around her. Moved inwards. The windows rattled with the wind. Taslimah set her laptop, still open, on the coffee table, her phone screen down on the keyboard. She took up her cup of tea and took a sip.

"I never wanted to fall in love with him." She moved her eyes to mine. "I'm sorry, I – "

"It's okay. It was a long time ago." My innards twisted with remembrance. Not so long. "When did you – "

"Fall in love?"

I nodded.

"If I am brutally honest, it was New York. But I think you already knew that. I think that's why you let me go. You were many things, Charley, but you weren't..." She seemed to search for the word.

"Possessive?"

She snorted. "A fighter. Maybe if you had fought for me."

"If I had fought for you, I would have ruined you. I have *some* pride. I set the bird free and it did not come back. You never loved me."

"You were good to me."

"I would have been, always."

"Jonathan – loves me. But it's different. I'm his second love. I think that's why I was drawn to him. I couldn't be a first love."

"I don't understand that. You don't deserve that."

"Talk to my mother." Taslimah laughed bitterly. She set the tea down loudly on the coffee table. She rose, discarding the afghan. "I need to pee."

She went to the far side of the flat. In the noiselessness of the stormy night, I could hear everything, the details that I remembered from our cohabitation. I never turned my head, but I would not have been surprised to see that she had left the door ajar, the way she used to. I could see her standing, pulling her underwear up before her jeans. Running her hands, wet from washing, through her hair. What the hell was I doing there?

She reemerged and returned to the couch by way of the kitchen. She brought a bottle of whiskey and two tumblers.

"I can't do this alone."

"I can't do anything alone."

She smiled at that and poured us each a fingerful. We tapped glasses and took a sip.

"I'm glad you're here, Charley."

I'd have replied if she had remained there. She had moved inwards again. I checked my phone for updates. The *Times*, the *Post*, the *Journal*: everyone was covering the story. There were no new details. I had little doubt that if there was news, it would get to us fast. By now everyone who knew us – who knew him – knew we were waiting. I sent a couple of follow up texts.

88 "Do you remember when he came to New York?"

Taslimah.

"Mm."

"I think that night was the first time that I understood myself."

"I have no idea what you mean."

Taslimah stared into the pool of whiskey. "I never understood before that night that I had spent my entire life running from fear. Have."

I laughed. "Come on. That's some kind of reverse psychology. You're fearless."

She shook her head. "I'd have stayed, Charley, if you had seen it too. But you couldn't see that."

"But Jonathan did?"

"I don't know. But I understood that he wasn't like me. Like you."

"He's not afraid?"

"Jesus, Charley. That's not what I'm saying. He feels fear, he's afraid of being shot at, of being killed. He'd probably scared out of his goddamned mind right now."

I didn't dare interject.

"What I'm saying is." She breathed deeply through her nose. "He isn't ruled by it. I can't – can't put my finger on it, exactly. He's not a stoic. He moves through the world with that sense of what he talked about, that sense of *gratefulness* for the mess of it all. And I can't

even imagine what that would be like. I've been chasing it, racing around the world trying to get my hands on whatever that is. I'm chasing a high I've never even known. I just know I want to grab it in my hands and breathe it and smother myself in it."

She wiped away a tear. "I'm rambling. It's the whiskey, the stress – it's... fuck, Charley."

Her phone pinged.

Taslimah sat for a long time staring past it. She nibbled from time to time at her lower lip. The whiskey in its tumbler sat unfinished in the palm of her hand.

After another minute the phone pinged again. I reached for it. She had an email from another reporter. I knew her byline.

"Anikah says that if you can get to Turkey, she can get you by bus across the border. After that, there's a network..."

Taslimah nodded. She was quiet for a long time.

"This is insanity, isn't it?"

"I mean – yes, but... Yes, Tas."

"I suppose I should let the government do this. I'm sure there are policies, procedures."

"Probably, yes."

She jutted out her jaw. Turned her gaze again to the window.

"I just don't know..."

"What you should do?"

She shook her head. There was no impatience in it. "I don't know whether the fear is in the staying or the going."

"I mean – it's in the going, Tas. Right? It's in trying to get into *Syria*."

"Perhaps." Taslimah nodded. I had lost her again.

"Anyway, I'll tell her to plan for two. For two of us."

She turned to look at me. "Don't even start."

"It's not your decision." My heart was pounding. I thought I might shit myself right there on her spotless Scandinavian couch. But I had the insane need not to be sidelined for this. "I know Jonathan, too. I'm not letting you do this alone. It's too dangerous."

"You're going to protect me?" That same smiling incredulity, maddening in its unintentionality.

"Yes. I mean, no. It'll be what it is. You just don't have to go there alone."

"Charley, you're being absurd."

"It's too late." I sent a hasty email back to Anikah. "I'm on the hook now. We're on the hook. We can face your fear together."

"It's your fear, Charley."

My fear.

*

The universal fear. Fear of death. Fear of pain.

No, it's worse than that. Taslimah knew it. Jonathan knew it. They were kind enough not to say anything, not to laugh at me, even behind my back, even after.

Fear of discomfort. Fear of inconvenience. Fear of not being fluent, not being understood. Not really understanding.

Not being what she really wanted.

My fear.

*

We were down in the Bowery, just coming out of a show at the Ballroom. Jonathan was there, along with a couple of other J-school friends, and despite my buzz, I was pissy. I walked ahead of the group. I managed to get across Grand street alone, leaving the others on the other side of the traffic.

Taslimah and Jonathan were talking. He was leaning against the light post, arms crossed. He said something that made her laugh, and she put her hand on his forearm. I clicked my jaw and turned away.

A short, wide-faced man was standing too close to me. His head was stubbly, and though it was early spring, he wore a heavy black overcoat. One of his eyes was swollen shut. A seeping laceration ran from his forehead to his cheek. I started.

"Buddy, you got a few pennies you can spare, a dime?"

"Guy, you need to get to a hospital." I turned to traffic, raised a hand. "I'll pay for your cab."

"I asked for *cash*," he hissed, and he took me by the front of my shirt. He was holding a short curved-bladed knife. He pushed it hard against my belly.

"You need a hospital," I said stupidly. He couldn't have been aware of the bleeding eye or it would have made sense. A cab made *sense*. Unless the whole thing was fake, the cut and the eye were a makeup job calmly applied to put people like me off my guard. That made sense, too, if you thought about it.

There was a shout and a screeching of tires. Horns blared. I turned to see Taslimah dashing across the street, through the deathly slow cluster of cabs turning off Grand onto the Bowery. She was pulling Jonathan behind her by the hand.

I did not think of the danger to Taslimah, to Jonathan. If they were going to hold hands while they *saved* me...

I ran.

*

I woke to the feeling of my phone vibrating under my fingertips. I pressed it on, but I was so bleary-eyed I couldn't see the time. I blinked my eyes into focus. The snowstorm had stilled, but the sky was dark. The phone's face came into focus. It was three fifty in the morning.

I had a text from Karim.

-Are you there, Charles?

A text in full sentences.

-Yeah. Here.

-Is Jonathan's girlfriend still with you?

I looked around. At some point, exhausted from the planning and the logistics, we had drifted off on the couch. I had fallen asleep still seated, but Taslimah was stretched out under the afghan, her head at the far side of the couch, her feet tucked under my thigh. My hand was on her calf. I pulled it quickly away, then set it back. The smallest thing.

-Asleep.

-I'm sorry, Charles, but you're going to have to break the news.

The phone buzzed a few times, but I could no longer see the words. I felt hot all over, just waves of heat. I thought I was going to throw up.

I leaned forward to pour myself another glass of whiskey. My hands were shaking like crazy. I poured the whiskey. I knocked over the bottle as I reached for the glass. It slipped, clanging loudly against the glass top of the coffee table. The bottle landed on its side. I watched as the liquor came glugging out, running in rivulets across the table, her papers, under our laptops.

Taslimah moaned softly. Somehow through it all she had remained asleep on the couch beside me. I knew that if I moved she would awaken.

I sat in the darkness and listened to the dripping of the whiskey. From time to time my phone buzzed to

remind me that I had not yet seen the messages from Karim.

I turned it off.

The End

Seth Bleiler
Untitled



Oberon Waters

Lazy Saturday



Contributors

Anastasia Jill is a queer writer living in the South. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and Best Small Fiction Anthology and has been featured with Poets.org, Lunch Ticket, FIVE:2:ONE, apt, Anomaly Literary Journal, 2River, Gertrude Press, Minola Review, and more.

Benjamin Gossman wrote this to see it as written.

Brendan Connolly's work has been featured by Genre: Urban Arts, OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters, Gravel Magazine and elsewhere. He lives and writes in New York City.

Ceara Hennessey earned her B.A. in creative writing from Seton Hall University in May of 2019 and was a 2019 recipient of the South Wind Thesis Award for Creative Writing. She was a lead editor of Seton Hall's literary magazine and is currently attending the New York State Summer Writers Institute at Skidmore College.

Choya Randolph is an adjunct professor at Adelphi

University with a B.A. in Mass Communications and M.F.A. in Creative Writing. Her work has been published in Rigorous Magazine, midnight & indigo, Her Campus, The Crow's Nest, NNB News and elsewhere. She is a proud Floridian who lives happily on Long Island in New York.

Christie Marra is a native New Yorker who works as a legal aid lawyer and teaches dance fitness in Richmond, VA. Although she cares deeply about social justice and loves her day job, writing has always been her passion. She returned to it once her two children left home to pursue their own dreams. Christie's stories have appeared on-line in "Little Death" and "The Write Launch" and in print in "The Fredericksburg Literary and Art Review." When she isn't writing, dancing or fighting for social justice, Christie is on a pole somewhere practicing for her next pole sport competition.

Daniel Casey has a MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Notre Dame. Most recently, his poems and reviews have most recently appeared in Moonchild Magazine, Philosophical Idiot, and Entropy. He can be found on Twitter as @JustDanielCasey.

Emma Johnson-Rivard received her Masters in Creative Writing from Hamline University. She currently lives in Minnesota with her dogs and far too many books. Her work has appeared in Mistake House, the Nixes Mate Review, and Moon City Review. Her chapbook, The Witch's Cat And Her Fateful Murder Ballads, was released by the Esthetic Apostle.

Ishita Sharma is a seventeen year old high school graduate from India, who plans to pursue psychology in UK. She is a proud Ravenclaw, and has been the editor of her school newspaper for the past two years. When

she isn't writing, Ishita can be found on the basketball court or in the kitchen, whipping up treats for her family.

Jack Spencer is a writer living in Kansas City. I am currently studying Literature at the University of Missouri--Kansas City.

Jeffrey Fisher holds four higher education degrees and has been working at Touro College for over 17 years. He is currently going for an M.Phil./Ph.D. at LIU Post. He has studied at Ithaca College, LIU Post, Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law, Yeshiva University, Touro College and Teachers College, Columbia University. He is a native New Yorker.

Joe Baumann's fiction and essays have appeared in Electric Literature, Electric Spec, On Spec, Barrelhouse, Zone 3, Hawai'i Review, Eleven Eleven, and many others. He is the author of Ivory Children, published in 2013 by Red Bird Chapbooks. He possesses a PhD in English from the University of Louisiana-Lafayette. He has been nominated for three Pushcart Prizes and was nominated for inclusion in Best American Short Stories 2016 and was a 2019 Lambda Literary Fellow in Fiction. He can be reached at joebaumann.wordpress.com.

Jose Seigar is an English philologist, a highschool teacher, and a curious photographer. He is a fetishist for reflections, saturated colors, details and religious icons. He feels passion for pop culture that shows in his series. He considers himself a travel and an urban street photographer. His aim as an artist is to tell tales with his camera, to capture moments but trying to give them a new frame and perspective. Travelling is his inspiration. However, he tries to show more than mere postcards from his visits, creating a continuous conceptual line

story from his trips. The details and subject matters come to his camera once and once again, almost becoming an obsession. His three most ambitious projects so far are his "Plastic People", a study on anthropology and sociology that focuses on the humanization of the mannequins he finds in the shop windows all over the world, "Response to Ceal Floyer for the Summer Exhibition" a conceptual work that understands art as a form of communication, and his "Tales of a city", an ongoing photo-narrative project taken in London.

He usually covers public events with his camera showing his interest for social documentary photography. He has participated in several exhibitions, and his works have also been featured in international publications. He writes for The Cultural Magazine (Spain) about photography and for Memoir Mixtapes about music (L.A.). He has collaborated with VICE Spain and WAG1 Magazine (text and photography for both), and his works have been featured in PhotoVogue. Lately, he has directed a short film: Víctor (1997) and a video art piece: Hot Summer, based on true fantasies.

Kalyani Bindu is a research assistant at the Indian Institute of Science. 'Two Moviegoers' was her first poetry collection and a forthcoming one is 'The Love-Stricken Buddha'. Her poems have appeared in several Indian Journals: Madras Courier, Muse India, Indian Review, Navalokam, Bhashaposhini, Ethos Literary Journal, White Crow Art Daily and Modern Literature.

Lauren Rhoades is the director of the Eudora Welty House & Garden in Jackson, Mississippi and an MFA candidate at the Mississippi University for Women. She is working on a collection of essays about Judaism, race, and the South.

Lindsey Schaffer is a current undergraduate student and aspiring writer. She has one poem published in the online publication Rue Scribe.

Lisa Montagne has been a college English instructor for more than 20 years. She has taught at University of California Irvine, Irvine Valley College, and Long Beach City College. She also trains faculty in educational technology at Irvine Valley College and designs writing workshops for Running Wild Press. Montagne has a B.A. in English with a drama minor, an M.A. in English literature, a teaching credential in English, and a doctorate in higher education. She is also a visual and performance artist, writer, and poet. Her creative non-fiction and personal narrative essays have been published by Running Wild Press, The Ear literary and arts magazine, and Boomer Reviews.

Oberon Waters this is a lazy Saturday- a comic depicting one of my favorite experiences with my boyfriend, where we are completely at rest and calm and have nothing to worry about for the rest of the day.

Peter Dietrich is originally from the UK, and after travelling the world non-stop for over 40 years as freelance reporter/film-maker, writing non-stop all the way in various forms, he feels it a good moment to pause and try to see some of my more personal writings read and published.

RC deWinter's poetry is anthologized in New York City Haiku (NY Times, 2017), Uno: A Poetry Anthology (Verian Thomas, 2002), Cowboys & Cocktails: Poetry from the True Grit Saloon (Brick Street Poetry, April 2019), Havik (Las Positas College, May 2019), Castabout Literature (Dantoin/Hilgart, June 2019) The Flickering Light (Down in the Dirt, June 2019), in print in 2River

View, Down in the Dirt, Genre Urban Arts, Meat For Tea: The Valley Review, Pilcrow & Dagger, Pink Panther Magazine, Scarlet Leaf Review, The New York Times and in numerous online literary journals.

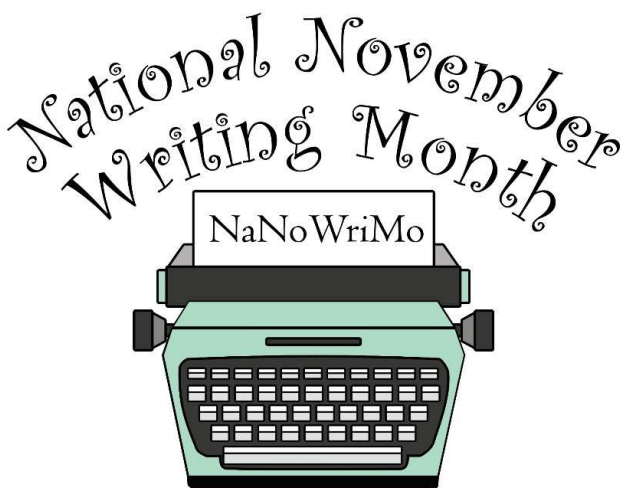
Seth Bleiler has been attaching odd words to funny faces for longer than memory serves. He is a classically trained artist who spent a lot of (borrowed) money to be reminded of where his true passions have always been. The ever-changing strangeness of society and human interaction is of endless fascination for me.

Steve Gerson is an emeritus English professor from a Midwestern community college, writes poetry about life's dissonance and dynamism. He's proud to have published in Panoplyzine (winning an Editor's Choice award), The Hungry Chimera, Toe Good, The Write Launch, Ink & Voices, Duck Lake, Coffin Bell, Poets Reading the News, Crack the Spine, White Wall Review, Abstract, and Pinkley Press.

Thomas Jacobs was raised overseas, mostly in South America, Turkey and Spain. He is a graduate of St. John's College in Annapolis, Md. His fiction has appeared most recently in River River Journal, The Oddville Press, and The Oakland Review, among others.

Travis Stephens is a tugboat captain who resides with his family in California. A graduate of University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, recent credits include: GYROSCOPE REVIEW, 2RIVER, GRAVITAS, SHEILA-NA-GIG, RAW ART REVIEW, TINY SEED LITERARY JOURNAL, APEIRON REVIEW, and THE DEAD MULE SCHOOL OF SOUTHERN LITERATURE.

Writing a novel alone can be difficult, even for seasoned writers. NaNoWriMo helps you track your progress, set milestones, connect with other writers in a vast community, and participate in events that are designed to make sure you finish your novel. Oh, and best of all, it's free!



This is a great resource to use even outside the month of November!

