



Variant Literature Journal

Excerpt from Fall 2018 Studies
A Portfolio
By Maria Grissino

Must-Read Fiction
Malcolm Graham Cooper
Martin Krafft
Kalyani Bindu

Featured Poets
Julia Aloï
Tuur Verheyde
Katherine Martini

Including Comics
Allen Forrest
David Warner

And More!

Issue 2 Winter 2019

Variant Literature Inc

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Variant Literature Journal – Volume 2

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Letters & Comments

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FROM THE EDITOR

The months since our first issue have been very exciting for us as we've navigated potential avenues that would allow us to support authors & artists on a bigger scale. We continue to enjoy the submissions sent to us and naturally owe a never-ending thanks to all those that shared their work with us. These issues are not possible without you!

I'd like to also express my gratitude to our newest team member Ceara Hennessey. Since Ceara's publication in our first issue she has gone on to successfully place four more stories of fiction – not an easy feat in such a short amount of time! Without her help over this holiday season I fear we would have fallen poorly behind schedule with all that we have going on.

Lastly, I'd like to mention our upcoming chapbook contest. UNC professor Ross White, director of Bull City Press, and author of *How We Came Upon the Colony* and *The Polite Society* will be judging the finalists. We will be awarding \$250 to the winner alongside 20 author copies printed in a 5x8" perfect bound book. Updates and additional information will be posted on our website in the following weeks.

Wishing you a happy new year,
Tyler Pufpaff

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Melinda Gonzalez

Turn to the Sun (Gira al Sol)

What if:

I wrote a poem about daffodils
instead of worrying about how I will pay my rent next month
I wrote a poem about daisies
whilst ignoring debates on whether my blood quantum
measures quite enough

What if:

I wrote a poem about carnations
without remembering the stiff cold bodies laid in caskets much
too young

Tio, te extraño.

I could write a poem about tulips
without feeling the pressure to always sacrifice self as mother

What if:

I could write a poem about baby's breath
recalling those days when I was loved,
before his smiles faded to crooked mouth, ajar with rage

What if:

I could write a poem
turn my face to the sun
be a flower.

Madison Whatley

I Want to Create Something Else

My sixth-grade teacher, Ms. Beeber,
once told my class, *Wait*

*until you fall in love
for the first time—*

you will write so much poetry.

I hate that she was right
because I can't write anything

that isn't about your arms.
I can't be with anyone

who doesn't look
like my recurring dream.

If I could time travel,
I wouldn't want to see you,

knowing how you'll unravel,
but I would go back and tell

Ms. Beeber to shove it.
I'm too far gone now.

I can't look away
from the destruction

long enough to unpack
the suitcase waiting

on my ex's floor
and then repack it,

still unsure of where
I am going.

Tuur Verheyde

The Blue Lagoon

“The sound of the rain
needs no translation.”

I drink from the gourd
Of Alan Watts’s gilded
Talk— Please, Reader,
Listen to him talk—
And hangovers vanish
Like the spaces in between parted beings.

Wiggles of the world unite!
Cosmic consciousness fits
Nicely with my pop art begotten
Restless rascality.

The mosquito bites the iron bull
And I am bitten by Early Summer.
Thank you, mister Fukui
You have brought sound to Satori—
Whatever a westerner such as I
Can grasp of it.

Let us try to hug
This glory of whatever is.
Why must writing be
The canopic jar,
The service,
Either madness inconceivable,
Or the common denominator
Of clear—all too tangible—
Confession?

Why not both?
Why not neither?
Why not paintings panting
Vividly to the sound of pop culture
And philosophic mumbling?
Why not have an impossible metaphysics,
Spiced by daily drudgery
Coloured in?

Let us be unoriginal, touch all lives
All truths, all clichés.
Let us be meaningless,
Maddening,
Writing from the inner eye only
Writing without an audience
In mind.
Let us be both and be
Profoundly genuine.

Let us be spellbound
By whatever flows
Into sensors soothing
And vexing.
Let the pain be a teacher.
Let the failure fall unto us
Like brimstone bombarding
Ancient Roman villas.

Let us be reckless in our love,
In our fangirling
In our sharing,
in our promoting.
Herr Freud, the unconscious is
A landline to demons and gods,
So what?

Let me have tea
With my primordial roots
With my over civilised literati.
No inferiority in the spontaneous.
No blasphemy in irrational
Purely personal worship.

Repress nothing, but willingly
Do no harm. And if failing,
Let no harm be done without
Lessons being made to follow.
Let there be laughter
On the secret face of God.
Let offence glide from shoulders
And feel lighter.
Let the world be flowing
And build no damn on behalf of shame.
Whatever comes
Whatever goes,
Shrug and say: "May Be"

Katherine Martini

This is not a suicide note.

Once upon a time,

I didn't know how to write without

killing myself.

killing myself in the literal sense of

slitting my wrists or

stepping in front of subway cars

or, most likely,

swallowing bottles of pills

since that was the system I selected

on both the occasions

I tried.

But also killing myself in that

deep, metaphorical sense

that us poets have of ripping

our souls out and slinging

them around our necks

like a scarf

like a noose—

swallowing pills like

swollen words

that spill from clenched-fist

pens and snake into my

lungs like the

smoke that dangles

from the artsy cigarette

on my soulful

poet lips,

slow death like

my blackened bronchioles,
wheezing emphysema words-

I didn't know how to depend on my pen
unlike a drag or a
drink or a
slow descent down the
writer's rabbit hole.

I didn't know how to write anything other than
pretty synonyms for sorrow.

I didn't know I could sign my name
to a story that wasn't sad.

Once upon a time,
I didn't know how to write without
killing myself.

But this is not a suicide note.
This is a birth certificate.

Adeiza Atureta

Chiamaka

The cold whisper of our love has died,
And yet, we boast of memories,
that bring back nothing,
but endless pain.

Somehow, we loved;
And somehow,
we hated in our back and forth.

There is no gain in our love.
And our imaginations of 'forever' burns reluctantly.

Tonight, is no different,
We cannot accept the impossible.

I die, you die;
Our feelings will never again lie.

Lauren Jahn

Heart Lessons

My heart needs to learn
that soulful and so full
are actually quite different
snacks aren't quiet solutions
to loud emotions

My heart needs to learn
there is wholeness in self-acceptance
even if my mind needs help untangling
with the aid of a prescription
Sertraline can wave a magic wand

My heart needs to learn
screens are neither mirrors nor windows
filters and captions are canned cheese
social media an antonym to acceptance

My heart needs to learn
genetic roots and family trees
produce beautiful buds
and
at times permanent abrasions
deforestation prevents inherited disease

Luckily, though. My aortic organ is learning
not just numeracy with rates and levels
but forgiveness with intention
second by second perseverance and diligence

To complain is to care
and to care is to decide
enough decision validates working
My heart is working to learn

Grace Miskovsky

i have a real strange fear

i have a real strange fear
and it is of
icicles.

but today i pulled myself out
from underneath my bed,
i pulled my self out
from underneath the weight of days that are getting shorter,
and i went to the mailroom.

i imagined tucking a yellow envelope
inside the fleece lining of the only
winter jacket i own and i imagined
a cage of grey moths
in my ribcage.

i imagined your scent on the return address,
your heart inside
and i imagined
you writing my name on a neatly folded piece of lined paper,
signing yours truly at the bottom.

i have a real strange fear
and it is of
you slipping through the space in between my fingers
where your hands should be.

to lose you is to lose the world around me;

you are everywhere,
you are in my coffee
and in my veins
you are the atmosphere and what's inside the soles of my
shoes
you are in the back of my brain, you are in my third eye
and in the ink my pen bleeds.
you are in the nonsense my mouth spills,
you are on the rim of my teacup.

and you are at the bottom of an empty bucket of mail.

i kind of hoped,
walking back from the mailroom,
that an icicle would drive straight through my skull
like phineas gage.

Julia Aloi

Honeycomb

There is an old Tolstoy fable

I like to think about.

A man, running away from a beast,

hurls himself into a well,

only to find a dragon at the bottom.

He hangs onto an olive branch,

the midpoint of two reapers.

A pack of mice scurry onto the branch

and gnaw away at its root.

The man soon notices

a drop of honey

on one of the leaves and licks it up,

a momentary treat

before the eternal beast swallows him.

I have not found my drop of honey,

but I am trying my best

to remain distracted.

Mary-Margaret Andrulot

Untitled

What do your eyes see
As they peer into the darkness
That lies beyond the glass?

Do they capture the glimmer of stars
In all of their infinity, the universe
And every endless possibility?

Are you, too, crushed
By the weight of the world?
Can you recognize your reflection
Gazing back from the darkness?

Who are you,
And how will you justify
The space you fill
Amongst those stars?

Channa Goldman

Body of, Born From

There is a religion between my body,
these thighs, God's growing wild amongst
a moon who breaks her back trying to spell out
the word for light pouring out of skin.
Hair down, belly out
I'll lay this shell on an earthbound mattress.
I am centuries of corsets bound too tight, and
petticoats who speak suffocation to their underneath.
My hysterias gone more holy than your Jesus—
Mary must have really missed out.
Lunar motions, cervical shifts,
I think there's too much a universe
inside me. Claim silence to this land,
they will. A woman is just another heresy—
burn the witch, for she'll never marry with
a mouth so much like a cavity, too much to cast
to the stars so give the flames a sister instead.
Be born of me, wicked
and in love with my original sin.
The molasses between my teeth
can only rot when my bra is too tight.
Let me out of this theatre
before I go deaf or at least,
become diabetic from all the sugar.
My own music, lady, I
taste the sweetest, remember?

When I get naked tonight, devils are due.
They'll burn my books, and I'll go on
writing them over.

November Rhodes

Closer

Close is never close enough
I want to crawl inside your chest
Murmur your lips against my neck
Say you'll forever love me best
Flutter kisses on my jaw
As your hand engulfs my breast
Close is never close enough
So I will break open your chest
I'll crawl inside and live there
The perfect little nest
You'll slip your fingers deep inside me
We'll feel my pleasure crest
Close is never close enough
Every inch undressed
My yearning for your body
Will never learn to rest
Close is never close enough
I want to crawl inside your chest
Forever I'll be one with you
And I'll forever love you best

Rosanna Jimenez

The Early Years

Up at 4am to scrape
Ice off the car to
Punch in on time
Do what is ugly
What is necessary
What is unthanked
There is laundry and
There is food to cook
And there are holes
Needing repair and hair
Needing detangling
Requiring a hand on
The head of a child
Stiff brush and soft touch
Injuries disregarded
Hands cracking, feet
Aching, backs breaking
Mouths yawning, eyes
Twitching for a break
Legs kneeling and
Fingers pressed for God
Tongue pleading for a
Break. Body in a coat
And gloves under sheets
Up at 4am to scrape

Elaine Naong

A Dancer's Shirt

Fabric contracts and loosens through sequences
—pirouettes, chainés, jetés, rolls to the floor—
each movement rising then falling,
sinking then recovering.

A second skin breathing in and out with me,
through each step, each turn so meticulously executed,
through each electric beat blaring through the speakers
in this otherwise empty room.

This garment gathering
my sweat, my energy, my
insistence to carry on,
to get as close to enveloping the air
and the floor surrounding me
until my lungs
give out.

Exodus Brownlow

For Horror Writers, Who Have Tried to Birth the Happy Things

There are many of you in my purse, and many in my waste basket, and so many of you on my floor.

In bed, I sit up sometimes staring at your crumbled bodies, sometimes reaching for one of you because, I think, I want to see you from an un-crumbled place, my children. I want to see your talons, your blood, and your teeth. And maybe you are better now. Maybe, you are the right kind of beautiful.

I tell only to myself—*Just let them breathe, girl. Just let them feed from your breast a little. You have two of them, and you have not let them even nestle at your nipple once, nor have you let them sleep in the crook of your neck. Let them almost-whisper their first words before you crumble their bodies back up, at least.*

I think only to myself—*But I've seen what you could be when you grow up, and you are only tiny-terrible now, and not so beastly-bad. People might say that you are cute when I point to you in the crowd, when I proudly claim that you are mine.*

I know only to myself—*But, oh, if I let you live, the terror you would bring! And what would the neighbors say? And my folks? To know that I can birth such things? To know that this is the kind of mother I have set out to be?*

Where is your softness, they demand? Where are the delicate curls amongst your mangy mess? Where is the god in you? All that they can see is the devil in you, and they feel that there is enough of that in the world already. They complain—your children have such foul mouths when they speak! It makes our ears bleed. It makes our mouths so salty. They cry too much, and too often, for our liking so please numb their teething a little by rubbing rum on their gums, so that we can all sleep more soundly at night. Shape your babies' heads while they're still soft enough to be molded, and tape a quarter to their belly buttons. Shave them bald so that their hair

may grow out right next time.

Why is it that my body can't produce the princesses? Why is it that only trolls come from out of me? I have tried, but the princesses never come out right. They are all scaly, and misshapen, and sickly-looking. They crave poison under their pillows and not peas. It is better for you to be what you are, and ugly, than to be something that was meant to be pretty, and not so at all. There is nothing more terrible than to be something that is grotesque that was meant to, and expected to, be beautiful.

If I put you in the bathtub, would you swim, my darlings, or would you eat up all the soap and drown? Would you die, and come back as bad-er ghosts to torment the ones that I love, too? If I place a pillow over you, instead of under, would your wails echo loud enough to hoist it away?

I am asking you all the questions, as if you will have the answers, but aren't I the older one here? And shouldn't I already know? But I am hoping that since you have taken all of my innocence, and in being new, you can see in a new way, too. Some knowledge that is lost to me.

I have thought of all the ways to kill you, and each one only brings you back worse. I have thought of all the ways to live you, and...

For, I know how you began, and where you were meant to start, and wouldn't they all be surprised to know that before you were the villain, you had been born good? Would they love you as much as I do, then? Would they understand that a little bit of tiny-terrible exists within us all? Would they see themselves inside of you, and in the same way that I do? Ice and fire all set against the brown in your eyes.

Oh, my monsters. Your tongues are as sharp as your teeth. I have set out to live with you, and only you, at night, in this room, and it is fine that it is only us, but could you please be a little gentler when I nurse you next time?

I want to kick your fathers in their teeth—Peele, Rice, Stevenson—for leaving me pregnant with the idea of you, to birth

you on my own. My body is stretched out from the weight of carrying you, and my eyes have grown dark from the late nights of caring for you, but they say, they always say, that *there will be moments that will make it all worth it, and really, you will miss them when you grow old, and forgetful, when they were this small, and precious.*

When I was drunk, and overly-confident, and willing to take a risk, a few of you found your way out of the crumbled pile. Found your way into someone's home who had mistaken you for sweet orphans for them to adopt. You had gone inside, all smiles and charm, and wiggled your way into their hearts, and wormed your way into their beds, and weaponized their love. You burned their houses down with them still inside, and they became your companions. Your forever ghost friends. It makes me happy, that you will have someone to take care of you when I cannot, who will remember what your favorite foods were, and feed them to you with their own hands.

In bed, when I am able to rest, when the lot of you have held your screams for me to tend to tomorrow, deep cuts rest on my fingers from where they have served as your pacifiers.

Casey Dexter

So I quit.

It was right down to the exact day after I turned 25 that I felt it. Timed, almost laughably, to the cliché of the mid-quarter life crisis. I didn't feel my familiar pep. I felt uncomfortable. Anxious and overwhelmingly bored at the same time. When was the last time I belly-laughed? Who was the last person I liked? What activities brought me joy? More importantly, why did I care about all of this so much, and all of a sudden?

These questions sat in my brain and eventually ignited the year that would mark the most change my life had ever known.

Not in this order:

I questioned how I spent my time.

Who I spent it with. Where I spent it.

I reassessed my hobbies, my relationships, my career.

I trimmed unhealthy people from my life. Saw more of some friends, and less of others.

I quit my job.

But it wasn't just a job.

I had worked so hard to earn my place there.

I had so many friends there. I was actually quite good at it.

I quit without another offer.

The last thing I'd quit cold turkey was the cello in 4th grade.

I didn't mean for it to happen that way.

I thought I could tough it out.

I'd spent the better part of a year convincing myself it was still my dream job.

I'd also spent 6 months of that time interviewing elsewhere. I had interviewed to work at a celebrity's film company. I had interviewed to be a Late Night TV Host's assistant. I'd even interviewed as the only female in an all-male production company. I didn't get any of those jobs.

I did accept a new job offer three days after I quit, though. Go figure

I never felt more lonely, nor had more friends.

I would go from seeing three different groups of friends in one weekend to crying over how I was eating Sunday dinner by myself.

I wanted a boyfriend, and I wanted to be alone.

I felt like no one understood me, even though my friends were incredibly close.

I learned "I don't know" does not mean he likes you.

It doesn't even mean he *may* like you.

I learned him paying for your drinks all night does not mean he's a gentleman.

I learned if you guys talk but he never asks to hang out, he doesn't want to hang out.

A modest banker is the same thing as a skinny chef-- can't be trusted.

Your friends will ask about who you're dating before they ask about your new job, or your family, or your stomach problems.

Your real friends will pick you up from all your stomach-related medical procedures.

I learned colonoscopies are not just for people in their 50's!

I was fat. I was thin.

I suffered terrible stomach pain (no doubt induced by my stressful past work environment), and became doctor-mandated gluten-free. For someone who already had a weird relationship with food, this wasn't welcome.

I realize only later I was never really that fat or thin. I was the same, average weight. I just couldn't see it.

My guy friends wanted to hook up with me. I hated them for it.
My guy friends didn't want to hook up with me. I hated them for it.

I realized certain friends caused me much more social stress than others.

I took a long break from some of them to figure out why.

I felt smart handling life on my own, catching mice in my apartment, and paying my own rent.

I felt dumb googling "Roth IRA."

I felt smart among family at holiday dinners, who admired my cultural awareness.

I felt dumb at work when out-of-touch and insecure bosses snipped at me.

I felt smart for telling boys no.

I felt dumb for telling boys yes.

I hated saving money. I hated spending money. I hated having to talk about money.

I hated when my parents gave me money.

I HATED when my parents gave me money.

And I hated when I needed it.

I stopped picking fights with my Mom. Well, I tried to stop picking fights with her.

She answered every call. No matter how badly the last one had ended. Never knowing which side of me she'd find on the other end.

I cried to her the most. She let me, always listening patiently. She knew I wouldn't let myself cry like that to anyone else.

I finally found solace in the distance between me and my sister. She had moved to London three years ago, and it took me three years to

forgive her for it.

She's still my best friend. We've promised to always have plans to see each other again before we part. I realized there could be worse ways to visit her than galivanting across Europe.

I finally understood my Dad had offered all that he could when I was growing up.

It wasn't his fault he always wasn't there, even if he was physically present.

It took me 25 years to realize this, fight through the hidden resentment, and find admiration in the fact that he held himself together as long as he did, without any of the right treatments.

He's one of my favorite people on the planet.

He still can't name more than three of my friends.

Who cares.

I felt invisible at a corporation where HR promised to listen to everyone.

I felt invisible at bars when guys wouldn't come up to me.

I felt invisible on the subway when an old man sneezed on me.

I felt invisible every time my phone didn't light up when I wanted it to.

I felt seen as the foreperson on a grand jury.

I felt loved when my best friend asked me to be her maid of honor.

I felt refreshed when I went back to visit my favorite city in Spain.

I felt empowered when I remembered the Spanish verbs I had spent 8 years learning.

I felt proud and weepy as I had a long coffee with my former homestay Madre, as she patted my arm and we spoke in Spanish together for hours. And cried when we had to say goodbye.

I cried more at 25 than I did my entire life.

I cried the most because of work. Creative jobs do that to you,

because they are so intertwined with your inner psyche.

I cried the second-most because I felt lonely.

I cried over boys, but realized it didn't change anything.

I cried over money, friends, clothes, my weight, muscle pains, the line at Trader Joe's being too long, the washing machine eating my laundry card, my plans to create my own comedy show falling flat.

One time I ran into a friend as I was walking down the street and she was coming up from the subway. Just the sight of her made me cry.

We joke about this now. We could not be more different, but our friendship is so honest. I try to replicate that more in my other relationships.

We became friends because she has a tattoo of Conan O'Brien's hair. I love that.

I had always divided up my life. Like a pie chart.

It's shifted as my priorities shifted, or as I succeeded or failed in a certain area.

Friends was 20%, Family was 30%, Work was 40%, Health was 10%.

Now, I've divided it differently.

Friends 15%, Family 35%, Work 20%, Health 30%.

I'm sure it will change again.

There were plenty of happy times.

I think the majority of people surrounding me never suspected anything was off.

Maybe I seemed a little tired.

~

I should have prefaced this by saying 25 was the worst year of my life because of direct actions I took and several, deep-rooted self-

-realizations. No one died, no one filed for bankruptcy, no family secret came to light that changed everything for us all.

Not one dramatic change happened suddenly.
But rather, hundreds of small to medium changes happened.

Maybe that's why it was so hard.
It wasn't one large wound that needed to be stitched together for me to feel better.
It was hundreds of small cuts. All happening at different times.
I didn't have enough band-aids.

Few are sympathetic to the white girl in her 20's living in NYC--
who's poor but somehow still manages to have Class Pass and attend
brunch with her state school friends.
I get it.
I feel that too, even though I am that girl.

But you can't deny emotions. And the stigma we may feel towards
change. And how finally getting what you want only to find that it's
nothing at all that you imagined, sucks.
That feeling lonely sucks.

In this order:

I was depressed, I was sick, I was mentally and physically
exhausted.
I quit my job.
I cried all the time.
I rearranged my needs.
I chose to spend time with friends that I felt good around.
I chose to spend more time with family.
I realized no job is perfect, but my new one allowed me to reset my
inner life pie chart and find balance.

I once heard a guest on Conan O'Brien's podcast say, "Desire is a wasted emotion."

I thought about that for a while.

I still think about it when I can't get an idea out of my head.

Technically, you don't need anything more than you already have to be happy.

Happiness is simply a state of mind.

Things will happen, I've learned, regardless if you're ready for them or not.

I'm still working on fully living this and believing it for myself.

But I'd like to think it's true.

I'd like to think I've learned from that year of my life.

I'd like to think I've come out better for muddling through it.

I hope I did, and I hope I'm ready for whatever comes next.

Maria Grissino

Excerpt from Fall 2018 Studies

I'd say this project was actually what helped me break through my old style and form what my current style is. It pushed me in a lot of ways to find a style of working on my art and a style of creating that is individual to myself and a lot more forgiving than what I had been taught previously. I've always been intrigued in color and more of a pop art style, so I suppose some of that carried through, but before this, I was always focused on realism and was rather perfectionist. I had basically been holding myself to an impossible standard and something that wasn't really "me." It prevented me from moving forward.

In a way, I didn't have a style of my own until I did this project. It gave me the freedom to do what I actually wanted - to make a mess, to destroy the concept of a perfect figure, to be as lazy or weird in my creation as I wanted to be - something I had been holding myself back from. It was essential to my growth as an artist, and it has definitely impacted the way I draw now. Things don't have to be perfect.

You can view more of Maria's work at

Twitter - @MariaGrissino

Instagram - @m.j.g.art









William Buchina

COMMON STRUCTURES, SIMPLE MECHANICS & VARYING DEGREES OF AFFECTION

For ten years, I have been creating paintings and drawings that look at both the fantastic and mundane elements of a human life, and trying to find the perceived differences between the two. If one was able to strip away all the historical, contextual and familiar lenses through which we cannot help but see everything we encounter, then one would have a chance to experience the thing with a kind of ignorance that puts the imagination to work. In my paintings, I am making a type of collage of scenes, objects, structures, creatures, interactions, landscapes and so on, and both removing and at times enhancing the ingrained logic of each, so that I can give the viewer a chance to engage with a familiar element in a new, critical and inquisitive way. In this way each painting or drawing I make is an attempt to illustrate scenarios from which I want to remove what is known and replace it with something new, and if it is successful, each viewer will see in it something unique to themselves, a truth rooted in non-verbal space, and will come away with questions for which there are no answers.

To view the entire series and other work visit
www.williambuchina.com









Malcolm Graham Cooper

Ghost of a Smile Like Yours

For Mark Linkous

The roof had caved in.

Through the glassless front windows, two planks forming a giant V revealed themselves among a carnage of shingles and broken furniture. The place was an anomaly: Empty, serene fields that once sluiced oil through its undercarriage made it look like some mistake of nature. Theo shielded his eyes and grimaced against the sun. He felt like the house had left a gash on his thigh. The last time he stood in this exact spot his grandfather rocked shirtless on the porch with a Remington 1100, yelling at skunks in broken English, as if they could understand. He would walk around town talking to himself, stopping to look in store windows, and accost people on the sidewalk, insisting that they shut up for once. Again shirtless, he licked telephone poles and whistled up and down the street, a tune he learned in his youth most likely, or something he heard on the radio somewhere. Now, the oil tower loomed high up in the clear October sky, almost weightless, silent and still; it stopped producing on the day his grandfather died. Theo took over the mineral lease, as per the will.

The pipeline workers stood in the empty space toward the woods. One held a giant map while the other pointed along the ground, most likely tracing the pipe's route. Both wore yellow hardhats, which to Theo seemed more like pageantry than a function of safety. They nodded quickly, and the one not holding the map began to walk.

"Looks like a pretty good read," he said. His face was long and red with a goatee more speckled than thick.

Theo didn't know what to say back. The guy had blue eyes that looked like shattered glass. He didn't look at Theo – he stared through him to something else behind.

Finally, the worker gained some sort of concentration and

looked at Theo straight in the eyes.

“Are you,” flipping through the pages of his clipboard, “Ronald Sumner?”

The ground was marked in the dying grass with fluorescent pink, a straight line drawn by a man with a pulley. “Um, no,” Theo said without looking at the man, just breathing through his mouth with his neck turned. “That was my grandfather.”

Through the empty windows, the old paint on the walls peeled in barnacles of various colors of dark decay, a cosmic vacuum; the spaces left beneath hinted a light green. Theo remembered that same front room, lit up by an unkempt fire and the black and white television that his grandfather put on a stack of books in front of his recliner. With a blunt, mangled cigar in his right cheek at all times — a fine line of yellow spittle tracing a nicotine stain down his chin — he propped up his feet, hands on a beer-bloated gut, propelling a voice against the youngsters singing on TV, their colored hair and wailing, their electronic blues and skinny dresses, grandma all the while never complaining because she knew that it was a battle she could never win. He satisfied his ever-racing mind as he yelled at the variety acts on public television, going so far as to beg his wife to murder him; he always refused to turn the channel. Finally, he up and died one day, suddenly, in the foyer as he cleaned the fake plants.

The pipeline worker stood impatiently. Theo grabbed a copy of his grandfather’s will and the mineral lease papers from his back pocket. What was printed on a few sheets of paper revealed little to him: The field in itself was worthless even before his grandfather bought it; regardless of any sort of investment as motive, his grandfather always insisted that large spaces reminded him of the movies: A vast, empty landscape that never ends or begins, cut jagged across a wide-angle, spanning infinite space as the sun outlines more nothingness in the vanishing point. With no cattle, no soil to plant, let alone the lack of some of the most basic, foundational benefits enjoyed by most commercial land — it sloped rather drastically toward the once-unpaved road — it was just some

empty place of rot in the middle of nowhere.

There was little else to be said to the man in the hardhat. The worker plaintively motioned with his finger to the key boxes in which Theo was to sign his name, hidden in dense text. Theo didn't care about anything being said to him — the effort to sign alone in itself was some caustic joke. The pen started running out of ink as he made the final S in his initial. He handed over the clipboard to the man despite the final S looking spotty and imprinted colorlessly on the page. Apparently, given the blank nod, that was enough. The worker, now free of his obligation, nodded and turned around, motioning to a faded yellow pickup entering the field from a wooden fence. Theo stood, mentally unable to move. More orange clad workers came out of the truck, their shared color a stark contrast to the gray of field. Theo rubbed his eyes and looked up — the mass of orange bodies became a part of the landscape, as insignificant on the ground on which they tread.

Theo's father had died ten years earlier of a pulmonary embolism. Seared onto the meat from which memory arises in the brain, there was the image of his father on the ground, groaning in pain, and Theo's own inability to act or do anything. He never did call 911. He often felt an urge to feel responsible, but in the end, it was a random act of the universe that could never be stopped by the likes of men. The role of the self-loathing child was too self-involved, an excuse to discount the past. Theo had loved his father, but nothing could be done about the rest.

Theo sat there in the room as the lawyer itemized the will of his grandfather. As the oldest of three — one brother and a perpetually young sister — he was given the useless property. It was his own to deal with. Everybody seemed to find that okay.

“What about the jewelry?” Theo's sister had the attention of the entire room, her voice a frightening wail penetrating the borders of socially acceptable sound levels. “My grandmother's jewelry.”

The lawyer looked down at his desk. Theo imagined him searching for something he had been looking for for quite some

time. As an afterthought, perhaps to gain a second sight, he lowered his glasses, long gray eyebrows luminescent by a slant of light against the shadow of the frames. He frowned and turned another page.

“Your grandmother is not mentioned in this document.” He looked above his glasses, which were resting so far down on his nose that he had to make the effort to lean back in his leather chair to read. “And I was not her attorney, so either she was buried in it, gave it away, or somebody else in the family has it. Who knows?” The chair rested back on its front legs. The lawyer folded his hands on the desk.

“Wasn’t that supposed to be taken care of? Didn’t she have a reading like this?” Some impetus in her body sent her shoulders forward and the wrinkles on her pale forehead to tighten. Her green eyes had somehow lost their shrewd glare, reminding Theo of a much younger version of herself, a vulnerable, frightened girl who would never leave the house.

Baby Brandon made himself known for the first time. “How do we find her will?” He furrowed his brow in the way he does when worried of some lingering threat, some outrageous act of injustice. Theo gave him the simple nickname and it stuck. It gave Brandon hell. But as quickly as his face tightened, it relaxed in some sort of understanding — Theo knew that it was the realization that their mother had found out a way to get the jewelry, the entire stockpile, pearl necklaces and tight diamond chokers. There were so many diamonds, probably even more than Theo had ever seen, glinting out there in the afternoon light as his mother brought him a sandwich during some endless summer afternoon.

Lexi got out of her chair without making a scene, pulling at the heavy door and nearly falling over from the unnatural nature of her pumps. Theo met her outside. He bummed a cigarette from his sister. There was a homeless man in front of the convenience store next to the office; the man’s long beard and wanting stare loomed over Theo’s chest. He grimaced as he inhaled the smoke, his hand over his mouth. Lexi always liked menthols.

She lifted her head up — long, dark auburn hair in a tight bun, making her profile that of a pharaoh. “I fucking love smoking,” Lexi said. She turned and regarded Theo, slowly squinting her green eyes and looking deep into his eye sockets.

“I do too,” Theo said. He blew a long rope of smoke down onto the concrete, marking the ghostly manifestation of a sigh.

“She’s doing it again,” said his sister.

“Yeah, but I guess I owe it to her this time.”

Lexi snorted in the way that made Theo want to rip her face off. “You owe that brat nothing,” she laughed. After a short walk, she stuck out her tongue and made big, bulging eyes — her representation of his wife, Natalie, that frankly made him cringe.

“Fuck off,” Theo said in response, falling short of any sort of witty reply.

Lexi buckled her knees and descended onto the concrete, her legs resting sideways, curled and with her arms splayed wide in the sun. After a few scant, silent moments, Lexi hoisted herself off the ground with mock intensity. She arose and took a deep breath.

“Ah, now that’s why she gets away with it.” She pointed a twirling, accusing finger at Theo. “You are whipped,” she cackled, “like a gelding.” She pushed Theo back on his forehead. “Little man.” Her lips tightened white against the cigarette filter, manicured eyebrows perking up.

Theo wanted to punch her. This interaction had gone on like this for the better part of a decade. But despite his self-loathing, his acknowledgment that deep down — down there where things get stuffed and buried, where he was afraid to face the world on his own, fractured and alone — Natalie would always be the best thing for him. Since their miscarriage, he learned to love her in spite of himself, in spite of their shared tragedy.

His sister looked down at the ground, blank. Her smooth, tight skin secured an ageless face in all its charm. “I guess it’s true about boys and their moms,” she said, flicking the butt into the parking lot.

“They say the same about girls and their dads, too,” Theo

said.

Theo negotiated the unpaved road through the back corners of the small town leading up to what amounted to his land, thinking about how everything was really endless and how things only gave the illusion to the contrary. Everything was grayed by a slight fog — a common occurrence in this country that Theo never really got used to — obscuring outlines of former car tires guiding the path on which his car was supposed to take. Some black outlines of houses cut through as he drove, houses from another time, some decrepit and cold with trash in adjacent lots, as if giving up was the only way to survive. A strange purple glowed through the dead branches of trees, Theo's eyes drawn to its conspicuous glare.

And then the tremor from below. The truck rumbled, kicked up, sputtering against the dirt. Theo felt the impact in his jaw, tightening, a sudden rush to the head both blinding and outrageous. Theo's jaw clenched in response, black dots frantically bouncing in front of his eyes. He turned around, more to gain some composure than anything, and squinted through the single-pane back window, the only view behind the car given a missing rear view mirror. At first, the thing looked like a suitcase — a threadbare lump of brownish material left in the middle of the road. It gave no sign of mobility, no movement to indicate what it was exactly.

The dog was sprawled on the dirt. Its intestines milky, crooked sausages, its eyes still moving. It breathed intermittently. Twitches in legs marked something being lost in quick bursts, again and again and again. How long? It was a golden retriever, and the overwhelming effluvium of blood dotted a dozen places at once, coating the fur in a dark matte. The woman's voice lowered as he saw her approach — arms at her sides, defiant against the image before her. The old man kept his head down, silent in a sort of defiance; he shook his head, rubbed his eyes, blinked, and shook his head again. Her wrinkled lips came within an inch of Theo's ear. "You fucker," she said. The words, like endless smog dissipating over a distance, seethed into the canal down the small of his back. She proceeded to grab the front of Theo's shirt, at which point his

brain melted into black and blind anxiety, starting at the peripheral and bulging to the center of his vision. On and on, he was blind, left to baser matters.

“Fuck your mother.” It was all he could say in that endless moment.

The husband had already begun guiding the lady by the shoulders inside before the sentence could register on her face, his old man face giggling as he whispered. Theo’s knees gave out, his breath too hard to find. He found it as he sat on the curb and covered his face with his hands. He wanted to look at what was left of the dog. Look at his handiwork. But looking — not only the seeing but the physical act of turning his head and moving his eyes — would then make it real. The old man and the old lady were already closing the door to the dark house. Theo grit his teeth — he felt sorry for the thing. Mostly sorry, though, for how he handled himself behind the wheel with his mind at work.

Soon the old man walked laboriously out his front gate, carrying a shovel almost useless with rust. He had a look of pale action on his face — this was a routine, albeit a tragic occurrence. Without looking at Theo, he slammed the shovel down near the dead dog and hoisted the carcass with a heavy scrape. He began emptying the contents into a blue plastic trash can. After a couple more loads, all that was left on the blacktop was a crimson pool with some white flecks scattered within. Saying nothing, the man picked up the trash can and went back to his house, closing the gate behind him. Theo decided to sit on the curb for just a moment longer, trying to let his thoughts justify whatever it was he saw. He breathed in again, heavily, and thought about his wife; she loved dogs.

The lady and the old man came out of the house. Now she had a smile on her face, a stark contrast to the former shrieking surprise from a moment ago.

“I’m sorry,” Theo said. He couldn’t come up with anything better.

She walked up to him. He braced for a slap, a punch, some sort of violent contact. Her head came up to his shoulder, and she

got very close to him — uncomfortably close. She looked up into Theo's ear.

“Now you've done it,” she whispered.

“Done what?” he said.

“Now you've got to explain this to my daughter.”

The old man had disappeared into the house.

Inside, everything was a wreck — yellow newspapers, stacked high, made a small path for Theo to take through the entryway; on every wall was some sort of cow-related memorabilia, from commemorative plates to roadside signs advertising “mooving” sales; in the kitchen, some rusted signs and advertisements from a racist chain of restaurants towered over him.

The old lady started to make grilled cheese. The old man sat next to Theo, smiling wanly. The tablecloth was checkered red and white. She served him with what seemed like a sincere smile on her face. He bit into the sandwich and immediately caught the taste of mayonnaise.

“So, where are you from?” she said. She pulled out the chair across from Theo's and sat down, putting her hands underneath her chin. Was this an act? It looked as if she made a violent transformation from the crying lady in the street.

“Farstead,” Theo said.

“Oh, a country boy, then?” she said.

“I guess.”

The old man scooted his chair closer to him. Their legs touched.

“Do you want to see her?” said the old lady.

“Who?” said Theo.

“Adelaide — our daughter.”

Fearing he had no other choice, Theo said, “Yes, please.”

As they climbed the steps, Theo asked the couple if they had any more children. No, they insisted. Only Adelaide. At the top, the old man caught Theo as the old lady went into the room down the hallway.

“Listen,” he whispered, “I don't know what you're doing

here, but I don't like it."

Theo scratched his nose, looking for a way around what he said. "Excuse me?" Theo felt like pushing him down the rotting stairs, taking off down the ledge and leaving out the front door.

"Look," he began again, "our daughter died ten years ago. She can't cope."

Theo's heart calmed down a little. At least he wouldn't have to explain himself again. "I see."

"Just take it easy," he said, pushing past Theo down the hall.

The room was bright and airy. Lace was everywhere — on the curtains, on the bedside table, on the floor like a rug. The light that came through transformed everything crystalline. On an ornate, golden chair in the center of the room sat a beautiful doll, transformed by dust and age but still retaining its everlasting, lifelike luster. Its eyes were a deep brown, overtaking the milky white color of her skin. She was dressed in an emerald flowing gown with lace on the neck, which went high up to the base of her empty face.

"What's your name?" the old lady said.

"Theo."

"Nice to meet you, Theo!" The old lady spoke in a voice not unlike her own, but it was perverted in some way; it was much too high and cracked as it went up.

Theo looked down at the doll, at the old man, and finally back to the old woman. She smiled.

"Nice to meet you," Theo said, looking at the old woman and back down to the doll, "Adelaide."

The old lady clapped, joyous. The old man walked over to her and took her hand, smiling at Theo again.

"What is your favorite color?" The old woman used that voice again, that high-pitched squeal.

He thought about it. "Blue," he said.

"Oh! How very noble of you!"

Theo looked at the old man. He nodded at him. "Yes, very noble indeed."

“Did you kill my dog?”

“What?”

“A simple question — “The old lady began to rock the doll.

“Did you kill my dog?

He didn’t have to think about it this time. “Yes, I killed your dog.”

The woman clapped. “And do you have any siblings?”

“Two. A sister and a brother.”

“Do you ever feel alone?” Now the voice backed off, a note or two lower than before.

“Alone?”

“Yes.”

“I can’t say.”

The old woman covered her face. “I feel very alone. Adelaide feels very alone.”

Theo stood up. The woman followed, looking into his eyes. “Sorry. I can’t do this,” he said.

The wrinkles in the old lady’s face began to move, her mouth began to quiver, and she began to cry. Soon, she was sobbing. She ran out of the room.

The old man came up to Theo, his face stern, and took his elbow. “Let her go,” he said.

Outside, in the back, the husband and Theo hoisted what was left of the carcass of the dog out of the trash can and buried it. They drank warm beers and shoveled dirt over the remains.

“One more thing,” he said, returning to the back door.

“Yes?” Theo said.

“Don’t forget to write to Adelaide.” He went inside and turned off the light.

In his car, Theo’s chest began to ache. Theo hooked up his iPod to the auxiliary and turned the music as loud as it would go. On the way home, he stopped off at the stationary store and bought some paper with roses on it to send to Adelaide.

Theo went back to his grandfather’s field. It was busier than when he last left it — a state of dismal, silent fury; where once there

were stakes colored with plastic flags, workmen walking up long rows of trenches, marking on clipboards, now were four steel siege tower structures moving cables up and down between the metal pillars. Somewhere rang that constant yawn, a phantom echo of some sleeping behemoth or machine lumbering past the point of sight in the dusk. The drone wouldn't go away, no matter how much Theo plugged up his ears with his fingers. Theo couldn't help but second guess where he was — was it the wrong road? How could this have been built up in a day? A worker approached him; it could have been the same guy from before, but Theo couldn't be sure.

“Mr. Sumner, your lawyer's gotta get you outta this plot,” he said. He held up his hands, palms first.

“Why?”

“The gross impediments, sir.”

“Gross impediments?”

“Yessir.”

“I know, but what impediments?”

“As you can see, it's a safety hazard.” He motioned behind him, revealing an entirely new aspect to the machine that Theo had failed to notice. The long strings of the pulley system were hauling mammoth ivory disk-shaped objects.

“What are those?” Theo said.

“Long as half a football field,” said the man.

“Ok. But what are they?”

“Pretty sure they're bones.”

“Bones?”

“Bones, sir. Yes.”

Theo knew that couldn't be right. It didn't even sound right — bones in a pipeline.

He licked his lips. “How did they get there?”

“I dunno, sir. They ain't supposed to be here. There ain't even any pipe what's left.”

“No pipe?”

“No pipe. Giant bones. Or so a man tells us.”

Theo wanted to scream at the deranged absurdity of it all.

The man squinted his eyes. “Not a trace of pipe left. What we gonna do with these bones? They’re not supposed to be here. Didn’t even see them on the screen. They aren’t here.” He scratched his cheek. “Well, they are here.”

“Yes. You’re right about that.” Theo turned around to his car.

Theo got back to the house and a note from his wife Natalie was waiting on the newly-polished kitchen counter. It said something about the inevitable, the timing of it all being right, but Theo couldn’t really care; he knew it was going to happen like somebody with the flu facing the basic facts of the human body. He tried to feel something, which was followed by a Fuck It within his mind, then back to the push toward a responsibility to feel something about it, but in the end, he couldn’t muster anything he felt he was supposed to. He couldn’t help but compare this to the death of his father — the overarching will enforced upon him to behave a certain way when all the while inside grief, in all its complexity, was disturbed and questioned by whatever was pushing it from outside. All grief returning to him now took the form of some loss of flesh — her immaculate palms, the way her mouth twitched while concentrating, legs that twisted and turned like milk.

As Theo went to his car, he could see the dark red remnants of dog gore baked on his tires. He hesitated before he turned left onto Orchard because he knew that if he started the route to his mother’s house, he had little chance of turning back; nothing else was there behind him. The drive was marked by long stretches of crumbling shopping malls, places that once encouraged an upper middle-class paradise out in the middle of endless fields and rain, but now fell under a shadow of empty parking lots and lone shopping carts cradling homeless inventory.

Out to where only a few shops — check cashing places, liquor stores, Goodwills — dotted the fields passing by, Theo pulled into his mother’s apartment complex, finding no space save for a handicap spot; he pulled in and parked anyway. He knocked on her door, apartment 357. Inside, Led Zeppelin played low. Theo looked

through the vines and could see movement. He knocked again, and then another time. Finally, the door opened and his mother stared at him, squinting against the sun. Her kinky hair sparkled as the sun flowed through it into the dark apartment.

“Who the hell told you to come here?” she said as the door began to close in front of her.

“It’s nice to see you, ma,” Theo said. Theo just stood there as the door slammed. He could hear his mother rummaging around — glass clinking, a coffee table screeching on the linoleum tile, the t.v and music coming down. After a long time of waiting out there in the fall weather, watching some leaves fall to the ground, his mother’s door opened. He stepped inside.

The darkness of her living room didn’t surprise him. Soon his eyes adjusted and he saw her sitting there on the couch, all slouched and weary-eyed and small. On the coffee table in front of her was a sheet of tinfoil with a zig-zagging line going down the middle; next to it, a straw.

“Mom,” Theo said, “I thought you cut that shit out.” He motioned toward the table.

She just shrugged her shoulders. Her face sank in, the skin harder and more worn than Theo remembered. She was skinny — the tank top she wore sagged over her body like a wet trash bag, her shoulders pointed and hollow. She wore no makeup like Theo always remembered, and her eyelashes were nearly gone, what was left of them haphazardly growing out of the flesh above her sunken eyes.

Theo’s mother tapped on a cigarette but it missed the ashtray. “I ain’t got them pearls, by the way.”

“How do you know I was here about the pearls?” Theo said. He moved closer to his mother.

“Lexi came around here the other day. Said your grandfather wanted her to have them.” She stubbed out the cigarette and grabbed a liter of Mountain Dew. “But I knew that was bullshit. I witnessed that will. They ain’t in it.”

Theo walked up to the coffee table and grabbed the tinfoil;

the tar was still fresh — it hadn't been smoked yet. He rolled it into a ball. "You're done with this, ma. I'm here for Lexi."

"You fucking give that back to me, I swear —" She stood up and started to rummage around inside the couch.

"You never gave a shit about Lexi. You were alright to Brandon and I, but Lexi —"

Theo's mother stood up straight. She pointed a handgun at Theo, shaking. It looked like she was going to cry, judging from the quivering of the muscles around her eyes. "Give that back to me, Theo. Now."

"Ma, are you fucking crazy?"

"I ain't got the pearls, I swear. Look around."

"Ok, I believe you," Theo said. He held out his hands, reaching and grasping at nothing. He tried to keep his voice calm, remembering everything he learned about de-escalation from the marriage counselor. Of course, that never involved a gun, but Theo felt calm enough to assess the situation, believing his mother would never even think of firing. "Just think for a second, ma."

His mother just stared at him and shook violently; her entire body seemed to want to ooze out of its skin.

"You can't even afford to fire that gun," said Theo. When she looked up at the ceiling for an instant, Theo pounced. He tackled his mother, and the gun clicked before falling to the floor. They hit the floor at the same time, and the gun slid into the kitchen.

"Ouch, fucker!" His mother's voice rose to a bloody wail. The insides of his ears started to burn.

Theo stood up over his mother. She shook back and forth, holding her left arm; it was bent at the elbow but already red. It was unlikely that anything serious had happened to it — the force with which Theo restrained her wasn't enough to fracture a bone.

"Mom, you're fine."

"You broke my arm, you idiot! What have I ever done to you?" She was crying. A spit bubble formed out of her mouth and popped when she sobbed again.

"Get up," Theo said.

“I can’t. You broke it!”

Theo wondered if it was really broken. What would that make him? A horrible person. Who beats up on a junky? On their own mother? He really didn’t mean to do it — he could have handled it some other way. Or so he thought. He reached into his pocket and grasped the ball of tinfoil. He threw it at his mother on the floor.

“Do what you need to do,” he said, “and I’ll drive you to the ER.”

She looked up, resigned. “You know,” she said, “I never meant to hurt you. Or your sister. Please believe me.”

“I know,” Theo said and walked out the door.

When Theo dropped his mother off at the ER, he reached over to her seat and gave her an awkward, sideways hug. She kissed him on the cheek and rubbed it in.

“I was never going to shoot you,” she said.

“You say that now,” he said, “but I dunno.”

“I swear on my life,” she said.

Theo remembered the time she pulled a knife on Brandon when he refused to give her a ride to score. And the time she pulled out most of Lexi’s hair when she caught her with a boy in the basement.

“Whatever,” Theo said. “Just get yourself checked out.”

She opened the door with as much force as she could muster, which was barely enough to separate the door from the frame. Theo had to reach over and push it even more. She stumbled out onto the concrete, crossing the threshold of the automatic doors with at least enough balance to convince the security guard that she could walk on her own volition. He tipped his cap at her and motioned for Theo to move his car. He wondered if he would ever see her again.

Lexi was waiting at their grandfather’s former house as Theo pulled into the dirt driveway. The sun painted the sky an obscure shade of purple in the west, illuminating the clouds and violating the mountains with a wash of gold. The pipeline workers

all seemed to have left. Out in the field, the neutral light revealed a field of broken white — pieces of bone, a fine powder in patches along the road, and four or five enormous pieces that looked like tusks from an elephant. Theo still wasn't so sure about the bones — it all seemed so elaborately convenient. But there they were, and the trenches along the field, deep and wet, were void of everything save for more of the white chunks piled high.

“Nice hair,” Theo said. He walked up to his sister and tugged on a clump of the new green mane that frizzed up around her head.

“I’m just trying it out. I haven’t decided.” She drank from a Pabst can. A twelve-pack sat at her feet.

Theo grabbed a can out of the box. There were two left. “Christ, how long have you been here?”

“Since four,” said Lexi. “So I guess about three hours, give or take.” She sipped from the can and wiped her chin. “Hey, did you know there’s a bunch of bones out there?”

“I’m well aware,” said Theo.

“Weird,” Lexi said. Theo sat down on the porch. “You know mom pulled that gun on me tonight? By the way, she doesn’t have the pearls. Let alone any diamonds.” Theo reached out a hand, indicating he wanted a cigarette. Lexi pulled one out for him. She blew out her cigarette smoke in a violent puff of air. All Theo could see was the cherry and the outline of her face. “But I guess you knew that,” Theo said. “She said you were there.”

“Yeah, she tried to do the gun thing with me,” Lexi said. “The trigger spring on that Glock has been broken for at least three years. It used to be mine, but she took it from me.” She flicked her cigarette butt out into the yard. “She wouldn’t know what was wrong with it. And besides, she can’t possibly have any ammunition.”

“That’s what I said.” Theo took another beer, cracked it open, and took a long sip. He grimaced. “I’ve got a plan, Lex, and you’re the only person stupid enough to help me.”

“I already know what you’re thinking. That’s why I’m

here.” Lexi stood up and balanced on one leg.

Theo had Lexi follow him into the basement of the decrepit house. Inside, moonlight shone through small holes in the walls that had been boarded up. The stars were visible from an empty patch in the ceiling. Theo marveled at how his grandfather could have lived in such conditions for so long — years, almost, at least since his grandmother died. The place was primitive in every sense of the word — everything was either board or nails or rust, some galvanized piping or electrical wiring exposed in the walls. They went down into the basement and carried up three red tanks of gasoline. They began to pour it out on the stairs, the floorboards, against the walls, and all around the kitchen.

“Watch it,” Theo said. “Don’t get any on you.”

“How am I supposed to do that? It’s all over the place.” Lexi threw down the last empty tank.

Outside, the siblings looked at the decrepit house.

“Now what?” Theo said.

“We can’t just walk in with a lighter and blow it up,” Lexi said. She smelled her hands.

“Wait,” Theo said, running to his car.

He came back with two cylinders. “Roman candles,” he said.

He didn’t know exactly how this would work, but he knew how a fire started; there’s an accelerant, there’s a spark, there’s a flame. Theo always knew he was going the wrong way, but that all depended on where he was coming from.

Dan Cardoza

The Bottom

So much can be measured by the metrics of a ruler, a measuring cup, even time. Yet some calibrations are useless in terms of understanding the depth of pathos. Capturing the emotional essence of grief is uniquely unfathomable.

Cassie met Dev at Cal. He made her skin crawl, but in a good way. Bachelor's degrees in hand they transferred to UCLA. There, they graduated honors, Devin, a degree in the linguistics of architecture, Cassie the structured language.

Soon they married, took jobs in the City of Angels. By their fifth year of bliss, you could say they were nesting, conjuring a house into a home in suburbia.

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Devin had their kitchen table custom made, see-thru beryl tinted glass. He designed it elegant and expansive to accommodate a life of togetherness, of love, full of children, strong enough to accommodate those “thick and thins,” he’d say. Of course there would be the weight of prosaic sorrows, but the table was strong, supported by, “promises and new beginnings.”

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That morning at breakfast, Devin pointed his index finger. “Cassie?”

Recently, he’d devolved, began using primitive grunts and hand gestures, this time jelly.

Cassie stretched toward him, “Here’s your jam.”

“Thanks, its jelly,” Devin grumbled.

Not letting go, Cassie asserted, “Its labeled raspberry jam!”

“Jam has seeds,” Devin snarled, gripping the jar from her hand.

“You’re correct; I’m not paying attention again.” Defeated she looked down through the table glass, the only thing left in the house that was transparent. Her flat ankle boot was untied.

“I pick up my car from the detailer around three today. I can use Uber, or you can pick me up Cassie?”

“Sorry I can’t Devin.”

Until recently, Cassie rarely addressed him as Devin. Devin’s is the one dimensional guy on his driver’s license. To Cassie, he’d always been “Dev.” She disappeared into ‘Dev’ while making love. Now, “Devin” was the last name she thought of, and sex was desperation, more to do with survival.

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Devin began taking work home. He complained about the incidental chatter at the office, his poor concentration. Cassie worked evenings a lot. This meant they’d spend more daytime together, confined in the house, neither having felt so alone.

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On occasion, they’d find themselves trapped in the wide hallway, their backs to the wall just to fit through. Before, they’d lusted in the spacious tunnel. It was a collision of two meteors, with Cassie screaming bloody murder. Exhausted and wet, they’d sink into the carpet and pleasantly drown in the plush aquamarine until dawn.

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For an early super, Devin had the urge to barbeque in the middle of a storm. On the patio, he reminisced how he missed all the levity of family and friends, the swimming, a child's giggle, the endless summers.

In the building rain, Devin quickly entered the kitchen through the sliding door. He was holding his grilled salmon, garnished in a blue oval dish. With his hands full, he had to pivot around, shut the slider with his toes, like an experienced circus juggler. Before placing the dish on the table, he paused and squinted back through the rainy glass. He couldn't remember when he'd seen the pool this choppy. The surface appeared shattered, defiant.

Hypnotized, he gazed out at the Wrought Iron fence strangling all the chaos, the frayed yellow nylon rope, a loose imposter standing in for a custom gate lock. Stuck like a thorn in the throat of his voicemail, Home Depot Jeff's message loops, "It's still on backorder. We can cancel?"

Obsessing the message, the house turns in to a chapel once again. It's too late to cancel.

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Cassie joined Devin for a quick dinner.

"Here you go, Cassie," Devin's dead voice crackled like a branch too full of squeaky hinged crows.

Cassie looked up, her damp eyes pleading for a sign, direction, for help. She'd been crying again. Before Devin loaded his plate, he poured their green tea. They sat a separate ends of their long family table. For what seemed like seasons, they stared at the salmon as if it

were preparing its journey upstream to spawn. Little was eaten that night.

How's the car? , asked Cassie.

“Fixed.”

“Good,” Cassie replied. She knew how he worshiped details, things done right. How he hated lose ends. Feeling particularly guilty this evening, she admonished herself. She recalled how Devin once referred to her as “Hopelessly distracted, absent minded.” Somehow this evening, she kept from balling, and falling through the crust of the earth, but barely.

After a short while, Cassie stood, looked down at her meal. Then in resolve, she gathered her plate and silverware, placing them on the frigid black granite near the sink.

“Done already?”

“Yes, Devin, I have to be at school early this evening, they’ll be waiting.

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Four weeks passed. Devin never reported her missing. He didn’t know where she was, nor did he care. This particular evening Devin seemed bored. His TV had grown fat on sitcoms, funny commercials, and HBO comedy specials.

Devin opened his Orbitz travel log and reviewed his hotel stays. He’d presumed his was an unshared account. Booked was a past travel date he hadn’t scheduled. He was certain this was just a mistake. Or that he was tired, and just didn’t want to think, or know for sure. After all, it was late, and he was more than exhausted.



Weeks earlier, inside ESL, the students spoke excitedly, in broken English, about their grades.

Outside the passenger window, only the heavy sky and Cassie knew where the aircraft was headed. She knew there would be no grades.

At altitude, the ocean shellacked as smooth as teal glass. Cassie swore, she could almost see to the bottom. It looked empty now, except for all the iridescent orange starfish the color of water-wings.

Cassie knew little about nautical miles, but was certain there would never be enough. Distance, in terms of water had become an enigma, and so very complicated.

The End

# *Kalyani Bindu*

## Godly Shadows

Jesus had always wanted to finish reading the Bible. Hebrew was not such a jovial language. He was intently drinking his phantom tea served in a minuscule Chinese ceramic cup, relentlessly fidgeting inside the air-starved interiors of his crucified wooden form in the cathedral. The mildly reeking concoction of wax blotches, crisp wine and fumes of burning incense wafting from the altar hovered around his head like some strange dance of scale-ridden fishes. He drank the phantom tea down to the last dregs and placed the cup on the wooden table in front. On it, dog-eared, perspiring from the stuffy heat and heavily thumbled at the yellowing edges of its coarse leaves, lay an ancient copy of the Bible. Jesus stretched his long legs, shook off a growing, biting cramp and sank further into the crumbly cushion of his half-a-throne-like chair. He was too preoccupied to take another dig at the Bible. Far away, at the entrance of the cathedral, melted candles were being stowed away into a steel trolley and *agarbhathi* ashes were being swept into its under belly. The sky was afternoon-white. A drunkard, delirious from his sumptuous morning swig, sat on the glazed marble steps mumbling a slogan, “*Uyarattangane, uyaratte!*”<sup>[1]</sup> (Let it rise, and rise!), while trying to catch a fly circling around his grizzly hair. A bald worker lazily tied colorful stringed posters around crooked coconut trees that spotted the church ground. Outside the church gate, vagrant cows dived into green debris, picked printed papers and drove intruding flies away from their twitching ochre ears with occasional nudges of their sagging necks. Half- crossing their legs and fixing the passing car or mini truck with a brooding gaze, they ventured further into mosaic bogs of litter. The beggar singers at the cathedral gates were singing old Hindi songs.

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[1] An Indian regional language called ‘Malayalam’

The singers persistently rattled their puckered steel vessels and sang in their incorrigible rasping voices. These songs- notes that rose again and fell- were, by now, quite familiar to Jesus. He remembered the difficulty with which Rama[2] had managed to stutter in Hindi[3]. He had broken down into a fit of mispronounced Hindi misgivings. Jesus had laughed and irreverently broken into a loud rendition of a sweet, sweet song, “*Om jay Jagadeesh hare, Swami jay Jagadeesh hare*”[4]. Rama had grinned and sang, “O come O ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come O ye, come O to Bethlehem”, mockingly letting out lungful of shrieking notes out of his rounded mouth. They were sitting under a huge banyan tree. The thick, sinuous network of airborne roots anchored into the reddish brown earth. Its leaves were too sleepy to catch the passing breeze; in fact, they were just awake enough to toss in their midnight green jackets and doze off turning their backs to the glare of lit lamps. Lamps broke out into an avalanche of light from the walls of the temple, a few feet away from the tree. Rama had stopped singing to stretch himself out on the concrete pedestal that tightly circled quarter the height of the majestic tree. He rested his head on his sinewy hand and turned his back towards the avalanche of light, making his sharp profile shimmer in its godly shine against night’s jet black. Jesus couldn’t help remarking on such picture-perfect elegance. Rama dismissed it saying, “You look equally horrible on your cross”.

Gods could only creep out at night, when shadows become invisible, for they could only creep out as shadows. They never dared to venture at daytime; if they did, they did so when sacred places throbbed with shadows of their devotees. As long wall-kissing

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[2] Rama is the protagonist of the Indian epic poem, ‘Ramayana’

[3] Hindi is one of the official languages in India, along with English

[4] An Indian devotional song



shadows with craned necks and stretchy legs, they glided, unnoticed, past a hundred foolish eyes closed in prayer. They would walk around as disowned shadows, like shadows that impersonate leaves and stretch their limbs unto freckled ceilings of rooms, at night.

Jesus and Rama never took such chances. They took off on dark, dark nights and roamed around like vagrant cows. They roamed around talking and laughing till estranged loopy sentences piled between them. Then, they would call it a day and leave.

Back at home, they would think about their secular conversations- ones that affectionately cradled the other. They (those conversations) didn't seem to matter, or amount to anything when they were around each other, yet, seemed excessively burdensome when back in their elevator-high and elevator-deep human world. Thoughts were such contextual creatures, always looking for half-filled cardboard boxes. Contexts were infinitely important in the human world. Jesus and Rama have been living in the human world for so long that they too, like any other human being, had come to think of a 'right frame of mind'. The divinity that emanated from them was too alienated, far too removed to be held true- such was the abundance of the human world around. So they kept asking themselves for things that fell into contexts.

So, they thought about thoughts that were properly placed within the religious context. They did so because thoughts were subservient private beings, while talks were thought-ridden bugles.

They met like concerned friends, yet feared to give away into the quagmire of routinely friendship. They treasured each meeting like a dream that was to be recollected and narrated as a story. Meanwhile, they ran around like white mice in their respective cardboard households. Ages and ages went by; they realised that routine was nothing, but a desperate longing for coincidence. They started meeting as nameless shadows on sun-lit sand, on scorching grass, on pallid walls strewn with sun-pricked samurai ants.

They met likewise for a year or two. They got into cyclical talks, tailing one another like snakes biting their own tails. Like migratory birds flying in and out of seasons, they returned and re-turned to the same thought streets. They grew to like each other.

The last of one such eventful meetings was at Jesus' resident cathedral presiding over a buzzing ancient marketplace in Kerala, guiding tourists and natives alike through the stretch of its surrounding alleys and lanes like a luminous white pole star. Jesus was too restless to drink the phantom tea.

Tropical winter, meeker and less insistent than its temperate counterpart, had gracefully set in. The sun let in a veil of light through whisked clouds. It was the Christmas season. The street was throbbing with activity- the cathedral hoisting its Christmas tree, securing it like a large fish dragged out of water with ropes tied onto the tipping edges of its pointed tip, men acrobatically harpooning the tree onto the ground, the giant star at the zenith of its green end twitching its five arms like a starfish, people creating the Bethlehem on tarpaulin sheets, the impatient priest, his meeting with shoals of families, the young pink and white, red-lipped choir group, the rickshaw puller with someone's ten sacks of rice, the biker and his jasmine-adorned wife strutting along and stopping to buy hot *appams*[\[5\]](#), the frequenting gang of ruffians, occasional appearances of a ruddy gulf returnee, the shy school girl and the shy school boy hugging walls as they drift like whiffs of sly air, the umbrella, bag, shoes shop that starts at one edge of the street and ends on another, and the working ladies settling household chores amongst themselves as they whizz past customers. There was so much of humanity around.

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[\[5\]](#) Pancakes commonly eaten in several parts of India, particularly Kerala and Tamil Nadu

Amidst the bustle of the crowd thronging to see the hoisted Christmas tree and the rattle of the beggar singers' vessels, they quietly crept out as demigod shadows. Like bleak souls of unhappy omens eloping to the happy canopy of the morning sun, they glided to the nearest bus stop and quietly sat next to each other on the rusted bench- geometrical shadows flat over its jaded iron wilderness, tipping down into an origami crease as they bent and touched the concrete floor. The bus arrived as if it rode the undulating wind. The shadows tailed one another while climbing onto the bus and guarded one another as the bus irreverently sped off. They sat and clouded the empty seats. They got down at a movie theatre. After a striped glide over walls laden with posters that threw pecking glances and gurgled like black-and-white spotted pigeons, they entered the cinema hall. Surveillance cameras adorned the mosaic walls of the cinema hall. They sat at the left end of the last row. The textured wall punctured their shadow heads into a bedlam of elegant gutters.

As the first treble of music bounced off the screen, unto their holy ears, phantom snakes slithered beneath their skins; tingling spouts of yellowish black pools littered the corners of their dewy eyes. The first flood of forms rose hazily from the screen, the shimmer welling into a glare as it travelled across the theatre. Cinema caved in. The two Neanderthals fell into a lonely land where their wall-kissing shadows slept.

# *Martin Krafft*

## Chosen People

I say it's a pretty good life for a kid - no school and not really having to do my workbook either. I say it's a pretty good life for all of us - out here on the ranch, no jobs, no school, no traffic, no Muslims. Rosie don't care for it much, but I don't count her, 'cause she's a teenager, and she wouldn't be happy with anything. She's always hogging the phone and telling her friends how much she'd rather be back in Georgia. But the rest of us, even Marianne, like it out here. Marianne's all grown-up and she likes it enough to have hauled her best friend, Hannah, out here. For a while I thought they were dating, 'cause I'd seen them kissing a few times, but Mama says they're just friends. Hannah's fine by me either way, 'cause she showed me how to gut a quail.

I got more important things to worry about, like my superheroes. I'd say Atom Bomb's the best I've made yet, because he can destroy the most, and also, his costume is the best. It's black and silver with electrons swirling all over.

"That don't look like a workbook," Mama says, leaning over my drawing.

"Already done my workbook." Now I know if Mama were to catch me lying straight to her face, that would be a spanking, but she don't ever look in the workbook to see whether it's done or not.

Given that Mama already says I'm a genius, I don't much see the point in learning how to read. I would try a little harder if reading seemed to be something useful. But the only book we got around is the Bible, and if I want to know what the Bible's got to say, all I gotta do is ask Mama.

After marking the last few electrons, I wait until Mama's busy scrubbing the stove then grab my gun and slip outside. I almost make a clean getaway, but Lucy and Sugar bark wanting to come along.

"I better see that workbook tonight," Mama yells, but I'm

already out the door and running.

Mama says we're the chosen people, and I'll go along with that, 'cause how many kids get to walk around the desert carrying their own gun? You might think I'm just playing, but I'm also protecting the ranch. Way Papa talks, he says I might have to use that gun one day to defend the family. I still haven't figured out why exactly the Muslims or the government are coming to get us, but when they do I'll be ready. Nobody knows this desert better than me. Maybe Martin, but he's crazy. He lives all by himself in his truck eating raw potatoes, and Mama says he was spying on Hannah and Marianne, so she don't want him around no more, which is too bad, because he used to tell me stories about all the countries he'd been to.

Now a gun ain't the only weapon I got. Also, bow and arrow, hatchet, bowie knife, and a whole bunch of sticks that I've sharpened. And I aim to be skilled enough to defend the family with any of them, though I'm not sure how useful the sticks would be, depending on what kind of weapons the Muslims got.

I got a right not to be *work* working, 'cause I'm busy protecting, but Marianne and Rosie, they're just lazy as can be. Which stands out all the more 'cause Papa spends all day out in the fields, and Hannah most of the time too. During our late-night chess games, Papa told me Marianne's lazy 'cause she was living in a city. I pointed out that this is the first time Hannah lived anywhere but a city, and she's a hard worker. Instead of answering, he put me in check mate. What makes it worse, Papa says, is that Marianne almost got famous, which messes with your values even more than city life. She almost made it big time as a country singer, got runner-up on this reality show country battle. And she is a pretty fine singer. Close your eyes and you just might be floating, 'cause you don't need your whole body no more, all you need is ears.

But since she moved out here she don't sing no more. Says she got burned doing it and lost the fun in it. Now for fun Marianne plays *Red Dead Redemption* on the Xbox, where you go around the desert shooting things. Don't make no sense to me why she's

messing with that game when she got a whole, real desert she could be messing with. But if she's gonna play, she might as well give me a turn every once in a while. Mama don't put up with no funny business, and she asks Papa, "Jerry, how come you don't put them to work?" He says, "They gotta figure that out for theyselves." He might be waiting a while.

As far as I'm concerned, we could go on living out here forever. I don't mind the beans and rice for dinner most nights. There's jalapeños in the garden and four types of hot sauce to liven it up: Frank's, Texas Pete, Louisiana, and Sriracha. The beans make Marianne fart like a monster from hell, but after a while you just get used to the smell. Mama tells her to quit, but that just seems to make Marianne do it more.

Tonight, Marianne's farting away, but there's not much I can do about it because we're playing Ticket to Ride, and if I want to play I gotta put up with the smell. Marianne's got that half-smile like she knows she's winning but doesn't want to show off too much, at least not 'til she's won. She cuts off one of Hannah's train routes and Hannah grabs her in a headlock, almost knocking the whole table over. After Marianne cuts off one of Mama's routes, Mama pushes the table away from her, knocking over a bunch of the trains, stands up, and says, "I can't play no more. This game's rigged."

Papa declares Marianne the winner, though the game ain't over yet, and we watch *Worms 2*, even Rosie, which is about the only time she's not playing with the phone, but only because she can't see the TV from the phone chair, the one spot that gets reception.

Then one day the man who calls hisself the Prophet shows up. He rolls up in his truck, a big shiny truck that won't stay shiny long out here in the desert. He's a man wears short shorts that show off the most muscular thighs I've ever seen, with a long pony tail and a big old Bible in his hands, even bigger than ours.

"My name's Mike, but if you're people of God, you can call me Prophet." He says he's thinking about buying the ranch from

Peter, the big Ukrainian man who we're working the land for and who Papa doesn't like very much 'cause every time he shows up he spends the whole day telling Papa how to run the place. Papa don't like nobody but God telling him what to do – and maybe sometimes Mama.

"That's a pretty nice Bible you got," Mama says, and that's all he needs, he pulls up a chair on the porch and starts asking Mama and Papa about God and all that. The Prophet listens and nods his head like he's hearing the smartest things he ever heard anyone say.

They have such a good time talking - after listening for a little at first, Prophet does most of the talking - that Mama invites him to stay for dinner. By that time, Tucker, Marianne, and Hannah have come to listen.

"I can tell that you people are chosen too. We chosen ones, we can tell who's who. That's another one of the blessings God gives us. God has blessed me with great wealth and prosperity, and in return, I help the chosen people get back to the Holy Land.

"Jerusalem?" Mama asks, awe in her voice.

"I could see about trying to get y'all out there too."

I never seen Mama look so happy.

"That's where the chosen people gotta go for the end times," Hannah says, and everyone nods their agreement, except Rosie, who's back to the phone chair.

At dinner, we all crowd around the table. I'm wiggling around the chair and Mama snaps, "He's gonna think you were raised in a barn."

"I like barns," I say.

"Feet on the floor!"

For prayer, the Prophet reads about a place called Sodom and Gomorrah getting all blast to bits, and it goes on and on, my stomach all rumbling. Now I'm expecting Lot to get what's coming to him after he offers up his daughters to the townspeople, but no, he's the only one who gets saved, him and his wife and daughters, but that don't do the wife much good 'cause she gets turned to salt

anyway.

“What happened to the kids in Sodom?” I can’t help asking.

“They got kilt,” says Mama.

“That’s right,” says the Prophet, smiling.

“That don’t seem right,” I say.

“Of course it’s right,” Mama explains, “‘cause God did it.”

“Ain’t that murder?”

“God doesn’t murder,” Hannah jumps in.

“What do you call when God kill someone then?”

“Murders only when someone bad kills someone,” the Prophet says. “Anything God does is good.”

I ain’t sure how I feel about that, but raining down sulphur like God did - that’s a good idea for a super power.

“That was one tasty meal,” says the Prophet after dinner. Now, I wouldn’t go calling beans and rice tasty. But once he says it, Mama starts to blush. Instead of getting jealous, Papa just lets out that quick little grin, like he knows this guy ain’t nothing really to be afraid of.

“He’s gonna get us to Jerusalem,” Mama says real quiet to Papa as we’re walking to the fire pit.

Papa whips the fire into being, throws a few mesquite logs on it, and we all sit back and stare at the flames. I look up and see the mix of smoke and stars all swirling together. The bugs are out chirping in full force.

“You got any beer around here?” the Prophet asks. Papa goes to get one.

The Prophet drinks it down, not in one gulp, but a bunch of quick sips, then asks for another. Papa drinks one beer a night - drinks it slow - and I’m sure he don’t take too well to anyone else shooting through his supply. But the Prophet don’t stop until he’s had four of Papa’s beers. In the firelight, it’s hard to tell what exactly’s going on, but it looks like after relieving himself in the yard, the Prophet plants himself down next to Marianne and maybe even puts a hand out on her knee. She just gets up and sits down



next to Hannah. And not right away, but a little later I see Hannah and Marianne take each other's hands, which ain't too uncommon for them.

"Anyone I take to the Promised Land, now," the Prophet declares, "they gotta be good and ready for it."

"Sounds right to me," says Mama.

"That means they have to have cast out their sinful ways," he says, looking at Hannah and Marianne with his chin all up high in the air like he's king of the desert. He don't know if anyone were to be king of the desert, it would be Papa, or maybe Jesus. I guess there could be two kings, but not this guy.

"That's why we came out here," Mama says.

"Sin works in devious ways. Sometimes, it'll be sitting right in front of your nose, and you tell yourself it's not a sin. But God knows."

"Sure enough," says Mama. "You looking for anybody else to take to the Promised Land? I feel like we been preparing for this. We're ready. We've tried to cast out the sin."

"It's not easy to cast out the sin. That's where I come in. I can lead people to the Promised Land."

"We're ready for you to lead us."

"You got to take some time to think about what you're doing, and if you're really ready to receive the word. There are rules that God has laid out that can't be broken. Rules about how people are supposed to interact with each other. And ways they aren't. Ways that are an abomination to God's word."

I ain't sure what an abomination is, but it sounds like a good name for a super villain. Prophet keeps looking at Hannah as he's talking like he's looking for a fight. I expect her to tackle the Prophet, maybe throw him into the fire, but she ain't saying anything. Back when we lived in Georgia I seen Hannah get in fights over softball games where she gave out black eyes and busted noses. But now she's looking like God Hisself's about to strike her down.

Trying not to hiccup, the Prophet gets into his truck.

“I’ll be in touch. Think about what I said.”

He drives off, almost hitting a saguaro on his way out.

“He didn’t even give us his number,” Mama grumbles.

“Guess we’ll just have to wait for him to come back.”

Next morning, I’m making my rounds when I come across Mama and Papa hunched over the Bible for their morning reading. They too wrapped up in what they thinking about to notice me.

“I always knew,” Mama says, “but I didn’t want to admit it.”

“I always knew,” Papa says, “but I didn’t care.”

“But you gotta care,” Mama says. “It’s their souls. It’s an abomernation.”

“Well, we been living all this time getting along pretty well.”

“That’s true.”

“So how do we know God don’t want us to live like this? Seems like we got a lot of blessings already. God wouldn’ta done that if they was really sinning.”

“End of the world’s coming. We wanna be out here or we wanna be in the Promised Land with the chosen people? With believers?”

“We’re believers out here too.”

“You ever wonder what it would be like if we weren’t the chosen people?” Mama asks.

“It might be pretty good for a while.”

Mama blinks, blinks, then shudders. “There’s only one way to sort it out,” she says, and they start reading in whispers to each other, which is good ‘cause I was getting bored of what they was saying anyway.

“What’s an abomernation?” I ask at dinner.

“We don’t need to talk about that,” Papa says. “It just ain’t good.”

With a sour look on his face, like he drank a whole jar of  
“What’s a dyke?”

pickle juice in one go, he turns to Marianne.

“How much work you do today?”

“I picked up some trash,” Marianne says.

“How much?”

“I don’t know. Good amount.”

“Well, tomorrow, you’re gonna get a real day’s work in.”

“None of the kids do anything,” says Marianne. Just like her to bring us into it.

“I’m not a kid,” says Rosie.

“Everybody’s going to work tomorrow.”

Next morning, Papa tells me to pull weeds out of the garden. I pretend that I’m Atom Bomb and the weeds are Muslims come to get us. I’d say it’s worth it - all of us working - just to see Rosie’s face without the phone, like she got bit by a rattler or something.

I thought us doing a good day’s work would have Mama and Papa back to normal, but that night Papa says he’s too tired to play chess. I say come on and he says ok, but he’s so distracted I beat him no problem. I’ve beat him only once before, and he looked at me all proud after. This time, he don’t even notice that the game’s over.

Breakfast time, Papa says he’s going up to the top of the mountain. He don’t bring nothing with him except for the Bible. I certainly would not want to climb through all those cacti and everything with that big old book in hand, but Papa, he’s stubborn like the rest of us.

Hannah and Marianne are still sitting outside their tent drinking coffee. I sneak up real close, but all I hear is Hannah say, “We got our souls to worry about,” before I step on a branch and they whip around and tell me to git.

Not often that I ask Rosie for any kind of help, but there she is tapping away at her phone, and I ask if she knows what’s wrong.

“Marianne’s a dyke,” she says.

“What’s a dyke?”

“Someone who likes women.”

“Papa likes Mama. Is he a dyke?”

“A woman who likes women.”

“So Hannah’s a dyke too?”

“Yeah, but that’s ok because Hannah ain’t Mama’s daughter.”

“What’s wrong with dykes?”

“They go to hell.”

“Why’s that?”

“‘Cause you need to shut up and quit bothering me.”

She lunges, but I’m too quick. This is a lot to think about, ‘cause I ain’t never thought about anyone but Muslims and the government going to hell.

With Papa on the mountain, there’s no need to do any work, so I shoot my arrows and hit one bullseye but miss entirely with the next few arrows. I go up to Mama and ask, “Why do dykes go to hell?”

“Don’t use that word,” Mama says.

“Is it true?”

“Only God knows who goes to hell, but it’s true they’re sinning.”

“What are they doing?”

“Don’t be worrying yourself none about that, Tylin. All you gotta know is that it ain’t right.”

How does Mama expect me to ever grow up if she always treating me like a kid? Like when she covers my eyes anytime there’s somebody necked in a film. She’ll lunge at me to make sure I don’t see nothing. Back when we used to watch tapes not DVD’s, Papa even scraped the naked bits off the tape so that no one could ever see them again. I still caught a couple peeks, despite Mama’s best efforts, and sure boobs are nice but I don’t see what the big deal is all about.

It’s not ’til late afternoon that Papa comes down from the mountain. Hannah and Marianne sitting on the steps, waiting, and he goes up to them.

“Y’all can’t stay if you’re gonna stay lovers.” Papa, he’s got a tear in his eye as he says this. I ain’t never seen Papa cry, not even when Grandpa died. I didn’t ever know what dyke was before, but now that Rosie said the word I remember back to when we were still in Georgia and Uncle Jim said it and Papa said don’t you ever call my daughter that again.

Without a word, Hannah and Marianne go to their tent and start packing up. They don’t even wait for dinner before taking off down the dirt road in their old, barely working Chevy.

That night, we play a game like normal, but it ain’t no fun without having Marianne to yell at ‘cause she’s farting, or Hannah to put Marianne in a headlock when Marianne’s winning. In the middle of the game, Mama says, “I’m too tired. Movie time.”

The one good thing about Hannah and Marianne leaving is that I get to lie down on the couch where the two of them used to sit.

We don’t play games hardly at all no more. Maybe once or twice a week. It would be ok if we had some more movies to watch, but I already done seen all of them at least three times.

I get to play *Red Dead Redemption* now, and I will say, it can be just as much fun going around the desert. The good thing about it is that you get to shoot people, not just rabbits. Now before you go thinking I’m some kinda crazy person, I ain’t about to go shooting any real people unless they’re threatening the family. Maybe if the Prophet comes back I’d shoot him with the BB gun, though Mama would whup me for a week straight. We ain’t heard nothing from him anyway, and Mama’s stopped talking about him, not wanting to get her hopes up. I’ve started drawing him for a supervillain. I call him Abomination, and he’s a dyke, and he shoots fire at all the kids in Sodom.

It’s been two weeks since Hannah and Marianne got back. Car didn’t make it with them. They called and said they were in Tucson and wanted to come back, so Jerry up and left and drove all the way there to pick them up and bring them home. When they returned, they had a long talk with Mama and Papa. I tried to sneak inside to hear but Mama saw and kicked me out.

All I heard was Hannah saying, “We gonna go to heaven, and that’s that. Sure, we love each other still, but we can love each other in the right way, ‘cause that’s what heaven takes.”

They musta worked something out because everyone seems happy now.

The most important thing, Hannah says, over and over again, at breakfast, at lunch, at dinner, is your relationship with God. Not just to the rest of us, but as if reminding herself. At night I sneak out behind their tent. Before I used to hear all kinds of grunts from in there, but now all I hear is the sound of talking, and they’re talking about what they think heaven is going to be like.

# *Yehezkiel Faoma*

## Shadow Play

It was dusk approaching evening and I still had a stack of documents to do. The greying sky outside the window cast everything into silhouette. I felt like I was watching a shadow-play with cut-out puppets of file cabinets, printers, and junior associates pacing up and down the screen, turning flat when they turn. It was hardly the Ramayana, but I thought I deserved a thirty-second break after many hours of sorting, reading, correcting, and re-reading litigation papers. It all wouldn't matter soon.

I scanned through each sheet and put them in new stack next to the old one. When these were almost as tall as each other, the bright text on my monitor had started to sting. Nobody had turned the lights yet. Scarlet evening fractured behind the ongoing shadow theatre. I walked over to the rose-tinted window and looked down on the ring-shaped interchange, twisting and coiling under the sunset, like gleaming ornaments clasped around the wrist of a Balinese dancer.

"Pretty." A voice came from my side — I saw Reza.

Reza and I knew each other vaguely from college. We both got in with scholarships, he took business law and I took international. Outside of that and the book club I never made any effort to talk to him and neither did he. Then one time I saw a familiar face on induction day, learned that we had the same floor, and found my anchor in this strange new place, until I started getting on by myself.

"Trafficky, but yes, pretty," I said.

"That's exactly why. Know what it reminds me of?"

"Yeah?"

"Everyone down there has their own lives, their own stories." He paused. "It's called 'sonder'."

I cringed and looked away to hide it. "That's not a real word."

Reza was my friend but he never fought back and I hated that. They tossed piles of work at him and he'd gladly slave away till eleven. Wasn't there anything else he wanted other than this? His face looked pathetic under this light. I wanted to protect him and berate him at the same time.

"Let's order something," he said after a pause. "On me."

"On what!" I clapped his shoulder playfully. "What are we celebrating?"

"I might get published."

"Oh?"

"It's just The Scoop. I have a real good feeling about it, though." The Scoop was the company magazine that published twice a year, circulated internally, and read by no one besides the editors and the two of us.

Reza would come over to my desk and we'd pick out our favourites, the other would point out the flaws, and we'd defend them like they were our own. It was as if that magazine was made just for the both of us, but sometimes I'd leak the worst ones to Lucy and we would have a good time together.

Suddenly I remembered the dinner with her tonight. I thought about it for a while.

"I'll pass."

"Why?"

"I'm meeting someone," I said. "An old friend, sorry."

"Ah. Where are you going?"

"Sudirman."

He hesitated. "Want me to drive you? I got an extra helmet."

"Thanks, but I'll take the bus." Sudirman was an hour away and in the opposite direction from his place.

"You sure?"

"Don't worry." I walked away from the window, leaving the silhouette of a man and two short stacks of paper before a dimmed screen to continue the shadow-play for the rest of the night.

Forty minutes later my bus crept to a halt in front of the university where the police shot and killed four protesters in the



nineties. It was long past study hours but a few rooms remained lit — little bright squares, housing scenes and stories in each one. I picked a window, imagining a student slipping his overdue essay into the submission pile before sneaking back out, maybe to a futsal game, or perhaps to a girl. I smiled at the thought.

Thinking of a name for him, I began to wonder about the names of the four dead. Behind the iron gate, the faculty building was drenched red by the glare of taillights on my window. They had careers lined up in the Golden Triangle, but still they chose to march down the quad that day, knowing what awaited. Some called them brave for fighting for what they believed in, others said they were fools for believing in dreams; I wouldn't know.

The light in that room snuffed out, then the one next to it lit up. I guess it was just the security guard.

The bus lurched and began to crawl again. I looked at the time: eight fifty. Reza must've been finishing up by now — a silhouette labouring on his desk while the other puppets exited the screen, one by one. I felt like a traitor. I sent him a text accepting his offer for tomorrow, thinking about this cheap vendor he might like.

I stepped out of the bus and hired a bike to the front of the restaurant. The lights were dim, accentuating the candles' faint orange glow on the faces around the tables. Lucy recognized me the moment I walked in and hugged me. Her perfume made me conscious of my own sour, smoky musk.

"Girl, I've missed you!" she said, squeezing my shoulders.

"Lucy! Man, how long?"

"You look so messed up. You work as a coolie or something?"

I laughed. "Nice to see you too, princess."

We rekindled the old friendship over the little candle-cup. I met Lucy in English class on the first day of junior high. She was one of the few who actually liked the lesson and the only one who saw the passages as I did. We always chose each other for the semester projects, working together on plays, debates, and even that terrible romance novella that she could never talk about without turning red with laughter.

Her poems were always selected for the wall magazine and I'd even had mine pinned alongside hers once or twice. She had this way of pronouncing 'poem' as 'poyem'. I'd tease her for it, but her poyems were all very good, and there was this one about a dancer—

"I'm freaking starving, aren't you?" she said.

I flipped the thick, coarse leaves of the menu, saw the prices, and skipped to the drinks. I felt her eyes following my finger as it traced over the teas.

"My treat," she said.

"Well, now! What's the occasion?"

"I got a new job."

"Nice. Is it near my tower? Cause—"

"In SF."

I knew what she meant. But I had to make sure. "SF?" I asked.

"San Francisco! Can you believe it?"

Her face lit up into a smile. I stared into the flame as she told me about the life lined up for her in America. The wick was suspended in the oil by a floating piece of metal, its tail submerged in the dyed oil and its tip blazing above the surface. Every time I breathe, the surface would ripple and the flame would quiver, making the shadows on our table dance, like a musical. I thought how nice it would be to dress up and watch one in an actual theatre, on a weekend, or perhaps after work.

Lucy blew the candle out with a sharp draft.

"Yo," she said, waving her hand in my face. "Snow! Did you hear what I said?"

"Yeah," I mustered up a smile. "Send me some so I can touch it."

My phone vibrated under the table. I opened it and saw Reza's name, but I couldn't understand the text. Every time I read a new word my brain lost its grip on the one before. I read them again and again and I strained but nothing just made sense. I felt like the stupidest kid in class.

"It's late, isn't it?" said Lucy, car keys jingling in her hand.

“I’ll drive you, c’mon.”

In the midnight traffic jam, I looked through my red-tinted window at the buskers, bikers, and beggars strewn on the pavement. Above us, skyscrapers perched high above the din and the smells, snuffed out like concrete candles save for a few bright little squares.

“Lucy,” I asked.

“Hey.”

“Do you remember that poem? In grade eleven?”

“Poy— poem?” she said, adjusting her blazer under the seat belt.

“It’s about a girl who dreamed of being a dancer, but one day she stopped walking. So with her fingers she made these shadows of ballerinas dance on the wall till her hands blistered from candle fire.”

Lucy turned away and stared out of her window into the night. The nape of her neck flushed with the red of the taillights. The radio host bid farewell amid the muffled buzzing of bikes swerving outside.

“Nah,” she said. “Sounds like something you’d write.”

It was past midnight and the office was fully lit for the two people still working. Reza’s desk was empty but the two stacks were still here on my desk. I picked up the finished stack and walked over to the window. Feeding the sheets one by one into the shredder, I looked down on the city as it inched away in the night under the looming shadow of a thundercloud. I tried to think again — I tried and tried and wracked my brain but nothing came to me. I wondered what Lucy was doing now.

When I reached the final sheet at the bottom of the stack, I realized how the bright light made my reflection so clear in the glass. She looked straight at me like a mocking imitation, standing there in the night before the image two others hunched over their desks, slaving away behind stacks of work. Clutching that last sheet, I looked beyond the pale scene and onto the city for one last time, then I fed my resignation letter into the shredder, turning it into coiling ribbons. Nothing came to me but the same cliched metaphors

and half-stories. But it didn't matter — I still had a stack of documents to do.

*David Warner*

A Job Interview



2 DAYS AFTER LEAVING  
2ND INTERVIEW.....

EMAIL: WE APPRECIATE YOUR  
INTEREST IN THE POSITION,  
BUT WE HAVE DECIDED TO  
MOVE FORWARD WITH OTHER  
CANDIDATES.....

WHAT'S THAT,  
MOMMY?!

JUST ANOTHER ART  
SCHOOL GRADUATE,  
SWEETIE...

WOAH!  
YOU ALRIGHT,  
BRO?!

ROCK N' ROLL, MAN!  
HA- HUH- HAA!

DAVID WARNER  
2019

*Allen Forrest*

*Excerpt from Smart Phone Addiction Series*

# SMART PHONES FOR DUMB PEOPLE




Marilyn Monroe  
for smart phone  
addiction

Come on Jack,  
text me!

Is nothing sacred?





Not enough  
followers on  
my Gettysberg  
Facebook page.

Abraham  
Lincoln for  
smart phone  
addiction

FF

Is nothing sacred?



My spy's email  
says another  
conspiracy to  
overthrow me!

Queen  
Elizabeth I,  
for smart  
phone  
addiction

Is nothing sacred?

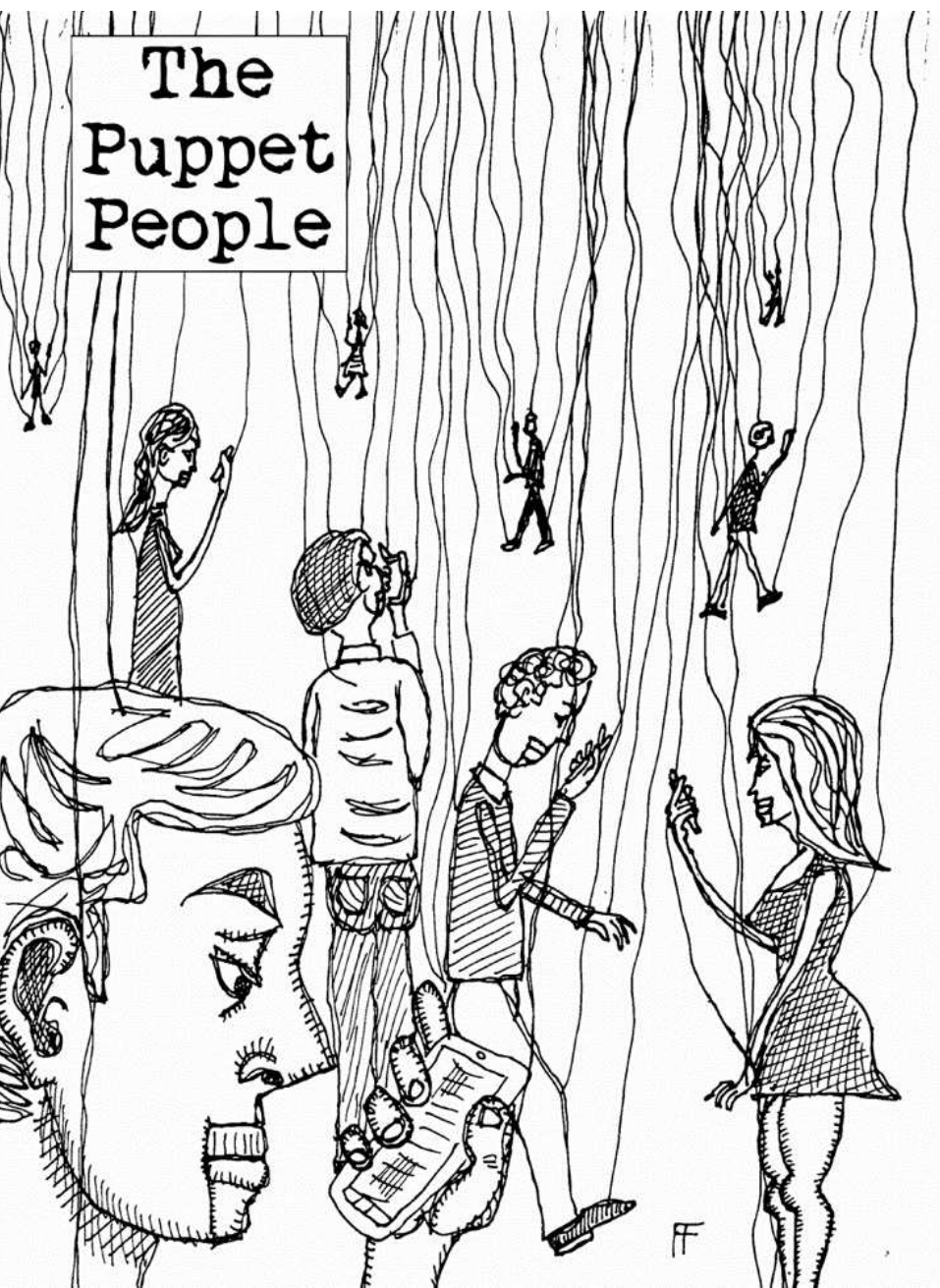
Winston Churchill  
for smart phone  
addiction

V for  
victory  
tweet,  
awesome!



Is nothing sacred?

# The Puppet People



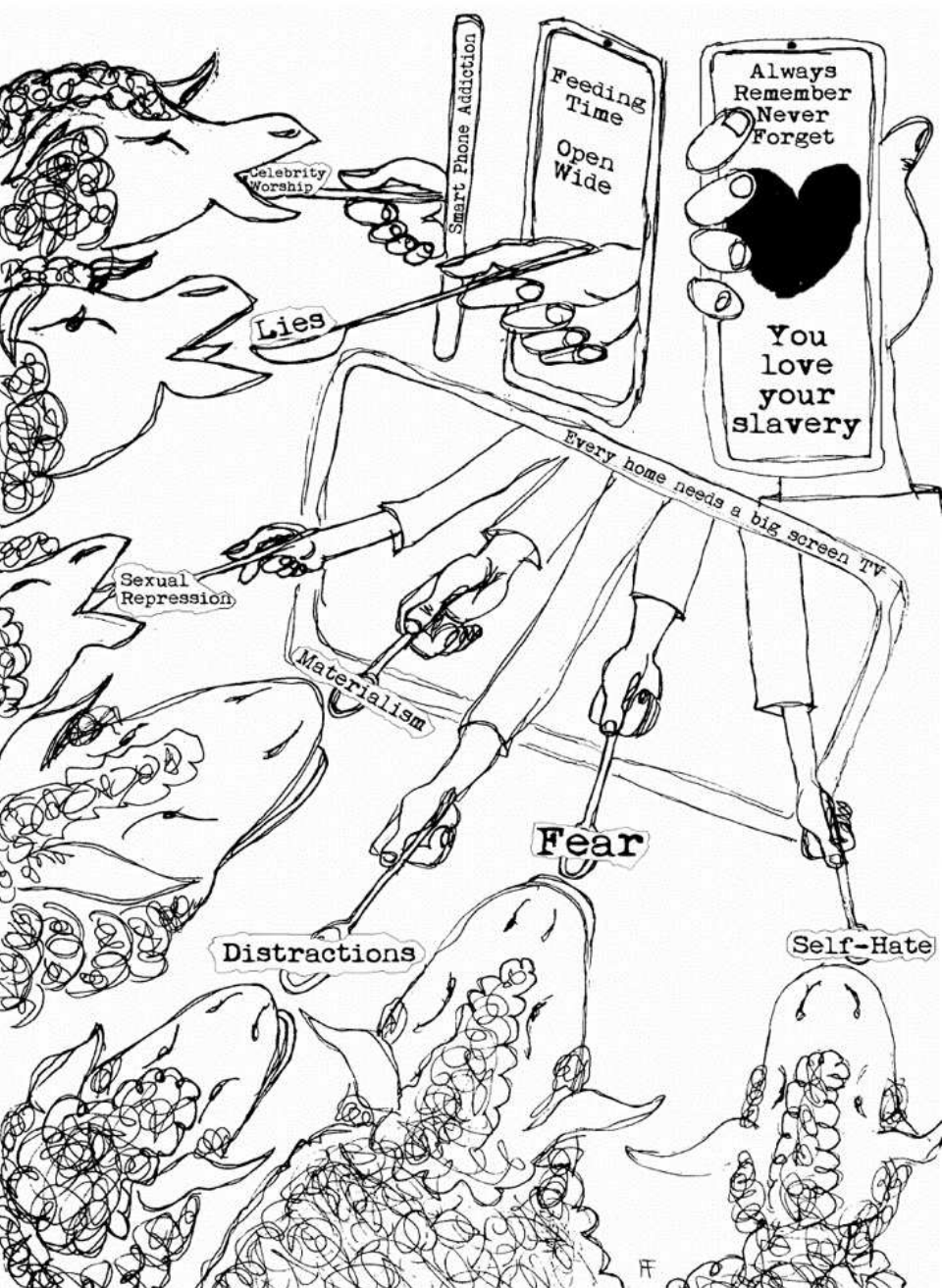






# Addicts







# Contributors

## **Adeiza Atureta**

Adeiza was born in Ogaminana, northern Nigeria. His poems have featured in Stick, Short Glass, GNU Journal, and Sentinel Quarterly. He has worked as PR staff, as well as TV, radio, and print journalist.

## **Allen Forrest**

Allen Forrest is a writer, graphic artist, and filmmaker, the winner of the 2015 Leslie Jacoby Honor for Art at San Jose State University's Reed Magazine, he lives in Vancouver, BC, Canada. His Bel Red landscape paintings are part of the Bellevue College Foundation's permanent art collection in Bellevue, WA. To find more of his published works, please visit him online at <http://art-grafiken.blogspot.ca/2016/04/poetry-and-prose.html> to browse his poetry and prose collection; and <http://art-grafiken.blogspot.ca/2016/12/graphic-narrative.html> to browse his graphic narrative collection.

## **Casey Dexter**

Casey lives in the heart of NYC and works in the entertainment industry

## **Channa Goldman**

Channa Goldman studies Creative Writing at SUNY Purchase. Her writing explores themes of identity, desire, and personal politics. She has been writing poetry for Pinstriped Zine since 2017, and continues to currently. Her previous work has appeared in Rookie Mag, Teen Ink, and Grl Mag. She is currently a poetry editor for Italics Mine.

### **Dan Cardoza**

Dan A. Cardoza's poetry, nonfiction, and fiction have met international acceptance. He has an M.S. degree in education from C.S.U.S. Most recently his work has been featured in California Quarterly, Cleaver, Coffin Bell/2019 Anthology, Dime Show Review, Entropy, Five:2:One, Gravel, New Flash Fiction Review, Poached Hare, and Spelk

### **David Warner**

I am a recent graduate from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and recipient of the Presidential Merit Scholarship. I absolutely love drawing cartoons and enjoy sharing them with people.

### **Elaine Naong**

Elaine Caalim Naong is a poetry and nonfiction writer based out of the greater Houston area. Her writing interests include writing from the body and writing about cultural identity. She currently works as Social Media Coordinator for Defunkt Magazine, a Houston-based online literary arts magazine.

### **Exodus Brownlow**

Exodus Oktavia Brownlow is a Blackhawk, Mississippi native whose writing aesthetic includes purposeful horror, character-driven fiction, and nonfiction writing that aims to create a healthier world for us all. She is a graduate of Mississippi Valley State University with a B.A in English, and Mississippi University for Women with an MFA in Creative Writing. She is published with Electric Literature, Barren Magazine, X-Ray-Literary Magazine, and more.

### **Grace Miskovsky**

Grace Miskovsky is an emerging writer from the San Francisco Bay Area. She is currently studying for a semester at an experiential learning based semester school in New York City.

### **Julia Aloï**

Julia Aloï is a writer based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She is an editor for BatCat Press, where she also practices a variety of bookbinding techniques. She serves as the managing editor of the award-winning literary magazine, Pulp. Her work has been published in Balloons Lit. Journal and will be featured in the upcoming issue of Sheepshead Review.

### **Kalyani Bindu**

Writer and Researcher from India. Two Moviegoers was her first poetry collection. She wrote articles revolving around socio-cultural themes during her stint as a columnist ('The Occasional Owl') in White Crow Art Daily. Her poems and essays have appeared in Muse India, Modern Literature, Variant Literature Journal, Madras Courier, Indian Review, Navalokam, Bhashaposhini, Ethos Literary Journal, White Crow Art Daily and the Indian Express.

### **Katherine Martini**

Katherine Martini is a first-year MFA candidate at Rutgers-Newark who is just trying to prove that there is a difference between a Master's in Poetry and a degree in Broken Childhood Dreams.

### **Lauren Jahn**

Lauren Jahn was born and raised in South Dakota. She enrolled in Black Hills State University and earned a Bachelors in English Education and Psychology. She has worked for rural school districts and counseling agencies. Currently, she maneuvers motherhood.

### **Madison Whatley**

Madison Whatley is a Saint Leo University undergraduate from Hollywood, Florida, specializing in Literary Study. Her poetry has been published in Furrow, Chomp, Sheila-Na-Gig Under 30, 30 N, and Outrageous Fortune.

### **Malcolm Cooper**

Malcolm Cooper lives in Tucson, Arizona and attends the University of Arizona.

### **Maria Grissino**

I'm a 24 year old artist who graduated from UNCG in December of 2019. I was born with chronic lung disease and I have ADHD but I think I still kick ass. I love music, writing, and art, and I hope I'll inspire people one day.

### **Martin Krafft**

Martin Krafft is currently a graduate student in photography, video, and imaging at the University of Arizona. He received his undergraduate degree in Creative Writing and Economics at Emory University. He hails from the sweet-tea-drinking part of rural Southern Maryland. His art practice revolves around people's search for meaning and expanding ideas of whose voices gets included in public discourse.

## **Mary-Margaret Andrulot**

Raised in a town unknown even by those who live in neighboring areas, the seclusion and regular immersion with the marsh woods inspired a love of nature - especially during the night, and what lurks just out of sight. Beyond using words to create, there is a fondness for multiple mediums including woodworking and blacksmithing. Where words are concerned, however, the genre preferences usually lie with horror - particularly poetry or creative nonfiction.

## **Melinda Gonzalez**

Melinda González (La Poeta Guerrera) is a scholar-poet, educator, and mother of Puerto Rican / afro-indigenous descent. She has self-published two poetry books – *Ramas y Raices* and *ReConstruct*, and has been published in various literary magazines. She is currently working on a third manuscript. Melinda is an anthropologist completing her PhD and an instructor of Capoeira, an Afro-Brazilian martial art. You can learn more about her at [PhDDreams.com](http://PhDDreams.com) and follow her on IG at [@lapoetaguerrera](https://www.instagram.com/lapoetaguerrera).

## **November Rhodes**

November Rhodes is a poet, novelist, and painter based in Minnesota. She is currently working on three separate poetry collections with anticipation of publication in 2020. She adores writing because it takes the mess of words in her brain and turns them in to beautiful poems.

## **Rosanna Jimenez**

Rosanna Jimenez is a tech writer and researcher covering workplace technology trends. When she is not writing about tech, she is working on her poetry. Rosanna currently resides in Boston with her chihuahua, Edith.

### **Tuur Verheyde**

Tuur Verheyde is a twenty-two year old Belgian student, currently completing a Master's Degree in English, Literature and linguistics at the University of Ghent. Although Dutch is his first language, Tuur writes poetry exclusively in English.

### **William Buchina**

William Buchina, born 1978 in New York City, has spent his artistic career piecing together disparate and conflicting imagery in an attempt to draw from them unrealized, unique narratives and suggestive themes. Buchina is currently represented by Hollis Taggart gallery in New York City and has exhibited extensively in New York, Istanbul, Paris, London, Berlin and elsewhere. He lives and works in Brooklyn, New York with his wife and fellow artist Sinejan Kılıç.

### **Yehezkiel Faoma**

Growing up in the strange and weathered city of Jakarta, Yehezkiel Faoma learned to write about things he couldn't express otherwise. His work was published and awarded in the literary magazine of the University of Nottingham, and now he spends his days a copywriter and nights a writer.









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