

Variant  
Literature  
Journal

Spring  
2021









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## **Variant Literature Journal - Volume 7**

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# Letter From the Editor

Wow—I'm just really excited to share another great issue with everybody. I can't believe it's already Summer and I apologize to everyone who has been waiting on this Spring issue!

It's been challenging managing the journal alongside the press this year, in regards to the amount of time I can continue to devote to it in relation to the time it deserves, and so going forward, Kalyn RoseAnne Livernois will be taking the helm as Managing Editor. Kalyn has been putting a lot of time into reorganizing our workflow and I'm excited to see where she takes things. It's been a pleasure getting to know her this year and I'm excited for y'all to too!

Lastly, this will be our last print issue and then we'll be transitioning to online only issues. We're switching web hosts to make this happen so it is likely that the current url for this issue will change but our domain will not ([www.variantlit.com](http://www.variantlit.com)).

More news on these changes soon!

Thank you for sharing your words with us.

Warmly,  
Tyler Pufpaff

# Table of Contents

## Poetry

- 1 Adam Schechter | Concerning the Moon
- 2 McCaela Prentice | Shadowbox
- 3 Marie Peebles | The Encounter
- 4 Joseph Hardy | I Have This Dream
- 6 Caitlin MacLeod | life lessons, as taught by snails
- 7 David Harrison Horton | Model Answer (Mathematics)
- 8 Hibah Shabkhez | Listen, Fable-Writers
- 9 Kimberly Wolf | If you ever find pictures of me under the bed of your new lover
- 11 Amanda Hartzell | Strawberry in pandemics
- 12 Nadine Mackell | little sister
- 13 Selena Cotte | Nothing feels quite like your grip & other shared memories
- 14 Kate Sweeney | (Trauma Chasm)
- 15 Abigail Minor | Infinity Ballot

## Nonfiction

- 17 Anna Oberg | Of Rupture and its Fruit

## Artist Statement

- 38 Howard Skril | The Anna Pierrepont Series

## Fiction

- 39 Jessica Evans | Sweet and Sour
- 42 Samantha Crane | The Whore of Villisca
- 51 Eva Eliav | The Bird on the Plateau
- 53 Sophia Zhao | Progression of Good People
- 56 Alexandra Wagman | Windows
- 72 Chris Belden | The Target
- 76 Elise Good | Love and Desperation
- 91 Juliana Johnson | Eyes
- 98 Linh Tran | Summer Nights

Adam Schecter

*Concerning the Moon*

And I keep waiting for them to say Aha!  
we've found it at last you are cured  
you can go on living, now, as I assume  
others do no fantasies of stealing my own  
breath drawing pictures in my arms This  
is the sort of harm my mother never  
warned me about and what good  
would it have done avoid strangers, and  
thyself mistrust others as thou would mistrust  
older men but with all of this belief I could be  
a god the violence I do myself is hard  
to recognize for instance I have not picked up  
the phone in weeks my blue nylon bags bulge  
with to-dos my cup runneth over as they say with  
soymilk orangejuice bright purple post-it notes upon  
pages upon pages upon pages Look—it is easy to keep ones heart  
beating just reach in and give it a squeeze remember  
the rule of three and listen to your  
waltzes before bedtime though you explained to me that  
this was all superficial once I bought myself  
a bouquet of irises their blueviolet petals so delicate  
it hurt once I stood in a  
courtyard drinking the moon until  
there was nothing but blackness all around me.

*SHADOWBOX*

I am moving slow lately—moving like raw honey  
down your chin. I would kiss the blisters from your hands  
I would kiss the palms that unearthed you. I am so tethered  
to the mercy of it—to the kiss that cleared the table,  
the metal cups tumbling to the storm drain. It should rain  
always. It should be so sweet always. I am always  
waiting for the blow. did you know it is  
a perfect science? the flight of bees, pollination,  
honeycombs, the recoil—the heat of the kiss after we  
spar in the kitchen. a grin splits my mouth corner  
to corner—perfect. I have such a sweet tooth. I have such  
lousy footwork and you still kiss my knuckles.

Marie Peebles

*The Encounter*

Exiting the car, brown package in tow, content with himself for converting the acute, aching emptiness into something purposeful, something absolute: he inhaled the bruised and shifting sky.

She delivered the question slow. *You think it's going to rain?* He took in the sky and gave his honest assessment, to which she replied, *it's only a little water, isn't it?* If he were less shy, he might have replied, *Right—*

*just a little water from the sky, and nothing we can't handle.* Instead, he drank what she meant. He took a heaping gulp and swallowed, savoring the warmth of her words in his throat, his eyes

absent. He felt the cool blankness of USPS, considering his own emptiness: less a flooded pit than an aching ascent.



Joseph Hardy

*I HAVE THIS DREAM*

they're casting my life story for a movie

and I'm thinking they love my audition,  
when the director stands up and says, *Thank you,*  
*but you're not right for the part.*

*It needs someone fresh, someone new, someone*  
*free to move the story forward,* he says.

He says, *I know you, of all people, will understand,*  
and shakes my hand.

But I don't. I don't understand.

Which is why I'm climbing a brick wall in an alley  
outside the studio where they're shooting my movie,  
when a security guard grabs me from behind,  
one hand hooked into the waistband of my jeans,  
one locked on a pants cuff, so if I keep climbing,  
I could lose my pants.

But I want to be polite, because Raul,  
the older guard with thick silver hair,  
who's watching, who looks like the wizard  
in the Wizard of Oz, and Eddie, the younger  
bigger uniform holding me in midair,  
are always scrupulously polite  
and fair every time they catch me.

I try to tell them, *It's my life*,  
and project authority hanging there,  
but it comes out a whine, and Raul and Eddie  
roll their eyes and discuss where to eat lunch  
while we wait for the police.

After the restraining order, the closest I get  
is to hide in the crowd on opening night  
outside of the ropes of the red carpet  
where I tell everyone, anyone who'll listen,  
*all this buzz, all of this wild anticipation,*  
*is about me,*

but the stars begin to arrive  
emerging from black limousines,  
beautiful, glamorous, and that director  
never see me behind the flashbulbs,  
and it's not until Tuesday  
alone at a matinee, I actually see the movie—  
which is wonderful, I must say,

though scenes of my life I thought important  
were cut, and others I hardly noticed  
at the time, captured the meaning.

*life lessons, as taught by snails*

i.

the shell of you is  
flesh too. the things you retreat  
into are still you.

ii.

both is better than  
either, be all in one. more  
than any just son.

iii.

live beyond the years  
the common world would expect  
from such a tiny friend.

*Model Answer (Mathematics)*

You take any three items, like a Jimmy Choo slingback, a 1937 Remington typewriter, and a corner store throw-away Bic pen, and you have yourself a field. The options, as wide as they are, are set. Having three points, they are in fact triangulated into the infinity of their possibilities. This is why I became a screenwriter: because I was good at math. The baseline is always money, and the story moves from there. Follow the millions, but care about where the hand-me-down nickel got spent. I'd like to thank my producer ...

Hibah Shabkhez

*Listen, Fable-Writers*

I am a fox. I must flatter to get the cheese  
If I would not claw and bloodily wring  
The necks of your poultry. Yet this too does not please  
You. One fool crow swears and waggles its wing,  
And you just follow suit?

Kimberly Wolf

*If you ever find pictures of me under the bed of your new lover*

please know that you aren't the first to feel this  
I have also loved those with women hidden in shoeboxes  
little shrines to a person who wasn't me  
but if stood side by side could be mistaken for my sister  
in another life  
I find the pictures and have a fit  
ungraceful  
I scream and I make ultimatums  
I throw his things out onto the lawn  
despite it being his home I sleep in  
but this is the reality of the situation  
I ignored it  
let her secret eyes bore holes into my back while I lay in his bed  
made space for her  
could feel her breath  
warm on my neck  
and almost understood why he couldn't throw the photos out  
when he left  
I acted like I didn't know why he wasn't happy  
bore that weight  
of a hollow love  
in which I was good  
and quiet  
and still not her  
so believe me when I say I know the cold sickness spreading  
through your gut  
when one morning you stand in his kitchen holding the letters you  
found under the sink  
that he never sent me  
Darling  
please listen



don't spend one second asking yourself if your hands are smaller  
than mine  
pack your things  
make sure the gas tank is full  
burn the letters for me  
and burn his bed for us both  
drive to a rest stop six hours away  
and spend the afternoon memorizing your own face  
tracing your laugh lines  
and then  
Sweet Stranger  
forget my name

Amanda Hartzell

*Strawberry in pandemics*

Come sit in my hotel room  
and scratch my head.  
I want to be a pet

who has a pet  
and room service—  
parfaits and mimosas

and flaky bread with bubbles  
from kneading and waiting.  
Rip green from strawberries,

their seeds on the outside  
not seeds at all but ovaries  
hiding a seed inside.

If that makes you want them less  
cover each in chocolate so we don't  
have to rehash how living doubles just

to depart from itself, how it returns ashamed,  
or anything besides the moonset and whether  
anyone on this speck will stop getting sick.

I'll take you for a walk and you will take  
me for one. Sniff the damp air and pour  
our bodies out on sidewalks.

We nod at each passerby  
like they know us gently enough  
to pick seeds from our teeth.

Nadine Mackell

*little sister*

she was mellow sunshine  
cotton hair  
perfect cheeks  
my mother said she looked like a small priest  
a red horse ran around our house  
ate my dresses and pulled my hair  
the priest buried my jewellery in the garden  
I dug my hand through the dirt  
past the rotten plums found my own bones

Selena Cotte

*Nothing feels quite like your grip & other shared memories*

If you remember that year  
which feels both like earlier today  
and the four years ago it was

—& I think you do  
because we both sit around talking about it  
like we could possibly glean  
anything new

from those mistakes  
like we're not domestic pigs gone feral  
or something less wild, more pathetic

some desperate dogs  
barking mad because they have not learned  
this new home is the one to feel safe in.  
And maybe it isn't—If

maybe you and I are doomed to keep biting  
even when close to ceasefire—  
If

there's something so ingrained in it—  
I must admit, I will always  
want to know how far you can go,

I don't imagine myself giving up  
first

Kate Sweeney

*(Trauma Chasm)*

My son brought home a piece of driftwood  
in the shape of a cow cranium. I mounted it

on the wall next to the hot pink, erotic tapestry.  
The one that tells the story of a person's ass being

eaten by a fish. While being eaten, they are also eating  
a fish. We talk about the difference between wood

and bone. I take him to a hotel in Idaho where there's a bed  
shaped like an open shell, the shell that produces pearls.

It feels like sleeping inside of a womb. In the lobby,  
there's an empty gumball machine with a sign

that says—*Don't touch me*. He doesn't understand  
why this makes me laugh and then cry.

I become more and more certain my memory is  
chicken cacciatore, clowns, a coffin of broken canoes.

Abigail Minor

*INFINITY BALLOT*

The valleys go slack  
with flowers of fog

white violet  
violet violets, secret

victory for plants, the quietest  
creatures, victory for winter-

berry, red as buttons through the trees.  
Every senator and judge has buttons

to unbutton,  
early November and it's the last

leaves down to burning  
clatter. I came this morning

for the first time in a long time, waiting  
to find out who's president

I want to be stronger, a stranger  
and more simple.

There's a version of time  
we all hate

and can't get out of  
it's not like the water



shining, shivery  
and burning silver. Into the same

new time I look up  
from the railroad trestle that crosses the creek;

a pageant of long, lit  
filaments drift

high up through the air  
from west to east.

What are they?  
They are glazed with sun.

They are the quiet genitals of this moment,  
the tired genitals of the citizens

counting ballots, behind them the mountain  
is in shadow,

through a blaze of courtesy  
I touch them paying

homage  
to the root.

Anna Oberg

*Of Rupture and its Fruit*

Knoxville, Tennessee. December, 2020. It's ten o'clock. I walk outside barefoot to feel the warm wind, the wet pavement. It's been raining, but now clouds hurry past the moon. The temperature hovers in the mid-sixties. Tomorrow it might snow.

Across the street, the neighbor's flag flicks across the porch light, left on overnight. It sends broken shadows over the road. There's the clap of someone packing cigarettes against their palm. A voice calls a dog back from wherever it has ambled in the dark.

A stray leaf drags the sidewalk, pushed along by the changing wind. I breathe in the damp. There is thunder in the distance.

This weather takes me back, a whirling memory of winter in New Orleans—short, eerie, like the season never happened, like a breath drawn in the Gulf, but never exhaled.

Back inside, I climb into bed, wedge myself around the familiar curve of N's back, listening to the howl, remembering how it was that year in Louisiana—all the times I walked those cracked streets after the rain. How we held each other when storms blew in off the Gulf and awakened us in the middle of the night, rattling the paned windows, clanging through the house.

Wonder at us, at how we've lasted, blooms in my chest.  
How are we even here, together?

\*\*\*

Central City, New Orleans, Summer 2007. A crowded church. Graying walls, flecks of loose plaster shake to the floor from the corners of the room. White pastor, black congregation. A gathering from all over, come to rebuild a little piece of the city after Hurricane Katrina. Voices rise. The service goes on forever. A final prayer, chorus of amen. We exit into the bright heat.

Kids play basketball in the paved churchyard. There is no cussing allowed, inside the fence. Small groups linger, chatting in

the midday swelter.

I'm an observer, always. I've not yet learned how to enter this place. With no intention to understand, I don't know why I agree to go, to live in New Orleans. I don't know why I stay. It is our only option. But, I see no grace in the pitted streets, no romance in the curve of the mighty river.

This city is a foreign country, with a language all its own. My new marriage, too, is an uncharted landscape. There is no way to know which road I'm on or where it will carry me.

\*\*\*

Traffic. Sun. A hand-drawn sign announcing a hibiscus sale, a fundraiser for one of the Catholic high schools off St. Charles. I gaze out the window at the Spanish moss swaying from the branch of a live oak. A streetcar passes, moving faster than we are. I'm trying to convince myself to stay where I am, but the feeling I will bolt grows slowly, emphatically. With one hand on my purse, the other resting on the door handle, I turn and look at N. He has no idea

I'm even angry—hurt—whatever this is rising in my belly. This unbidden rage grows by the second, alongside something else—a shortness of breath, the feral urge to get the fuck out of the car, away from him for a second, a year, never see him again. It's only a feeling, it will pass, I tell myself.

Five minutes later, he hovers at my pace with the window down, begging—please just get in the car. I'll walk, I say. I need a minute, I say. He speeds up, roars down the block, his hand thrown in the air, giving up. The city is new to me, and I have no way of knowing where I am or how to find our place. I wonder if I should call my dad, or if that would make it worse, so I walk in the direction I'm walking, over those lacy, spring shadows on the sidewalk, thinking about how, just for now, I can breathe. How there's a tightness in my chest, but I manage not to hurt myself. How I am alone in this beautiful, wretched place.

\*\*\*

Berea, Kentucky. March, 2007. Three months earlier. A dot,

an arrow on a map marked *you are here*. Sweat trickles the ladder of my spine beneath the undergarments, all the white, satiny underthings. The dress is heavy, hot. It is sweltering, out of character for eastern Kentucky in the early spring. I expect a raw day, the weather icy or a slate sky threatening sleet. But, it shines. The daffodils lining the sidewalk open their faces to the sun.

Twice, beneath the chapel's stained glass mosaic, I ask the officiant, my soon-to-be father-in-law, to repeat himself. I can hear him, but the words he says evaporate before I can echo them. A muffled softness hums in my ears.

There is a candid photo of N and I just after the ceremony, holding hands as we meander between the ancient oaks, whispering our thrill, so newly married.

\*\*\*

I could go into the backstory. How N and I meet and marry within seven months. How there is an unacknowledged urgency to everything we are. An intensity to our lives I can see and feel, but



can't quite identify the source. How prior to our wedding, somehow, the swift current of life carries me along. I graduate college the year before I become a wife. Before that, though, I move to a West Coast city where I lose myself in a man. The two of us live together for a while until the morning he sits me on the edge of the bed, looks me square in the eye so I will know he means it, and says without faltering—I don't love you. I never did. How I wind up in Colorado and meet N one stormy August afternoon, unable to stare directly into his kindness. How six months later we vow forever in a little stained glass chapel in Kentucky. And, a month after that, I am disoriented, walking the streets of post-Katrina New Orleans, studying the bend in the river, wondering what comes next.

The current moves quickly. I can't see where I am before I am somewhere else entirely, already around the next turn, the past obscured from view.

\*\*\*

Damp heat dresses me in sequins of sweat. It's evening—

one in a line of many I spend bewildered in this place. It has just rained, a thunderstorm at sunset. The sky breaks toward the lowland, dousing everything in rosegold. We walk home from a movie at the old Prytania Theater, two blocks from our apartment. Fire springs up in the clouds piled high above the houses. Darkened power lines stretch overhead. The street lamps have not yet switched on.

We stroll, hands laced, the wet lane reflecting the sky. It is as though everything is healed. The streets no longer display their pockmarks from past flooding and scant maintenance. The asphalt shimmers, whole.

I have an expectation of marriage to do this, too. This covering, this healing is what I want marriage to be, what I think marriage is. Redemption. But, there's a shift as we walk into the coming night. I begin to wonder if we are built on cracks unknown to us, still dowsed in the glow of our wedding. Everything looks beautiful in the reflection, but there are shadows marking the edge of this brightness. The houses hide in stark relief. Some small piece

of me understands N and I don't know each other at all.

\*\*\*

Marriage is a geography, a topography all its own. The difficulty in navigation lies in the unknown. It is an unmapped country. How am I to know another when I don't yet understand myself—who I am, or what I'm doing in this place? There are no points of reference.

\*\*\*

Something builds in me our first weeks in the city, like water rushing against a rock. The current quickens, threatens to shove me further downstream. Old demons rise, billow up from under the stress of moving to a place I don't know and caring for a fledgling marriage I have no idea how to nurture.

One afternoon, N and I argue, standing in the church where he works. The reason for the fight has faded, but its intensity remains. Our eyes lock. Our voices rise. We're alone in the room. I finger the car key between my pointer and thumb, memorizing its

teeth, until something—some word or undecipherable tone—pushes me to my edge, and it becomes a tool, a weapon in my hand. I jab it into my skull over and over and over, an act as involuntary as a heartbeat, a breath.

Thin, red lines stripe my blonde hair, and I drip evidence of my route to the bathroom. Blood splatters like flung paint on the white linoleum. With a wad of paper towels to blot my head, I flee to the car.

Immediately, my mind whirls back, clicks off in quick succession the times I've done this—given in to the impulse of public self-destruction and hurt myself. I remember ripping out handfuls of my hair by the lockers during class change in high school, bashing my head against a concrete curb, unable to handle the way my boyfriend and I fight. It's the only way I know to bring my self back to my body when I perceive I'm misunderstood—the violence makes me seen. Another time, I drill an ink pen through my hand, and still another, bite my palm until it scars. The hurt proves

me to myself—I exist, as though I’m more *here*, if I’m suffering.

Pain is a touchstone.

Back in the car, dabbing my bashed hairline, I’m still a few years away from the trusted therapist who will steer me toward healthy ways to bind myself together when I can’t find my bearings. From her I will learn running is enough physical discomfort to pin me to my humanity. And still later, I will begin to take photos of myself. Steady in the viewfinder of my camera, I mentally reestablish I’m not lost, but remain the integral character in my own story.

This healing, however, is years off. In the passenger seat, on a side street in downtown New Orleans—the Big Easy—a city I don’t know and never wish to love, I feel I will die of shame.

\*\*\*

That afternoon, questions arrive. There are demands from the ministry N works for, to know I am healthy, stable. That I will not make them look bad. They must have seen him wiping up the

floor.

I lay in bed, studying the light as it writes the arc of afternoon, first entering from one corner of the window, then through the other before slinking behind the neighbor's magnolia across the street. The room grows dim. I cry, dozing to the hum of the window unit, as I memorize the bedspread seams with my finger. My mascara stripes the white pillowcase. I know I will be asked to explain myself, but my self is not yet something I have an answer for.

\*\*\*

Time moves. N dislikes discussing difficult things, so we don't—until he is called to his boss's office and informed that for him to retain employment, we will have to go to marriage counseling.

Small talk, logistics—the currency of a new marriage. A week passes with its little anecdotes and tiny tragedies. I am filled with dread of talking to a shrink about myself, my marriage—a

relationship I don't yet understand.

The day comes and we sit in a room with the therapist, a waif of a man with pleated trousers and coke bottle glasses, who speaks so quietly I want to slam my head into the wall. N, too, houses silence the same way those obliterated structures in the Ninth Ward do, the way the Mississippi does, as it flows along, smooth on top with a ripping, angry current beneath.

So, what brings you here today?

They both look to me, as if I have answers. I don't speak for a while. Tears well up. I look to N, but his expression is blank. He is throwing me to the wolves.

Because I hurt myself. Jabbed a key into my head and bled all over the church where he works, I gesture to my husband.

And, why do you think you did that?

I don't know.

And, how does that make you feel?

I'm not sure.

Do you have anything to say?

No.

And, why is that?

Because, I cannot make you understand.

Anger simmers below my surface. We sit there, looking.

They look at me to speak, because I am the crazy one—too female, too emotional, too not right. No one else in the room could possibly have a problem. It's just me. And, I stare right back at them, because, fuck no. I am there for N to keep his job, but this is not an environment where I will pour out my soul.

I can't speak freely, because the therapist N's ministry has chosen is a man. Because, I'm not ready for this—for any of it—to confess the heaping pile of shit that is me in front of my brand new husband who would never in his life dream of doing the same. Because the words clog up my throat, and I cry before I can ever get a coherent thought to rise to the top of me.

For eight weeks, or ten, we sit in the room with the skinny



man, with the pleats and the glasses. We go, and everyone is quiet.

The conversation never extends beyond some script, a list of boxes I need checked to prove I'm okay.

Eventually, our time runs out. And, things fall back to the way they were before. N and I carry our silence outside that room and never return.

\*\*\*

That fall—whatever autumn is in bayou country—I start running to learn the city, the streets nestled into the curve of the Mississippi that gives New Orleans the nickname, Crescent City.

I can't sit still anymore. I am strangled, drowning unless I'm in motion. Light simmers through the branches of live oaks, blurred, distilled in the humid air, and I do laps around the track at Audubon Park, running for my life.

I have married myself into the backlash. When I think over the past year, the man I loved before N lodges in my mind. His words still live in my head—I don't love you. I never did. I wait for

N to speak these same words to me. I wait for his walking away.

Sunday evenings, N watches football by the air conditioner—it's hot well into October. I creep away, anxious, unable to be still in my own skin. I run the streets, sweating through my shirt, until dark, trying to climb from the ether in my head back into my body.

Down Magazine and over any ragged street to St. Charles—follow the streetcar tracks east. They don't run much this time of year, anyway. Turn around at the underpass between Central City and the CBD. Head back Uptown, over any ragged street, past those mansions with immaculate lawns. Over to Tchoupitoulas, past the wedding venue, bride and groom bursting through the double doors into the last golden hour light.

Sometimes, I run far Uptown to the river. The Mississippi is silent. It flows uninterrupted—deeper and wider than any river I've seen. Standing on the bank, I guess at the water's power, its terrifying ability to pull me under, wash me away. On the paved path atop the levee, I have the same feeling as a moving sidewalk at the

airport—I am still, but the muddy water moves on. The entire world slides by at the pace of the river.

I know if I were to dip even one leg ankle-deep in to that brown water, I would be pulled in, under, whisked away. It frightens me—the thought of giving myself over to the yearning tide.

\*\*\*

I find out I'm pregnant on a Sunday evening in December. The sky glows sapphire behind the dim house across the street. We stand in the tiled bathroom watching the second pregnancy test turn blue. A shock runs through me the same way those words—I don't love you. I never did—pierced me the year before. The blue lines take my breath away. I am growing a baby. We've been married eight months.

I feel the undertow take hold. At first, it's like a trapped scream, a sob stuck in my throat. I'm sick, and I don't know why. The week before, I run a marathon in Baton Rouge, an hour off my expected pace. I can't speed up—it feels like I am jogging through

jello. I'm twelve days late and still don't understand why.

I arrange my face to make myself look pleased, try to match N's enthusiasm. This is the first time he's been happy with me in the months we've been married. I try to make my expression calm like the river, but my heart races like the current underneath. I sit on the closed lid of the toilet, a torrent of rapids and rage flowing under my skin.

\*\*\*

Those first days, weeks I lie low inside the hormone hangover and utter fatigue. But there's something else too, as though a seed of peace is sewn in me as well as a child. My rage at the unknown and resentment of marriage settles like silt at the bottom of a riverbed. I'm twenty-four—not anywhere near ready for a child—but there it is, happening, multiplying cells and growing by the day as I bloat out of my pants and develop a sudden adoration for pop tarts. Something about the inevitability calms me down. It is a trajectory, finally. It is a way to settle in, move forward without

question. Regardless of what else, whether or not I will ever learn how to be a wife—I will be a mother.

\*\*\*

My runs turn to walks. I am too tired to move during the first trimester. Up on the levee, slow, I give myself permission to look around. Often, I amble toward a place where Hurricane Katrina compromised a small portion of the levee wall. Rupture, it occurs to me, is a moment of origin, a birth. Something breaks and something else emerges in the aftermath—the way this city is coming back slowly, a year and a half after unimaginable devastation. The way I am finally coming back, after hearing those words—I don't love you. I never did. Maybe that's what this baby is—the newly created thing that will come from the breaking.

The terrain of my body changes quickly in early pregnancy. Where am I in this? I ask myself. I am shared space. A vessel. For the first time, self-reflection involves a sense of wonder at the future—a tentative, faltering hope that what is to come will heal some of

what has transpired.

There remains a wide, vacant territory between N. and I.

But, but as I grow, the space between us lessens. My pregnant belly is a bridge closing the gap. For the first time in our first year of marriage, I don't want to bolt. I want to stay in the car, see where the road is headed—if we can figure out a way to ride alongside one another in the same direction. For the first time, we are looking the same way.

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Knoxville, Tennessee. December, 2020. I lay awake, listening to rain pat against the window. N's breath comes as a sigh. Rolling back into the past is preemptive somehow, like if I reach in, look back, I can somehow cultivate a forward vision, pretend to know now what I wished to learn back then. I remember how it was when I couldn't sleep in that Gulf city, my enormous feeling that I would rise and run, burning from the house, fleeing everything. And, the anxiety still comes to me now. But, somehow, and, still I wonder

how—I've stayed and he's stayed. It's been fourteen years since then. Still, we travel at the pace of the river.



VARIANTS  
LIFE

Justice in the

BUN

get  
out



*Lee Tagged and Protested Richmond*

29" x 19" ink, gesso, graphite and colored pencil, pastel on  
watercolor paper, 2021

by Howard Skrill

These latest works, many made in 2021, is perhaps an inevitable progression from the practice that I launched in 2013, modest plein-air drawings of figurative monuments near my home in Brooklyn. The latest studio works on paper are an unanticipated and anguished project originating with the blood of innocents. Public monuments function to communicate collective memory that is sanctioned by those controlling memory space at particular points in time that are installed in central places.

Most monuments are pastiches of selective memory blended with outright fictions that appear increasingly absurd as time passes. Brought into being in stone and metal, they often endure in central public places way past their expiration dates.

Increasingly people are connecting these relics to the persistence of inequities enduring into the present and turn against extant monuments with astonishing intensity.

I am a realist and my works on paper since 2018 have recorded attacks against these monuments that are accelerating rapidly utilizing fire, paint, hammers, dollies, plastic wrap, lassos and cranes and thus resulting in astonishing tableaux vivant of monuments being added to the Anna Pierrpont Series.

You can find more of Howard's work on Instagram @skrillhoward

Jessica Evans

*Sweet and Sour*

Mama named me Heather because she wanted my soul to be acidic like hers. She is a taker, absorbing what she needs and leaving the rest behind. But I am alkaline, deep roots and soft petals. We are both perennials, fated to return over and again.

Mama wanted me to be able to stretch my leaves, to sprawl, to take up space. But she should have named me Daisy because I am not hearty. My stem is too easy to break.

Mama is bitter, born from a bulb, quick to emerge and now, quick to die. She takes up too little space inside her cardboard urn. Nate said we didn't have the money for a brass one and I know he was lying but I fold to his will anyway. He is stronger than me, stronger than Mama.

Mama taught me to use ash the right ways. She said it was full of magic, like the moon. We gathered hearth ash, carefully deposited it into small glass jars. Said prayers and whispered spells. Watered our ashes with promises and pretended like we didn't care when our dreams didn't come true.

Mama's magic wasn't strong enough to keep her alive. Today, her urn falls open on my porch and her ash catches on a breeze. I am mesmerized; my mother reborn. In her ash form, she makes trails in the spring sunlight.

Mama still smells sour but today I pretend she's sweet. I'm itching for softness, the kind that comes from growing low and slow. I want to hold her. I want to believe she can nourish me, that I can preserve her. Nate tells me I'm being sentimental. That I need to use her ash the ways she taught me. Make my own soul sweeter in the process. I know it's wrong, but I do it anyway.

Mama's ashes clump around my heart in mounds. Nate watches me perform this ritual from his safe perch on his hammock. He swings back and forth on May winds, indifferent to my outcome. Even if this spell kills me, he will still be alive. I know her soul will poison me, and yet.

Mama's voice travels up through my belly and out my mouth. I begin speaking like her, thinking like her. The lilt she worked hard to erase; word choice specific to a woman used to working with second-hand love. I take on her harsh, bitter smell. My change comes in cycles with the moon. Nate begins to keep his

distance.

Mama's memory pulls all the wrong dreams, misplaced hope fated to crash. I remain in stasis, small and potted instead of becoming a crop of heather stretched far. Nate knows I'm dying from the inside. He tells me to take on more of Mama's ash and even though I know it won't help, I do it anyway. Without Mama, my will is gone.

*The Whore of Vilisca*

You sat on the barstool at the corner, hunched over, elbows on the bar, head hanging heavy. You swirled the last drops of a whiskey sour around in your glass wishing the damn song on the jukebox wasn't so jazzy, so happy. You shifted your weight and raised your arm to signal the bartender that you were ready for another drink. That was when the man slid onto the stool next to you. Your arm lowered, your elbow returned to the bar. You could feel the man looking at you. You looked through your emptying glass to the distorted bar top on the other side. Eye contact would invite conversation. You were not interested in conversation, you didn't come to this bar, so far from home, looking for conversation.

What you were interested in was the burn of the alcohol as it rolled down your throat. Every sip took you away from thinking about the horrible week you had. The bartender approached and set your second drink on the bar in front of you as you threw your head back and cleaned out the remains of your current glass. The bartender's attention went to the man.

"The usual?"

The man nodded.

You plucked the cherry from your fresh drink and let your

eyes shift in the man's direction. Your glance told you he was a big man with gray hair and a gray beard. He cleared his throat. You could feel his stare on you. You didn't like it. You didn't like that he had picked the stool next to yours when a dozen other seats were open. Your heart beat increased, fingers curled into a fist. The whiskey gave you courage. Your lips parted, tongue ready to ask him if he had a problem but your fist and your tongue and your courage were interrupted by the bartender placing a bottle of beer and a tumbler of clear liquor in front of the man.

“Thanks Martin.”

His voice had depth, a gritty echo that tugged at you. A mix of fear, irritation, and curiosity turned your head fully toward him. His eyes were black and set deep. His weathered skin was pulled taut over his cheekbones and disappeared beneath a long scraggly beard. He looked at you without emotion. His face blank and eerily lifeless. You picked up your drink and took a sip unable to look away and unable to speak.

“Never seen you here before,” the man said.

You shook your head, “Never been here before.”

“Where you from?”

“Claremore.”

“You came a long way to drink alone at a bar.”

You nodded.

The man chuckled, “You get in some trouble out there in Oklahoma?”

You nodded again.

“That’s how I ended up out this way myself.”

You gave an irritated smile but didn’t say a word.

“Not real talkative are you?” he asked.

You looked at him. His face was heavy, not quite sad, remorseful maybe. “Been a rough week,” you replied.

“Understood, I won’t bother you then.”

A few moments of nearly unbearable silence went by then the man reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He shook the box into his hand until a cigarette poked out, he took it and put it to his lips. He grabbed a pack of matches from the bar top. You looked at his hands, covered in scarred, dry skin, dirt under his yellow fingernails. The man took a deep drag as he lit the cigarette then blew the smoke out slowly. He turned, tilted the pack at you.

“No thanks,” you said, patting your jacket pocket, “got my own.”

He nodded and returned the cigarettes to his pocket. Your eyes followed his movement. That was when you noticed the emblem on his sleeve. Against the olive drab wool the dark copper colored button stood out, two crossed rifles on an empty field. You

knew what that meant. Soldier. Infantry. Your mood changed.

“You an Army man?” you asked, intrigued.

“I was,” he replied.

“You fought in the war?”

His face hardened, brow furrowed. “A couple of ‘em.”

“A couple?”

He put his dry lips around his cigarette and pulled a drag, “I fought Mexicans at the border and Germans in France.” He exhaled and smoke curled in the air.

Your irritation was pushed aside by interest.

“What was it like?”

“Now you want to talk,” he scoffed, “and you want to talk about war.”

The animosity in his voice shook you. His black eyes danced as they looked through you. Penitent, you waved off your question.

“You want to talk about war, might as well talk about love,” Another drag. “They both do a hell of a number on a man.”

You shifted uncomfortably on your stool, cleared your throat.

The man laughed. “You ever been in love?”

You shook your head. The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a coin.



“Play some songs, will ya?”

Confused, but looking forward to a reprieve from this conversation, you took the coin from his palm, “Sure thing.”

You slid off your barstool and moved toward the jukebox but the man’s hand grabbed your upper arm, startling you and stopping your forward movement. Your eyes widened as you looked back at him.

“One of those songs needs to be number 6.”

Something flared in his dark eyes, anger, maybe, passion, perhaps. You nodded. He let go of your arm, but you could still feel the grip of his fingers. He hadn’t grabbed you hard but your skin burned where his hand had been. The heat rose up your face as you walked over to the jukebox. You dropped the coin in the slot.

While you searched the 45s your vision blurred. It must be the alcohol, you told yourself. You needed to eat some food, or have a coffee. You leaned against the jukebox as you picked the first song. You blinked your eyes a few times then turned around. You watched the man at the bar as he took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. It looked to you like his lips were moving, he was mouthing words, one word, over and over. *High? Lie? Why?* You shook your head and turned back to the jukebox. You found song number 6, pushed the button then slowly made your way back to the bar. A fresh cocktail was waiting for you. You sat on the stool and waved

for the bartender.

“Can I get a coffee and a sandwich?”

“Sure thing, egg or ham?”

“Egg, yeah that sounds good.”

You closed your eyes and let the jukebox serenade you. The soothing tones of the orchestra’s clarinet settled over you, and you swayed slightly at the introduction of Glenn Miller’s dulcet notes.

“It was 1909 and I was a fresh-faced kid from Missouri.”

His voice startled you and you opened your eyes, turning your attention to him.

“I enlisted in the Army and they sent me to Fort Des Moines. Me and some of the boys had gone out to find a drink or two and there she was, prettiest girl I’d ever seen.”

You studied the man as he spoke. His demeanor had changed. Softened, slightly, lightened, a little.

“She was from Villisca, a few towns over.”

The man wasn’t looking at you, at anyone, he was looking dreamily skyward.

“She was smart and funny, and whew could she dance,” the man took a swig of his drink, “If I had known then that she’d tear my heart in two I’m still not sure I could’ve stayed away.”

Wait, that name, you knew that name, the town, it was familiar. You may have passed through there the summer of ’36 but

you aren't quite sure. Just as you opened your mouth to ask the man a question your coffee arrived. Drawn in by the warmth of the coffee, you took a moment, put your face over the steam. You wrapped your hands around the mug, you let the heat and steam ground you. You took a sip, the hot liquid scalded your throat and you exhaled sharply.

“She came from a big family, wanted a half a dozen kids running around her too,” The man took another drink.

You sipped your coffee again. The dark brew didn't counteract the whiskey sours. You tried to blink away the dizziness. You could usually handle your liquor.

“It really was a shame what happened to her,” the man's wistful tone was gone.

You looked over at him, “What happened to her?”

The man turned fully toward you, his eyes suddenly dark, cold, “That whore broke my heart, that's what happened to her.”

You squinted your eyes, and shook your head, what the man had just said didn't make sense, did it?

Song number 6 dropped into the jukebox.

*And so you kissed me, but it didn't mean a thing...*

“Time for me to go,” said the man. He put some money on the bar and nodded at the bartender. The man slid off of his stool and turned toward the door.

*You pretended to surrender but it didn't mean a thing...*

It was at that moment you remembered why you knew the town of Villisca. You snapped your fingers as the memory moved from your brain to your tongue.

“That town,” You said to the man’s back. He stopped and turned toward you. “Villisca,” You looked at the floor, trying to steady yourself, “There was a murder, a family, killed with an axe.”

*I gave you my heart, and you thrilled me with delight...*

“That’s right,” the man said, his eyes boring a hole into you, “Terrible thing to be famous for.”

Your brain raced to pull up the facts you’d known about that murder. “They never caught the killer.”

The man grinned faintly as he said, “No, they never caught him.”

*But you never gave me your heart, you just loaned it for the night...*

A chill ran through your entire body. You watched the man push the heavy wooden door of the bar open and fade into the night. You got up to follow him, your legs wobbled, your head spun. You used all of your body weight to push open that door, step through it. On the other side you lost your balance, landed face down on the ground, unable to open your eyes. The last thing you felt was the snow melting against your hot cheek as the song from the jukebox

drifted faintly around you.

*You swore that you loved me, but it didn't mean a thing.*

## The Bird on the Plateau

The skeleton was immense. At first, the bones seemed part of the plateau, hewn from the stone, polished by primitive tools. But no, on second look, they were clearly bones, a whole skeleton, amazingly complete.

“An enormous bird,” said Rose, “that’s what it must have been. Prehistoric.”

The shape wasn’t precisely birdlike, but close enough. Rose dared to lift one of the wing bones. It was long and firm, lighter than she’d expected. She ran a finger along its surface, then carefully returned it to its place.

“I wonder why it landed here,” said Rose, “why it died here.”

“We’ll get in touch with someone back at the university,” said Ben. “We’re not even remotely competent to guess about this find.”

Rose agreed. They were on a walk, caught up in the beauty of the landscape, the pleasure of being together. They weren’t scientists or explorers. Even reaching the top of the plateau had seemed too hard. Rose had said, “Let’s turn back.” But Ben had coaxed, “It’s just a baby climb. We can make it.”

It hadn’t been a baby climb. By the time they reached the top, both were exhausted. But here they were. Hands linked, they

walked around the bones. There seemed to be something familiar about the shape, the arching wings, the long body, the slender, slender legs, the delicate feet. Familiar, yet elusive. They gazed in silence.

Finally, Rose said, “we need to start getting back. Otherwise we’ll be trapped here for the night.” The air had become cooler, and she was trembling.

Ben nodded. He opened his knapsack and took a long drink from their canteen, then passed the canteen to Rose. “Drink as much as you can. It’ll be tricky to fish this out on the way down.”

Rose drank, staring at the bird.

“Maybe we won’t tell anyone,” she said. “I wish I’d seen it alive. It must have been a wonder.”

“We need to tell someone qualified,” said Ben, “someone who can take a proper look, perhaps do a reconstruction.”

“It’s so peaceful,” said Rose, “I don’t think it’s ever been disturbed.” She flattened her palm gently against the head. “I wonder what happened to the beak.”

Ben shrugged. “Exposure to the elements,” he said. He took his camera out and snapped a photo of Rose kneeling beside the bird, dwarfed by the span of its enormous wings.

*Progression of Good People*

**stage one (39 years; 3 years)** - In the twilight corner of the kitchen, Baba peels tomatoes and thinly slices them into crescents, knife ringing bronze against the bamboo cuttingboard. A moth hums against the windowsill. He laughs, confesses he's dreamed of a blade this sharp since childhood, when the village brutes would sculpt stones like Michelangelo—dangerously exquisite—while he harnessed a lowly magnolia twig. *I fought like a madman, like that stick could save me and I really believed it*, Baba says. After those afternoons, bloody and bruised, he'd climb back up the valley home. Mosquitos would swathe his bare knees, making all the deep pain from bone to skin seem arbitrary, inflicted by arbitrary weapons. The sky would unclothe itself warmly and all the ashen terracotta roofs would yearn for the same metamorphosis. Mothers would be elbow-deep in oaken washing bins and peer up to catch that spectacle, then would notice Baba, scowling. *Ah, it's him! The neighborhood huai dan! Why won't he just stay home like a good boy?* He leans back, hip taut against the granite counter. Under daylight's slumber, he eats a tomato. It tastes saccharine.

**stage two (44 years; 8 years)** - We wait at the terminal, the storming tempest outside stifled by white light and thick steel architecture. Baba taps his foot fitfully. He's upset that he didn't pack his prized possession. *How could I forget that knife?* He wants everyone back home to see it; the pristine metal, the sharp point, the firmly hooked and steady tang. Travelers lumped under worn rucksacks rush past, leaving scents of the unwashed lingering around us. The tiled floors catch dust. *It's nothing like the pu tong ones, damn it.* Nainai would cut tomatoes with a minuscule fruit



knife, slowly and delicately handling the flesh. Limpid juice would seep out from each fumbled incision. The dull edge would carve carelessly, leaving no pairable contours to be sutured back together. *Well, security wouldn't let you bring it anyways, I say.*

**stage three (54 years; 18 years)** - By midday, his evergreen Toyota Camry has a broken window. Shattered, the police attest, by a serial criminal. *The car killer (heh), we call him. Best close your doors at night to be safe.* Baba shakes his head and buys an extra lock, latching it all day. The cupboard now has eight knives— although we really need four at most. Ten years ago, Nainai also owned eight of everything. Eight pillows, eight books, eight toothbrushes— but no fours, absolutely no fours. *Lucky and unlucky. Those are the rules.* She would smile and admire the tender sublimity of it all, reassured by something not really there. *You're becoming like Nainai,* I mumble. Baba stares at me, eyes blank. *Who?*

**stage four (64 years; 28 years)** - I am in the bathroom, face drenched in ice water. Droplets sink down in slow-motion. I am listening. *Creak creak.* For hours at a time, sunken softly into a rocking chair, Baba lurches back and forth, back and forth. *Those village idiots really had it coming! All they had were stick-arms and stick-weapons. Hah! Me, I had an army of stones.* His eyes trace the ceiling fan. *You know, bao bei, I'd beat them all up. All blood and bones. Then I'd climb up that hill and the sun would be shining, like it was welcoming me back... That's when I knew that I'd made it, that I was the survivor.*

**stage five (74 years; 38 years)** - Quietly at bedside, I peel a tomato with one of the knives. The nurses were worried. *Honey, we have pre-cut apples here, you shouldn't bring a knife in!* I slip Baba a slice. He grimaces, then closes his eyes, attempting to doze off. Hospitals smell of blood, bodies, disease, death— but not forgotten

memories. I wonder what I could've done. The doctors say, *Nothing. Sorry ma'am.*

In the afternoon, a stream of sunlight filters through the cheap polyester curtains. Baba stirs and squints at the window. I clear my throat. *Baba, do you remember that story? Back when you'd fight the village boys with an old magnolia branch?* He frowns. *Lucky*, he mutters. *What?* I say. He turns away, now fully staring at the window. A hard, golden sheen envelops his body. *I'm so lucky.*

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**footnotes** / *baba* - father; dad. / *huai dan* - rascal; a bad child. / *pu tong* - ordinary; traditional. / *nainai* - grandmother. / *the number four* - associated with bad luck because it has a similar pronunciation to the chinese character for death. / *the number eight* - associated with good luck because it has a similar pronunciation to the chinese character for fortune. / *bao bei* - darling; baby. /

*Windows*

I'm trying to give away a window on Craigslist for free. One after another, people keep not showing up.

Even folks who react with enthusiasm— *I need this! It's perfect! I'll be right over!* — still aren't actually coming over. Perhaps the idea of getting something for nothing makes it less desirable. A friend once told me that about dating, that the more available you are, the less desirable you are. She said it could be charted.

My friend is still single though, and I'm not sure if that's because she is too unavailable or too undesirable.

Craigslist responder #4 happens to be a name I recognize, Walter Abramov. I took a class with him over a decade ago. This morning when I saw his email address, I blushed, even though I was alone. All he wrote was:

i'm interested.

(mY OLD PANE HAS ROTTED)

15 Min away

It was so odd that I thought maybe it wasn't Walter after all. But the

message was sent from an iPhone, so that might explain things.

Walter was never comfortable with new technology. I haven't seen him in ten years. For some reason, when I corresponded about the window, I decided not to mention who I was—just signed the email, J.

So here I am, perched on the front stoop of my ranch house in Pelham, awaiting Walter's arrival. I look around. It's hard not to notice that my ex left his buck moccasins by the door. He got them on a road trip we took cross country years ago, back when he was searching for his Cherokee roots, and when we returned, he wore them every day – at first taking care not to scuff them, then marveling at how naturally they had weathered. "Like us, Jane," he had said at the time. I remember just how he said it: first, looking down at the shoes, patting them with one hand—then, looking up at me and smiling, a glimmer in his eye. He loved their rawhide laces, worn suede.

Now it hurts to see those old, tired slippers. I don't want to remove or even touch them. They're artifacts, another symbol of my failures. And I know enough to know that he won't bother to come back for them, because he's already taken everything more necessary.

Maybe if I stare at the slippers long enough, they'll become unrecognizable. The way it happens for words.

There's a space on my left hand where the ring used to be—a subtle indentation. It seems so obvious and glaring. For some people, this feeling might be freeing—no longer engaged to be hitched. For me, though, it's as if I'm still searching for the ring—like I've dropped it somewhere, and I just need to find it so I can put it back on.

I look out at the lawn, at the free window, which is brand new—yet far too big for my impulsive bump-out bathroom renovation—and then I look at the sky, which is reflected in the window. It seems as though the sky wants to be blue, but a fog is smudging it out.

Walter might call this *erasure*.

\* \* \*

Twelve years ago, when I was 25, I took a writing class with Walter. He was a visual artist, an abstract painter, and a writer, too. He held a weekly writing workshop in the living room of his farmhouse in Amherst.

“See that hutch? I built it,” he said, getting up from his seat. “See that door – the front door – I built that, too.”

We all stepped outside to admire the front door, made entirely of reclaimed oak. It was rectangular, and it looked very

much like a door. Ellen, a statuesque grad student at UMass, said, “I think of Wabi-Sabi— you know, the Japanese aesthetic? How the imperfections make it beautiful.”

Walter had converted the barn out back into a studio. He was at least 50 and still handsome—his hair a gorgeous wing on his head— gray, like that of a catbird.

Whenever it was warm, our group sat on the stone patio overlooking fields with grazing neighbors’ cows.

“Now this is the definition of picturesque,” said Spike, a recent transplant from Brooklyn. He had brown, wild, I’ve-poked-my-finger-in-an-electrical-socket hair.

On the first night, Walter told us about how there was a more popular workshop in town – one with international acclaim that had its own affiliation and press – but in that format no one was permitted to say anything negative. He could not give credence to that method and made some reference to the importance of negative space in visual art and to the impact of negative selection. And then he went on a tangent about eschatology and pessimism porn. Walter felt we should focus on what was true and honest, especially because this was a creative nonfiction class.

That sentiment spoke to me, at the time.

He said, “In this class, we’ll be constructive. And you can’t be constructive without being critical.” Walter was holding a jigsaw.

He went over to a pile of wood and starting cutting.

“Yes, sure,” we all agreed.

Spike offered everyone artisanal raspberry popsicles that his mother had made. “She’s just visiting,” he said, taking back our sticks after we had sucked the cold fruit off them. “She can re-use these.” He slid them into his jacket pocket.

Corbin made a comment about how we were living in Paradise Valley, the Happy Valley, a land of over-political correctness, and he wanted to do what was right, but he was tired of being corrected for not being correct all the time. I looked into his eyes, and he did indeed appear tired.

Ellen said, “One time when I was in Tuscany...”—after which point I tuned out, because that’s what I do whenever anyone begins a sentence in that way.

And, most of all, I remember this: Walter was divorced but still so much in love with his ex-wife. This part was clear to me, by how many times his eyes grazed the nearly life-size framed photograph of her in his foyer.

Week after week we met, commented on each other’s work, and admired the cows.

I noticed how Walter’s small rustic house was gradually given over to boarders – all of them female and recent immigrants from Eastern Europe. The first one, a Moldovan woman and her

child, moved into his eldest son's former bedroom. They slept in bunk beds. She would cook for everyone and make treats – halva and piroshky. Her child always clung to her leg in a way that made me feel like we were rats, infesting his youth. Walter gave his other son's bedroom to Irena, from Ukraine. She was slim, knew very little English, and liked to pray. Finally, he gave up his own bedroom to another woman, a younger, taller one – who was very pretty, Anastasia. She didn't cook but always gave Walter the eye – the sexy eye – and I had a sense of what was going on.

After Walter gave up his bedroom, he took to sleeping in a loft. "I built that," he said, pointing at the ceiling.

There was a small ladder leading up to a shallow space. I climbed up there and looked around. "You can't even sit up," I said, carefully backing down the ladder.

"I don't need to," he said. "When I recline, I do it all the way. Everything I do, I do completely."

Anastasia rested her comely head on Walter's shoulder. She was one of those women who had voluptuous lips that easily formed a pout.

*But you can't make love up there in that loft,* I thought but didn't say.

In exchange for his home, Walter was learning Russian. "It's my roots," he said.



He was going to become fluent.

She took her long, elegant pointer finger and pressed it to the pane, writing OKHO in the condensation. I watched each letter drip.

\*

Back then I spent every workshop focused on Corbin, and not much else. He was a balding psychotherapist with a beard and short, muscular hands. He was smart, and sensitive, and single—as far as I was aware. Corbin wanted to be a poet, and he was at the workshop to get in touch with his feelings.

I tried to write and submit pieces for workshop. Every time, though, Walter said things to me like, “Jane, this is not real. An octopus in your bathtub? A third eye that keeps regenerating after being surgically removed? This cannot be real.”

Corbin said: “You’re not being honest, not even with yourself. We need to see honesty emerge on the page.”

Anastasia, who was there to learn more English, nodded in agreement.

Then Spike put his hand on my shoulder, a kind gesture, I think, which soon became very awkward and uncomfortable when he didn’t remove it.

Walter placed Anastasia's arm in his and looked at me. He said, "If you take everything lightly, how will it all stay down?"

"It *won't* stay down," Anastasia added, freeing her arm from his. "It will live in the possibility of drift."

I was writing stories about having a congenital wooden heart, about getting buried alive while raking leaves in the yard. "They're allegories," I said. "They're all true."

\*

One day, after I quit the workshop, Walter asked me to lunch. He had broken up with Anastasia, and we sat outdoors at the Lone Wolf Café. He looked glum. "Listen," he said, "I'm double your age. Am I still attractive?"

"Yes," I said. "Absolutely. You are attractive." And I believed it.

"Would you ever date me?"

"Hypothetically speaking?" I asked.

"Yes. Hypothetically."

"You're handsome, Walter. And smart, and generous, and you can build things. That's a package." I said that, licking the frosting from my black forest cupcake, and I meant it.

Then, a couple of weeks after that, I went for drinks with

Corbin. I was trying to be less infatuated with him, but every time he asked me to do something, I texted *yes!* immediately and overused smile emojis. Way too available. When we met, he said he was also out of the workshop but played racquetball every Thursday with Walter. Racquetball, I thought, at the time. How cool. How could I not know that Corbin played racquetball?

“I play racquetball,” I said, lying.

“You told Walter he was attractive,” Corbin said, sipping his Mystery Box IPA. “Yes. We had lunch.”

“You said you would date him.”

“Hypothetically speaking,” I said.

“You think he’s cute? You really think he’s cute?”

I felt pressed, and at the time I didn’t realize Corbin was just fishing, because he and Walter are chasing the same girl, that Tuscany woman – Ellen – from the writing workshop. I didn’t know any of this, and really my interest was with Corbin. So I said no, no I wouldn’t really want to sleep with him, that sex with Walter would be gross.

It was that last part that came back to bite me.

A month later, I ran into Walter at the farmers’ market. He was with Tuscan Ellen. Maybe he had won the battle with Corbin for her affections. Walter pulled me aside by the summer squash and said, “Do you really think sex with me would be gross?”

I felt like shit. I felt so low.

I should've said I had told Corbin that only because I thought maybe I had some potential to date him, but then I discovered that he was just interested in Ellen, and Corbin couldn't see how Ellen could possibly be interested in Walter.

But I didn't say that because it sounded complicated and juvenile. It still sounds complicated and juvenile. I didn't know what to say, so I threw up my hands and mumbled, "Wabi-Sabi?"

\*

Five years later, I got a package in the mail, something from Walter. In the padded envelope was his book – with a tiny note attached.

Here is a copy of my book. Enjoy!

W

I looked the note over and over, but clearly it revealed nothing. The book contained a series of short stories. I read through each one, incredibly fast, wondering if he had written something terrible about me, wondering if aspects of me had been woven into a character. Then I read the book again, slower this time, cover to cover. Nothing. All of the stories were about his ex-wife, which made me wonder if Walter had just sent me the book as a kind gesture? Was that possible? What a thought!

A couple of years after that, Corbin published a book of poetry. I read an article about it online and looked it up. One of the poems was titled “Walter” – comparing him to a saint in a way that seemed sincere. Another poem was called, “Racquetball,” which is a sport I still intend to learn. When I saw these titles, I panicked. I grew concerned that Corbin had written a poem in reference to me. (I had never considered myself to be so self-involved, but you know publishing a book can serve as a kind of weapon. What if there was a poem entitled “Jane,” and it was a scathing account of how terrible a person I was?) I went to the publisher’s website to order the book, but then I stopped myself. No, I was not this person. I was better than that.

Also, the book had not been released yet.

\* \* \*

All of this stuff kicks up in my head, and soon I decide it’s best to avoid Walter. I can just tape a note to the free window. I dip inside and scribble on a piece of paper. Then I run back outside and post the note on the window.

OKHO

For Walter

Simple enough. When I go inside again I close the blinds.

Hours pass, and I hear nothing.

My bathroom sink is still backing up every time I use it. Just weeks ago, my ex would shave regularly there—his little specks of hair filling the bowl like commas or hyphens – brief pauses leading to his final departure, and clogging up the sink in the process.

He used to complain that I took everything too lightly. I was too flip. He said I was always on the outside of things, looking in—that I drifted away in conversation, retreated to the walls at dinner parties. “Where’s Jane?” he would shout during an argument, frustrated and ambling about the house in his worn moccasins. In bed at night, just before the lights went out, he’d turn to me say, with painstaking sincerity, “What are you thinking? What are you really thinking?”

I tried hypnotherapy, meditation, aromatherapy, the self-help section at Barnes & Noble, new recipes discovered on the cooking channel (well, that was unrelated), and finally an improvisation class – which seemed to help, but not in time to stop him.

Now, washing my hands in the backed-up sink, I realize it is time to call my plumber to fix it, because there’s only so much a person can be reminded of her own propensity for failure.

But first, I have to take my neighbor’s Rottweiler to get reiki. I come home and try to write a poem. It’s about a lonely woman who takes her neighbor’s dog to get reiki. I zip off that very

same evening to my weekly writing workshop—the more popular one in Amherst where no one ever says anything negative—and I share my poem. They only have good things to say about it, and that makes me feel good. The next morning when I go outside, the damn window is still there.

On to Craigslist responder #5.

Meanwhile, Frank, my plumber, arrives early to snake my sink. When I open the door, there he is—tight Wranglers, cowboy boots, and a V-neck shirt that showcases the squiggly hairs on his chest. He’s a little too good-looking, the type of person you see at a bar who effortlessly hooks a girl by closing—maybe because of the dimple on the center of his chin.

I’ve spent my life avoiding too good-looking guys because they get what they want, always, without working hard enough for it.

Nothing in my own life has ever come easily, so I am cautious, or possibly resentful, perhaps even a little bitter—maybe a combination of all three.

“Boyfriend split, eh?” Frank says, following me to the bathroom.

“Fiancé,” I say.

“I figured as much,” he says, running the cold tap of the faucet, and I’m not sure if he meant that he figured we were engaged

or if he figured my guy would split.

When Frank finishes, he hands me a copy of his book. “It’s a collection of short stories about my experiences unclogging pipes, a euphemism,” he winks, “for some wildtimes.”

“You wrote a book?”

“It’s thinly veiled fiction,” he says, holding out my bill for snaking the sink, “*thinly* veiled.” I notice he’s included a charge for the retail value of his book on his bill, along with the parenthetical: (*Makes an excellent holiday gift!*)

When I sigh, it’s one of those low-to-the-ground exhausted sighs that showcases how much a person has lived. I’ve reached a point in life when it seems as though everyone around me is publishing books, even unlikely people, people who never wanted to be writers – like Mike, the owner of the adult sex toy shop in town (which I’ve heard of but of course have never been to). He wrote an erotic memoir about his early days as a house painter: *Every Stroke a Pleasure*.

“And guess what, Lady Jane,” Frank says, shoving his auger drain back in his toolbox, “on this job I’ve given you a 10% discount.”

I lean on one side of the threshold for my front door.

“Really? A discount?”

“Let’s just say I have a soft spot for you,” he says, and I



think, oh god, no. Not him. I try to close the door right away.

But something catches his eye. He peels a taped scrap of paper off the front side of my door and hands it to me. It reads:

Ñĩàñèáí

From Walter, of course.

“I like you,” Frank continues, holding the door open with his palm, “because you’re suffering.” His expression is sincere, and he keeps looking at me—he won’t turn away.

I crumple the note in my hand, peer around the corner to make sure the big window is gone. Then I pause, noticing the silhouette of a robin on the electrical wires hanging low beyond my front porch, with clouds so startlingly gray, and all that negative space behind him.

Frank’s eyes are still on me, creating a heat now, uncomfortably, like the warmth from a brightly lit bulb. He puts one hand on my cheek, moving closer, so that his lips are inches from mine.

I start to feel myself sweat. Droplets collect along my temples and form in my armpits, making them slick. I am feebler now, too, as though everything is suddenly falling in—the house, the furniture, the ex—all of it cascading down a giant drain—trying to

take me with it. Frank releases his toolbox on the ground, and I watch as his knuckles loosen the grip. The sound is louder than it should be. I stand in the doorway, bare feet balanced on the metal rims of the door jam, as he puts one arm around me and squeezes my side. He holds me tight, so that I can't be free. Weakly I ask, my lips to his ear, almost in a whisper: "I'm suffering?"

Then, he releases me, and I nearly fall to the ground. "That you are," Frank says, repeating, "that you are."

*The Target*

That night, the snow was so deep he had to walk in the middle of the street, keeping to the ruts created by the few foolish enough to drive. A good eighteen inches or more, he guessed, and still it fell, the flakes smaller now, but icy and just as plentiful. The snowbound cars lining the street reminded him of igloos, and the trees appeared doused with foam beneath the street lamps' sulfuric glow.

He had not worn his galoshes, having left in a hurry when she called, and the snow had not been so deep then. He wished now he'd stayed in his warm apartment. But, naively, he had assumed they would drink a few beers and go to bed, and he'd even picked up a six-pack on the way. Thinking back, he should have noticed the tone in her voice on the telephone. *Can you come over now?* A question he'd heard a hundred times, but this time minus the usual breathless, seductive quality.

He cursed as the snow slivered into his shoes, wetting his socks and feet. He wanted to run, but the tire ruts exposed a layer of ice, and in these shoes he'd surely slip and fall, so he took measured steps up Forrest Street. Just one block to go. At the corner loomed a five-story parking garage that even the snow could not beautify.

From the top level he heard laughter, students returning home from the bars, no doubt.

He'd known as soon as he arrived that she was going to deliver bad news. She received his kiss passively and asked him to sit down. He opened two beers, and though she thanked him, she set hers down on the coffee table without taking a sip. "I need to tell you something," she said, and, in addition to her voice he heard the repeated warnings of his colleagues: *Do not get involved with one of your students.*

As he passed the parking structure, the wind picked up, driving the small icy snowflakes into his face. He dug his ungloved hands deeper into his coat pocket, making fists to keep his fingers warm. With each step his feet grew colder and wetter.

The first snowball landed with a puff of white powder several yards to his right. The second shattered in the wheel rut a few yards ahead. The boys on the parking structure roof cursed and laughed, their voices sharp in the quiet night.

He continued walking at a steady, slow pace, thankful that he felt a bit drunk. Another missile thunked onto a nearby car, and he heard the next one splat on the road behind him. He did not glance back. He didn't want to offer them the satisfaction. Instead, as he carried on, he concentrated on the flurries illuminated beneath the street lights. They looked like insects, locusts perhaps, swarming

in the yellow light.

His face dripped with melted snow, but the numbing cold felt like a relief after all the tears he'd spilled earlier. He felt embarrassed by his emotional outburst but had found it impossible to stop the flow. As she spoke of the boy she'd met and her feelings for him, he recognized how she'd already slipped away from him. He had rushed over to her apartment, eager to make love—he could picture the way her face flushed, could hear the throaty sounds she made—and now all of that was gone. It struck him as grimly ironic that his colleagues had been so concerned with his professional reputation, while in this case it would be his heart, not his career, that needed repairing.

A snowball went wide and thumped against a street sign. Another landed three feet to his right, swallowed by a bank of snow. More cursing. He smiled, enjoying the boys' frustration. He would soon be out of range, and he pictured them frantically forming more snowballs, taking aim, letting loose.

In the end, he drank four beers. He couldn't stop, knowing that, once he opened another bottle, he would remain in her company until it was empty. Meanwhile, she nursed one drink, taking discreet sips in between expressing her concern for him. This infuriated him. Why couldn't she make this easy and act like a bitch? Why did she have to demonstrate so clearly the qualities that

he loved in her?

The next snowball landed well behind him, but the one after that came closest of all, just two feet to his right. He did not flinch. The next two attempts did not reach anywhere close, and he knew he was safe now. His building stood ahead on the left, and he looked up to see the light in his sixth floor apartment. It would be warm inside—too warm, really, but he welcomed the heat tonight.

He'd stayed at her apartment for more than an hour, though he can't remember now anything he might have said. Did he beg her? Did he tell her, finally, that he loved her? After his fourth beer, he stood and went to the bathroom. He took in the familiar red towels, the white bath mat, the tub in which they had bathed together just a few weeks ago. He told himself he'd been a fool, but he couldn't take it in. Every moment had been worthwhile. When he returned, she stood near the door with his coat in her hand. "I'm sorry," she said again. He struggled into his coat, pulled his damp hat onto his head. She hugged him, and he held onto her for a long moment, until she patted his back. She opened the door for him.

In front of his building, he turned around and looked up at the top level of the parking structure. Through the swirling snow he could make out two dark figures standing at the edge. He raised his arms in triumph.

*"You didn't get me!"* he shouted. *"I won!"*

*Love & Desperation*

The haze of the dim light fell across the room as I stretched my hand out over the now empty, white bed.

Terian had left again.

I don't know why I was surprised, why some foolish part of me clung to the idea that, this time, he would stay.

We had started this dance, this to and fro, about a year ago. Still, I was different, I told myself. Beautiful, stunning even – though I knew that had nothing to do with why he stuck around. I was brilliant. Self-taught with the work and memories left behind from my dear aunt, long dead now, rest her soul. But I knew enough of my way around molecular biology to go wit to wit with Terian. I knew that was rare for him and, at first, I assumed that would be enough, enough for him to be captivated by me.

I pushed the pale sheets down, swinging my legs down to the wooden floors as I reached around for my discarded clothes from the night before. Here, with the luxuries I had, like proper plumbing and electricity, I could imagine the view behind the windows was entirely different. That the building and streets of London stood clean and gleaming, not dusty and beaten down, with

hardly a soul around.

Maybe, if I had more options, if I lived in my aunt's generation, I would have been different. Still brilliant and beautiful, of course, but maybe...not so desperate.

But was love desperate? Was it possessive? I wondered, gathering my thick, bright red hair up and out of my face.

No, I thought, I would give Terian another chance before I pulled the trigger. One more chance.

Dressed and ready for the day, I pushed open the door of my bedroom, moving to the small, modest laboratory I had made for myself. I didn't have Terian's knack for engineering, but I think I did more than well enough making this place. It was pristine, nearly at its former glory from when my aunt lived in this flat, before the War two decades ago.

I wonder what she would have thought of all of this if she hadn't died in the original bombings from the War. I smiled, trailing my fingers along the glass workshop bench. She had hated politics, and religion even more so. She would have been bloody pissed to know that's what led to her demise. Politics and religion really were a foolish and stupid way to end the world. But I suppose that's most of humanity, foolish and stupid, with the exception of the few truly remarkable.

I went about the small lab, turning on the machines I would



use for the day. The serum Terian and I were working on was simple enough in theory: using CRISPR/Cas9 to confer some amount of radiation protection. It had been done before, of course, as a vaccine. We were both old enough, and from families wealthy enough, to have been given that vaccine before this whole world went to Hell. We already were, to a degree, safe from the radiation still lingering in the air two decades after the bombs dropped.

To put it simply, we had no skin in the game.

And for whatever reason, Terian wanted to reverse engineer the original vaccine. A lofty, noble idea, I supposed. I had agreed to help, because, well I thought being chosen to work with him was... special, Jove help me. I guess we all do ridiculous things when we're lonely.

There were, of course, other survivors out there, but no one of them shared a spark of his intelligence. Maybe it was cold, cruel, but I had no interest in someone's sad story of survival. We've all had lost something, someone – get over it. Besides, this new brave world wasn't so bad, as long as you knew how to create fare powder, which was all you really needed for nutrient anyway, you were golden. And there were no more taxes. No more news or politics or boring civil exchanges with other people. I may have been lonely, but I had standards.

I moved one of the vials, another test to run, to the

centrifuge. Most of them were for the serum. But a few, those were possibilities for myself. Tiny little triggers I had yet to pull. If one of those were added to the serum, the effects would be a little different.

But not yet, he still had one more night, one more chance. One more chance to see what I did. We were perfect for each other – and I was tired of waiting for him to realise that. So tonight, I would give him that final offer.

Then I would decide how desperate I really was.

\*\*\*

He knocked at the door of my flat that evening. I sometimes forgot that the rest of the apartment complex was falling apart. I only had to glance at the ruins when I opened the door, but I always tried my best not to look. I'd rather not see the ugliness that laid in wait outside.

I couldn't help myself from flashing a smile when my eyes met his. I took in his attire, a straight ironed Italian suit. I had always wondered how he had managed to find those.

"Terian, good to see you."

"Hello, love," he said. He straightened his already perfectly fitted coat and stepped past me. Not one word or hint of

acknowledgement about last night.

I had gotten used to this, to him acting like each time he left my bed was nothing more than an equal transaction. Sex, nothing more, nothing less. Yet as used to it as I was, I was still bloody sick of it.

“I know we talked about this before,” I started, shutting the door behind us as I walked with him down the short hallway to my laboratory. “But are you still set on using a human subject for the trial for the vaccine?”

“We’re using me, love,” he corrected, leaning against the workbench as his light green eyes flicked up to mine. “That’s non-negotiable. I’m not risking someone else’s life for this.”

I yearned to push back the fine, golden hair that fell across his forehead, but I held back. Not yet. I knew the rules of the game. “There’s always a chance it could go wrong.” But as always, he was so reckless with that life of his. Though I suppose that would be to my benefit if this went the wrong way, if he made the wrong choice.

“Are you doubting either of our capabilities?”

“Hardly. I’m looking at it logically,” I said simply, striding across the floor. I pushed over the work I had done to-day over to him on the table. “It’s nearly done. It just needs a stabilizer.”

He looked it over, our work. I watched him make a

correction, but the look in his eyes was lost to me. I had known him for over a year now, but I felt no closer to unravelling him than I was before. This façade he wore, always wore, was beautiful, but I wanted more.

I wanted all of him.

I wanted him stripped raw of that mask he wore. I wanted him naked and vulnerable, for me, because that was what you did when you were in love, you tore down all your defences and showed yourself, who you truly were. I wanted to see him.

“The preliminary test,” he started, breaking my thoughts.

“Already done,” I told him. “Like I said, it just needs some finishing touches.”

He ran a hand through his hair. It was one of few cracks in his masks, one of the few tells of his emotions tumbling through his mind.

“This –”

“I know,” I whispered before kissing him.

Eight months of work, of our work, and here it was done. Or it would be, I thought when we pulled apart. I glanced at another vial, the one I had put away earlier. The one I would use, if he made the wrong choice.

“Jadealie, as much as I would love to, I’d prefer to finish this first,” he said, his gaze meeting mine.

“It’s done, Terian. Well, practically. I think we both need a little celebration, don’t you?”

It always took very little to persuade a man, I thought, as we easily fell back onto each other’s lips. Though, I suppose, it also took little to persuade me as well when it came to him. There was always something intoxicating, no matter how many times we did this. It was new and burning, and Jove, couldn’t he feel this too?

It didn’t take long for clothes to be strewn across the floor, returning to the same disarray they had met the night before and so many nights before that.

It took even less time for me to be against the pale sheets, my red hair fanned out like blood as we too greedily met each other. My hands trailed, nails lightly tearing at skin. It was always like this, like a hot fever, some sort of delirium as we took each other in. There was nothing else but us, no other sight, no other noises than the soft gasps and moans that stroke in tune to this wonderful fervour of him and me.

Between a moment and eternity, we broke apart, my body happily spent. I closed my eyes, wishing I could spend the rest of time between this second and the next. But as much as I loved this, these stolen minutes and hours, I was not satisfied. I was never satisfied. Not yet.

Maybe I should have just taken the moment to enjoy this

golden hour. And maybe I would have, if he weren't already pulling away, reaching for his clothes.

Maybe I was being irrational. I knew how this worked with him. Glorious minutes, taken in like an addict, and then back to work, like nothing had ever happened.

I was so Jove-damned sick of it.

Why couldn't he see what I did?

"Terian," I started, before abruptly stopping myself. My voice was too thick, too choked and weighed down by emotion. I wanted to have a conversation, but I would be in control. I would reach and take what I wanted, not sob in a mess for it.

He raised a brow at my tone, my own, tiny crack in my armour. "Yes, love?"

I sat up straighter, wrapping the white sheets over my breasts, like a makeshift gown. "Don't you ever want more?"

Any spark of light that was in his eyes before flickered off as his façade was pulled back on. "More what?"

I shook my head, gathering my thoughts. I needed to stick to the plan of what I was going to say, how I wanted this to go, how I needed this to go. "Don't you get sick of it all? How boring it all is?" How lonely?

Those were the wrong words to say.

"Boring is hardly the adjective I would choose," he replied,

straightening that all too perfect jacket as he pulled it on and adjusted his cuffs. The mask he wore, if it was even a mask anymore, was back and secured. I yearned to rip it off, to tear it to shreds.

“Maybe not, but you know what I mean.” He had to. None of this rubbish could be enough for him. Maybe if he were like the rest of them, maybe he’d be too caught up in survival to take the time to think and want more. But he was never that dull. He was brilliant like I was. A perfect match in a world of insignificances.

“I’m afraid I don’t, love.”

“Terian,” I started, leaning forward. “I know we talked about how this arrangement is. But why do we have to keep it to only this? Don’t you want more?”

“Jade.” He paused before sitting down on the bed next to me. “I don’t. I’m sorry.”

“That’s not true. You know as well as I do how well we work together. And I know there’s no one else that can keep up with your brilliant mind, not like I can. We fit, Terian. Why not make this more than a few moments of sex and work? We could be so much more.” He and I could be everything.

He sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Jadealie, I’m sorry. No. I don’t want a relationship. I don’t have time for one. I’m sorry if I misled you. That was never my intention.”

I hardly heard anything else after he said *No*. That word, that *No*, was ringing in my head, repeating itself over and over. *No*. But as much as those two little letters ripped me apart, I shoved it down. I would not be the one in pain. No, I was better than that, and though he was making a mistake, I would not cry over it. I would never be a pathetic, sobbing mess.

So, instead of reeling, as my foolish little heart did, I gave him a smile and said, “I understand.”

“Jade —”

I waved him off. “Truly. It was just an option I was considering. Come on, Terian, I’m not a schoolgirl. We’re still colleagues.”

“I know, love, however, I am sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologise,” I insisted. He would not see me vulnerable, not now. “I’m quite all right.”

He glanced at the door. “Nevertheless, we can wait to finish tomorrow.” I hated the touch of concern in his voice and that stupid little apology he gave, and I hated the stupid little repeat of *No*, *No*, *No* echoing in my brain.

But I kept these thoughts under lock and key, shoving them deep into my mind. Instead, I merely rolled my eyes, standing, dropping the sheet to the ground as I slipped my clothing back on. My hands didn’t even shake. “It’s quite fine. Besides, like I said



before, it's practically finished. We don't need to delay because you feel like you need to be a gentleman."

He raised a brow, the concern still lingering in his eyes.  
"Okay, love. Lead the way then."

I pulled my composure around me, refusing to give into my weaker emotions, and walked back to my workshop as if it were just another day, as if the ringing in my head did not chime on in a chorus of *No* with each step.

No, instead of the turmoil, my hands, without a tremble, reached for the vials, laying them out from the centrifuge. I didn't second guess as I grabbed the second stabilizer, the one I had specially made. He had his chances. This time, he would pay for it. Mistakes had consequences after all, didn't they?

"Go ahead. You do a better job of stabilizing the proteins anyway," I said, handing him the two glass vials.

Despite giving me a second glance, a glance I would have yearned for before – if it were not one out of concern, he took the vials, flipping on the machines and reaching for the pipette.

Yet, as I watched him work, for the first time, the smile that grew on my face was genuine.

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Some part of me had wondered if I would feel guilty. I knew without a shadow of a doubt what the results would be from the serum; I was brilliant after all, wasn't I?

I knew Terian, of course, planned to test it on himself, as if his life was something he could gamble away. Perhaps, in a way, it was his fault for doing that. He could have taken my suggestion on using someone else, someone sick and dying from the radiation anyway, as the test subject. He never had to risk himself.

But I knew when I made the switch to that other stabilizer that he would only use himself.

So, I wasn't surprised when I heard the noise of the slamming door.

Still, it caused me to flinch, and I dropped the breaker I was using. It shattered in tiny little shards on my workshop floor. It would be a mess to clean up, I thought distantly.

It was the only thought I had the chance to have before I felt cold, sharp metal against my throat. Maybe I should have felt a shiver down my bones. But instead, I felt my lips turn to a smile.

I had his attention now.

"Hello, Terian."

"What did you do." His voice was calm, deadly. It was like that quick cut of lightning before thunder.

"You know, I had wondered about this," I said, ignoring as

the knife dug deeper. I felt warm blood begin to pool underneath the blade. “I wondered if you would sacrifice yourself or not. I know what little care you seem to have for your life, but I wondered if that would overrun your desire to live. I guess I was right.”

It took me a moment to process the slam of my shoulders against the wall. The knife was gone, but his hands pinned my arms down. Those pale green eyes of his were lit in a beautiful way, like a forest on fire. Jove, I still loved him. “You have thirty seconds. Tell me or we’ll see how far you’ll go to live, love.”

I laughed. “Come, I know you won’t kill me.”

I had remembered in those brief moments in my bed how he had confided in me. He had to kill before, to survive after the War. In those early days, people had to kill for mere scraps of food. I had done the same, of course, but it never bothered me quite like it had him. That pain and guilt I knew he carried was what had given me this idea after all.

The grip he had on me was hard enough to leave behind molten bruises. Probably would. “Well, thanks to you, it will now only take a single touch to kill you. Care to rephrase your answer?”

“I thought that was a nice *touch*, wasn’t it? I know you’ve probably already connected the dots; you are always so clever. But still, it was very creative.”

No one really gave it much thought that the body, like any

other machine, needed electricity to survive. Granted, bioelectricity wasn't something just anything could produce – but another human could.

That little stabilizer I added guaranteed that he would, from now on, have to steal it. I turned off his body's ability to organically produce his own bioelectricity. So, he could either siphon it from someone else and kill them or he could die himself. I thought that had a nice poetic twist to it. Like I said, I was brilliant.

“Fifteen seconds. And before you care to claim that I wouldn't dare kill someone in cold blood, let me remind you that you know very little about me, Jade.” The lightning had struck and there was the burning fire in his voice. And finally, in an awful way, there was the passion I had wanted.

I laughed. Maybe I was a little mad, I thought. But weren't all desperate, lovesick fools? Even now, as he threatened me, as he hated me, I wanted him. I wanted to make him mine, and I suppose in a way I did.

“You can kill me, Terian, but you and I both know why you haven't.” I was the only chance he had of undoing what I had done. I had created this and only I could unravel this mess I bound him in.

I felt cold when he released his grip, turning away from me. I couldn't see the emotions dancing on his face, but I knew for

certain, that mask of his was in tatters. I had finally torn it apart.

“What is it? Are you not going to try begging for me?”

He didn't say a damn word to me as he left, left me alone in my home, like he had all those times before.

Yet for the first time after he left me alone, I couldn't help but smile.

*Eyes*

The world is me, and them. They are the ever-present audience, waves of faces in rows and rows of seats, filled by people I know and even more people I don't, all leaning forward in their chairs to watch me, hanging on my every step, on my every word, eyes fixed. I live my life for them, on a stage where there are no red curtains to pull open, because there is nothing else to reveal. There is only a black void of a backdrop and me in front of it. The spotlight follows me, the living art piece. I don't sing, I don't dance, I just live. Constant performance art I never asked to take part in, never taking a break, never standing still for the fear of what the reaction may be if I do. Breaking the fourth wall, fifth wall, sixth, whatever ones I need to break to reach the eyes of those watching. Always watching. I stare into the camera, into their eyes, into the void, into God.

There is a constant running track in my head, a hypothetical critics review of my 19-years-and-still-going performance. What would be thought of my current actions by those watching- if everyone, if anyone, were watching. Am I the hero, the lover, the martyr, the rebel, the villain? Do they admire me, sympathize with

me, feel inspired by me, hate me?

Do they love me?

I want them to love me.

They have to love me.

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When I was 18, I met a boy. A auburn-haired boy with tawny-brown eyes and a honeysuckle voice. He joins me onstage the night he tells me he is in love with me, the first time anyone has ever said that to me. He whispered into my ear in the dead of the night, a secret for us two, the LED lights of his wall illuminating us in the moment. We dance on stage, an old-fashioned waltz, fingers laced, eyes looking into each other. His burn, mine glow. We dance like that for what feels like forever, and I am too busy looking at him to remember there are others here. With him, there are no others here. Not even God.

And then he breaks up with me, and the dance ends so abruptly I am thrown onto the hardwood of the stage floor, my lip busted open, blood staining my dress. I get up, looking wildy around for him, my eyes scanning and searching and -oh. There he is. I stop to stare into his eyes, as I had done so often before.

He has become the center of the audience, the spotlight

flipping from me to him, and the audience is watching him watch me, his whiskey eyes to match his breath, his smirk hidden in a ginger beard. He whispers my secrets, the ones I told murmured in the dead of the night when only he was listening, and the audience clings to every word. The audience watches me stare at him, a deer dumbstruck in the headlights, waiting for him to smile at me. He keeps the same, his harsh leer never letting up.

I want to hide from him, but on stage there are no props, no curtains, no escape. Just me alone in a sheer dress- no makeup, my hair wild and unbrushed, every flaw illuminated by the burning stage lights. I am exposed through and through. Blue eyes shining, windows open and letting the outside in and my insides out.

I don't know what to do now, without him by my side but with his eyes still on me. I don't know what to do without his love distracting me from the piercing gaze of the world, waiting for me to do something. How can I be loved and then not?

What does the audience think of me now? A lover turned to lover-spurned? What is he saying about me? Who do they think I am now?

I do the only thing I know how. I keep going. The performance begins again.

I want to show him up. Make him regret leaving me, make him hate me, envy me, desire me, love me.



I want him to love me.

And I want to say I do not love him in return.

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My ex and the audience and God are always watching me. Except in the moments the world goes dark, when the shadows cave in and form a bubble around me, protecting me from the cruel burning of the spotlight. I used to be so afraid of the dark, so scared of what I would discover about myself when I had no eyes to hold me accountable to neither sin nor virtue. What am I, if not the amalgamation of others thoughts of me?

I learn in the moments I live for me alone. My moments. No cameras, no soundtrack, no T.J. Eckleburg eyes above, not even a boy who said he loved me once. Just me and the silence of a spinning earth spinning around a star that stands still. Moments where I get to stand still.

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I am walking in the woods, the sun blazing up above. I have left the marked trails, wandering in the untouched grass of the burning fields, fallen dead trees in a pool of green. Something

brown in the corner of my eye moves, and I turn my head. In the distance, I see a doe and her two fawn. I look around for anyone else, for this must just be another stage, beneath another spotlight. But the audience is gone, and the light above me is not a burning stagelight but the sun. Whiskey eyes can't reach through the shadows of the trees to see me here. God has turned a blind eye.

He gives me this one.

I take a step forward, tentatively reaching out my hand, though I do not know what for. A branch snaps under my foot, a gunshot in the silence. The children run to their mother, who has already snapped her head towards me. Her eyes are jet black, and I am scared she will charge me for being a disturbance to their moment, an audience to a performance not meant for me, but she simply stares into my eyes, ice blue. A held gaze between strangers. I am tempted to speak, to see if she'll respond. I look around again, but still, we are alone.

I don't move any closer. I don't even go to take a picture, because this. This is mine. This clearing is in another dimension away from the stage. This doe doesn't care what I have to say, what I mean to do. She watches not to judge, but to know. She is not the audience, and this is not the stage where all I ever am is a girl playing at being a daughter/sister/lover/crazy-ex-girlfriend. Pretending I know what it means to be anything but myself, for

myself.

This doe, and her fawn, they don't act. When they play in the field, they never think of the reception of their actions, and when they make their journey through the woods, they have no concerns but for that of their own life. There is no audience for them, just the whispers of the trees, but not whiskey whispers. The trees whisper kindly. The tree's don't pry where they do not belong. They leave us in peace.

I hold my breath, for I fear even the tiniest movement of the air will break this bubble and the lights and the audience and whiskey eyes and God may find me. I hold my breath. I blink. I stand still.

In a wide, open clearing, the doe and I have found a way out of the show. Or maybe these creatures saved me from the show by letting me into their moment. A secret garden, tucked away in a dream, where only we exist and the only light is the sun and the closest thing to an audience is the rest of the life running around, except the other animals of these woods are barely an audience. They never stop to stare. They could care less about me, and there is nothing I can do to impress or disgust them.

God, It's beautiful. Unthinkingly, I wave at the doe, my eyes still on her soft gaze.

We are alone, a mother and her children and me, who in this

moment doesn't have to be the latter and can stop worrying about if I will ever have to become the former and what it would mean to do so. This doe, she cannot fathom I am anything but myself- she sees no labels, she sees no performance. I do not have to pretend I am anything or anyone other than the very core of my soul. Not a daughter, not a mother, not a lover or sister or wife or whore or anything except a 19-year-old girl who would like to live in this bubble forever. Here, I am not a girl who a brown-eyed boy loved until he didn't.

I am just a girl who lives for myself.

The children begin to move again, hopping through long grass and around fallen trees. The mother keeps my gaze. Black and Blue, alone. Finally, she turns, striding towards one of her children.

But before she does, I think she waves back.

*Summer Nights*

In the fleeting, furious summer, we did not think of anything, opting to feel everything instead. We left behind the freshmen orientation letters sitting on marbled kitchen counters, hers embossed with red S's and mine with purple W's. Instead, the moment the last high school bell of our lives rang, she grabbed my hand, and with shared grins, we ran straight into the blue and pink of summer nights.

The first night was a pitch black as fireworks shot up and exploded. My heart exploded right along with them; for sitting on that lawn, we spilled our lives out. Despite the four years spent together, the four years that felt like many lifetimes over, we still hid things away. But that night, the intoxicating darkness coaxed out every broken part out into the open.

While cuddling, I found out about the constant pangs of loneliness she felt, the reason she flinched when someone mentioned broken glass, and the way she curled up to muffle her tears.

"I love you so much, Lyra." I told her, my fingers braiding her hair strand by strand.

When her shaking slowed down, I revealed how my mind twisted every kind word into something sharper; how selfishly, I could barely breathe when I saw people happy; and how I crumbled.

“It’ll be okay.” She whispered. I nodded. And then we took each other into our arms and tried to hug the pieces back together.

There was no home besides her that summer; for every night we tramped around town, licking melting ice cream off of our hands, a wall was painted. For every night we sat on the lawn, counting stars, a painting was hung. For every night spent at the bowling alley, watching balls roll down the gutter, a pillow was embroidered. By the end, we built a house where we could stay the stormy nights and dance on the tiled roof.

It was a warm summer’s night, the sun casting its rosy shades over the darkened horizon, when we stepped into the vibrant night market.

“Are you ready, ready for the best dumplings of your life?” The noise of people and vendors engulfed us, even on the outskirts. My feet ached from wandering the streets the whole day, but she insisted I push through, to sample her baba’s dumplings. We stood outside, waiting as people packed the stall, their body heat and the kitchen heat mixing with the cool night. Then, with one look at her baba, and we bypassed the crowd, slipping behind into the makeshift kitchen behind the counter.

After hugs and loud Chinese, Lyra dragged me out, back into the night air. This time, she held in her left hand a bowl.

Her rose-scented hands covered my eyes. She had boasted about these dumplings all day, her little eyes lighting up and movement growing more frenzied. I bit down into burning broth.

“Fuck!” I fanned my mouth and tried to expel as much hot air as possible. I heard her giggle a little, so I pulled away her fingers. Oh, was she going to get it.

But when I saw her swaying in the bustling crowd, face alit with gentle lantern lights, I couldn’t help but smile too. The sun had set long ago, but my tired feet found strength again. I was struck with an urge to wander through the market all night long, until they chased us out.

I bit into another dumpling, this time able to savor its flavor. The perfectly seasoned meat, enveloped in thick skin and soaked in juices, met my tongue and doused it with the taste of a home I didn’t know I had. I realized that I wanted to hang on to her and never let go. Jumping up, I hugged her. At first, she startled but then melted into the embrace.

“Can we keep going?” I asked after a long moment of silence. She nodded, then snatched a dumpling from the bowl. For all the hustle and bustle around us, I could only see her. Auburn hair flowing in the wind while wearing my old choir sweatshirt, she

outshined all the lights here with her toothy grin.

We weaved in and out of the food area, ordering spiralized potatoes coated with chilli flakes and sweet boba. We tried on scarves and hats and earrings and necklaces - happiness. We browsed cute stationery and eyed oversized stuffed animals that we shouldn't have bought but did anyways. We took photos of everything, from the mess the potatoes made of our mouths to the sheer size of the panda compared to our 5'4" selves. We linked arms and laughed and laughed and laughed at our silly faces and our silly futures. And as the guards escorted us out, I stared at her, captivated. My cheeks aching from smiling and my mind tired, I imagined that silly face in my silly future. I shook my head and shoved that possibility deep down away.

One more countless night spent with her, the air was alive with lights and fans waving their phones back and forth. Music blared through the stadium and shouting filled the stands. When the spotlight turned on, illuminating the glittering bodysuit and a delicate silver crown, the stadium erupted. We turned to each other, unable to comprehend that Martina stood in front of our eyes. Her strong vocals had carried us through rough patches of cuts and cliffs, and now, we were alive, watching her.

"Look at us!" I shouted in Lyra's ear. She nodded and wiped away a beading tear. There wasn't much else to be said. Instead, we



grabbed each other's hands and joined the hundreds of others jumping up and down, singing their hearts out.

Our necks a little sweaty and our glittery eyes a little runny, we blabbered nonstop in line for another pretzel and iced tea. People hurried around, rushing to their seats or to the restroom line or to meet their friend. As for us, we rushed to let every bit of amazement and beauty tumble out. Rarely were we ever this talkative, instead preferring to let our actions and expressions do the speaking. Yet, surrounded by the noise and warm bodies, everyone a stranger but not entirely so, it just felt right to be this way.

Returning to our seats, instead of a pump pop anthem to start the second half, Marina shared with us an older love ballad. I felt the crowd swooning, and tingles ran up and down my body.

"I love this song so much." Lyra whispered, awestruck and wistful. The strong, emotional, almost on the brink of breaking song came close to drowning out her voice. Except, I was always listening for her feathery words.

I hesitated before replying, not wanting to ruin this night with memories now bittersweet. "They played it,"

"At prom. I know. I asked you for that dance, remember?" A soft smile slipped out onto both of our faces, before the crowd erupted. I turned my eyes to the stage where Martina had frozen, trembling from her dancing. I hooted and hollered, enough for the

both of us, thanking her for this one summer night.

Another night was cold, dark blue filled the sky with speckles of stars if one looked close enough. We pulled into the parking lot of the Shell, tires screeching. The doors slammed as we, stomachs rumbling, raced out of the car into the corner store. The bright incandescent lights burned above us, watching us skate from aisle to aisle to grab whatever food we could find.

The cashier gave us a bemused look while he scanned an armful's worth of chip bags, two 12-packs of soda, and two handfuls of candy bars.

“\$48.29 please.”

“Here.” I handed my card over, without glancing at her.

Our loot in cheap plastic bags, we walked back to the car and barricaded ourselves in.

Pop, crunch, splish. For a long time, the only sound we made came from us tearing into the food. I let the radio play the summer's greatest hits. Now deemed pop pariahs, they spun through the air and settled between us. Sandy buckets and wet towels in the trunk filled the air with a sea scent and memories of a carefree day.

“It's almost ending.” Crunch, crunch. She didn't elaborate, for the sun crawled down earlier each day with the temperature creping downwards alongside it.

“Do you think this is our last raid?” Stuffed in the corners

of the mom van were chip bags and half opened soda cans, remnants from previous nights.

“Probably.”

“I’m going to miss this in college.”

“Me too.”

We moved in for a hug and stayed there for a long time. Another car pulled into the lot with a screech, shocking us out of our daze. We then untangled ourselves and continued to bury our sorrows and regrets.

Pink, sugary bubbles popped, and chocolate crumbs fell into seat crevices. Our legs rested on the dashboard with our hands in the middle of the seats. We sat there in silence until the lights of the Shell flickered out and the roads emptied out.

On the last night, I don’t remember the color of the sky or if it was cloudy or cold. I just only remember that some part of us died that day. No, all of us did. It had too, because it had felt like life clutched us by its claws and demanded it. Our brains whirled back on and shut down our hearts in the preparation for “life.”

Of course, we knew all this as we both took another sip of black, bitter coffee. Step after another, we fell into rhythm and silence. Rounding the corner, we saw the geese that had overrun the park, 4th of July posters long gone. After, we passed the empty night market, gutted as merchants had left weeks earlier. We let go of each

other's hands then. An old flyer for the concert fluttered on a pole while we stood waiting for the lights to turn. She ripped it off and crumpled it. Crossing the street, we approached the Shell.

Here, I would have to turn left, and she would keep walking straight. She stared at me, mouth and face closed. The free laughter had vanished, whooshed away by the wind which exposed a widening chasm. We let it howl. Silence fell again. I spoke, each word delicate and careful.

“Goodbye, I wish it could work. We can say that it will but,” I paused, because she knew the rest.

“That's our hearts thinking. They can't think. Only beat and keep moving forward.” She swiped at her eyes.

“We have to be rational.”

“Be contributing members to society.” At this, we let out a mocking laugh.

“Go to overpriced colleges and,”

“Leave each other behind.” I delivered the final blow. I tore the home apart. I watched her face crumple. And I willed mine to not do the same. One of us had to make it out. Or else, we would've run back to each other, all of that for naught.

Maybe one more time.

I reached out and pulled her close. I felt her chest rise and sink while mine did the same. We held on for so long. Somewhere, I

wished that we had decided to try, and that if we had loved each other enough, it would've worked out, and that anything was better than this. But a wiser voice told the truth. We had to move on, from each other and in life. Neither of us wanted to trap the other here or hold them down. Indeed, we loved each other too much for that. Held together by tape and foolish hope, our futures hung too precariously for us to become tempted elsewhere.

So, we hugged for the last time.

Then, the fall winds scattered us. The winter chills came and killed any dormant hopes of reconnection. The spring rains kept us company as we slowly and painfully learned how to grow new connections, but also how to wash away the longing that clung to the memories of each other. And then it was summer again. Somehow a whole year had passed.

Now, when I look up at the night sky, with its dark blue mixing with pink and the stars poking out, desperate to be seen amongst the bright lights of the city, I am no longer hurt by the memories of us. I hope the same is true for her.

## Contributors

**Adam Schechter** is a musician and writer living in Boston.

**McCaela Prentice's** poetry has previously been featured in Hobart, Ghost City Press, Lammergeier Magazine. Her first chapbook, "Junk Drawer Heart", was published with Invisible Hand Press. She is currently living and writing in New York.

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**Joseph Hardy** is one of a handful of writers that live in Nashville, Tennessee, that does not play a musical instrument; although a friend once asked him to bring his harmonica on a camping trip so they could throw it in the fire. His wife says he cannot leave a room without finding out something about everyone in it, and telling her their stories later. His work has been published in: Appalachian Review, Inlandia, Poet Lore, Poetry City, and Structo among others. He is the author of a book of poetry, "The Only Light Coming In".

**Caitlin (cat) MacLeod** is a Scottish poet, activist and academic . She's interested in the role the poet plays within their own work, and how communities can interact and be interacted with through poetry. You can find her on twitter @communistbarbie

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**Hibah Shabkhez** is a writer of the half-yo literary tradition, an erratic language-learning enthusiast, and a happily eccentric blogger from Lahore, Pakistan. Her work has previously appeared in *Bandit Fiction*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *Across The Margin*, *Panoplyzine*, *Feral*, *Literati Magazine*, and a number of other literary magazines. Studying life, languages and literature from a comparative perspective across linguistic and cultural boundaries holds a particular fascination for her.

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**Anna Oberg** is a professional photographer based in Estes Park, Colorado. When she's not arranging family portraits with the perfect view of Long's Peak as backdrop, she focuses on writing tiny memories and small stories. She has been published in Cleaver Magazine, Burningword Literary Journal, Causeway Lit, The Maine Review, decomp Journal, The Festival Review, and Split Rock Review, among others.

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**Eva Eliav** received a BA in English Lang and Lit from The University of Toronto and completed courses towards an MA in English and American Literature at the University of Tel Aviv. Her poetry and short fiction have been published in literary journals both online and in print. Her poetry chapbook, *Eve*, was published in 2019 by Red Bird Chapbooks. A new poetry chapbook, *One Summer Day*, is forthcoming from Kelsay Books.

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**Chris Belden** is the author of two novels, *SHRIVER* (Simon & Schuster) and *CARRY-ON* (Rain Mountain Press), and the story collection *THE FLOATING LADY OF LAKE TAWABA* (New Rivers Press).

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