



Variant Literature Journal
Issue 6 | Winter 2020



Variant Literature inc

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Variant Literature Journal - Volume 6

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Letters and Comments

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Letter from the Editor

It's just a forever delight to read submissions to our journal. I'm continually grateful for the abundance of submissions and time the team makes to read and discuss the work sent in. As writers ourselves, we're also often learning from you—thank you for sharing your work with us!

This year the journal will be tri-annual as we extend our submission period to two months. Our next reading period will be for our Spring issue; we'll be accepting poetry & fiction submissions in February and cnf & art in March.

If you'd like to join us as a guest reader for an issue let us know at editors@variantlit.com or by sending us a note on our contact page at variantlit.com.

Wishing everyone a happy belated new year,
Tyler Pufpaff

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Mandira Pattnaik

Seppuku

Five honorable men around a turquoise roundtable scour for origins of a rattling noise, on paper maps spread on velvet --- the engine is in trouble.

Five honorable men forget they'd climbed out keeping their car engines on; it's spewing a tornado where it never had, hailstorms on the Sahara --- the engine is in trouble.

Five honorable men pour margaritas, glasses overflow, the islands are underneath, specks of land drowned out of the map --- the engine is in trouble.

Five honorable men polish off their plates, their greedy guts are full; the Arctic is ice-free; and engine rattling stronger still --- the engine is in trouble.

Five honorable men mock a young girl who's missed school to wake them up; they can't hear her peers banging down walls --- the engine is in trouble.

Five honorable men smoke, let the fumes spill; discuss trade, plan fracking; their backs are on fire, the engine been running far too long --- the engine is in trouble.

Five honorable men commit to making other five hundred men plant a billion saplings; while they tear down Hambach forest --- the engine is in trouble.

Five honorable men collect coins off a roulette table, laugh and pat each other; they couldn't care less --- the engine is in trouble.

Five honorable men sit back, but the fire's engulfing them;
seething, sputtering forest fire; they imagine a clock ticking away
--- the engine is up in flames.

Five hundred thousand lives are lost --- barbecued alive. And,
what of the engine, or the five honorable men? Turquoise table ate
them up!

Asher Noel

Paternal Confessions of Luxiander Lev

Son, look me in my wrinkled eyes.
Your mother says this, the heliotrician says that.
What I can say is this: do not aim to be a moral man.

Once, I burned a soul. It stank like a pig.
I saw myself slice an enemy, saw in hand.
It's a gift, that black horse: it lets you
ascend the divided line.

Son, I made you with myth in mind.
I wanted you to be Delight, making me divine.
But there are no happy endings in heaven,
& the curdle is where we boil: struggling, in toil.

It all sounds the same:
a white rock on a black shore,
a crow overlooking a winding gorge.

The difference is in the hiccup:
the branch that breaks the wolf
in half. Delight is not made in the womb
of my mistress, No. It is in the space after notes,
the song unheard in open sonnets

Son, your messiah is surprise. And
you command the chariot, you define

your own line. Son, I took a coconut once.
Eventually, it demanded the reigns. More water.
It wanted me to change. But Son,

Love who you may; laugh with them, lots.
I made a list of ten traits; Your mother had eight.

It all blurs together:
lurching off the canyon, or was it a crest?
choking on laurel in Mariner's trench.

Son, nail me under the earth,
where I'll stop hearing kindling crack between breaths,
stop seeing pork jump over the fence.
The variance of emotion, I say, is what we call bliss.

Son, I only had you to live forever. So please have kids.
I'll see you in the next standing gallant beside her.

Dmitry Blizniuk

The Future (translated by Sergey Gerasimov from Russian)

Poplars, steel-white from dust, are waiting for rain,
like a moraine that waits for a snowfall,
and dreams of catching a handful of snowflakes with its
elongated stone mouth.

And we always wait for our bright future. It should
fall down on us, sweep us from our feet,
lick our face like a tender, vigorous St. Bernard dog,
throw us on the electric couch of happiness, but no,
just cold blades of crystals percolate into the present moment,
just tiny droplets condense on the invisible wall that keeps you
safe from

the tsunami of time,
like a wall of glass in a terrarium keeps you safe from alligators.
Acceleration is a glimpse into the future: just run along the path,
through the leaves that spread out like a monitor lizard's fingers
and you'll feel a tiny bit of your future,
just get in the driver's seat and speed along a highway,
go on a binge or go on war, and there you are:
your future happily absorbs you, blinds you
infects garden statues with TB of the bones,
scratches their walleyes, making them almost alive.

And it doesn't matter whether you are lit up by a book
or fogged by a woman, your every step
is a step of a ballerina made of hard cheese
that is dancing on the kitchen grater, a sharp sloping grater of
minutes.

Don't hurry into the esophagus of the future.
Rabbit sinking into the inner world of an anaconda,
hang on to the walls with your claws, with your ears,

when the muscles contract, pushing you down through the pipe.
If I could, I'd escape from the future into anything branching off
of it,
into art, creativity, friendship, love, with you or without you.
Oh dear, they are driving a horde of hamsters
with brooms along the street,
towards the dragons...

Whitney Hansen

remember that you loved me then

getting weepy in the tub again,
seeing sonograms in suds again.

there's no one here to help again
as idyll lives find wandering hands.

when she finds my bobby pins,
remember that you loved me then,

remember rickety play pens,
secrets, stories, hidden glens,

the buried lives of private men.

Sarah Marquez

Imitation Game

When my mother says, *I have no hope for you-and-him*, I don't imagine she means there is no next year for falling out of pattern. I watch her separate damp curls, after stepping from the bath, towel-clad and dripping onto the bathmat. Clean again. In that moment, I learn to tame the wild creature I am. Lonely but for porcelain regret and a notebook of poem drafts. When her face in the mirror is a glimpse, next to mine, drenched in condensation, I think we look nothing alike, but I've known how to press into my body everything, she is. Spanish blood, two languages tattooed to her tongue, no accent, skin pale as the day she surrendered to my father's bronze hands, reaching, reaching. I've known nothing is coincidence and I must let tired arms rest, statue-like, and trust the god she gave me to do the impossible. I do not have a name for this, or the perfume she spritzes around her neck three times to ward off evil: my shadow clouding the air, closing over our mouths. I want to move backward, along the grave of our buried hopes, watch humble worms quietly dig their way.

Allison Whittenberg

Watching Jordan's Fall

... God, I hate November
All the hope I had hoped
Against hope for Jordan.

Dad beat Jordan, to
Straighten him out, to show
Jordan, to silence him.

My brother lived until the next
Season, onto the next winter,
Very quiet like a fallen leaf.

Nicole Arocho Hernández

As I tell Siri I want to die since Puerto Rico is dying

Did I ever tell you
I am an unincorporated territory.

My grief hugs the chair,
spooning me hostage.

Did I ever tell you
my parts are not available.

Mutts do not get repairs.
Instead, they burst into glitter.

Did I ever tell you
where my wishy-washy comes from.

My land swallows births'
breath. No need to wallow for
a death meant to happen.

Did I ever tell you
I have never been to prison.

A hospital replaced my bones with
sugar. American. I got out melting.

Did I ever tell you
I want to be brown study.

My sister, la trigüeña. Her skin
reaps warmth. I am toast with no butter.

Did I ever tell you
I wish I had collected dioramas.

The crisp of my mountains. The moths
in my mouth at sunrise. Chewing wings.
Growing feathers in the wrong places.

Did I ever tell you
my Horatio lives as a ghost.

Panadería. Rincón. Pantalones.
Abuelo. Calle. His handfuls. Gringüño.

Did I ever tell you
I have a metabolic problem.

Pills have no effect. My breast
tickles. My feet moan. I walk without my sea.

Did I ever tell you
the problems come with white dirt.

Trampled. Soles de la gente de razón.
A mattress with no name. Because
it's for us. Soiled for soil.

Did I ever tell you
my sun grates their teeth at night.

In an island without power,
even stars worry. It shall metastasize.

Did I ever tell you
the beaches died long ago.

The government pours
alcohol right before daybreak.

Did I ever tell you
there are no eyes in the clouds.

Tears thunder from the dead.
Tears merrily streak from disaster
capitalists. In the eye of the storm, no one
waits for whimper. Everyone
expects song.

Jesse Weaver

Sanctum

Someplace in the Deep South, hard hickory cracks your spine. Familiar teeth clench your neck. You search for sixteen—yearning, roused, stilled by the terror of desire. But you're here at twenty, beneath a woman you once found attractive, if only because she half-resembles Amie. She's somewhere below you now. Each intrusion set to a metronome's tick. A cymbal hit to your abdomen. Bass beat, unrelenting, between your ears. Hands composing the score to a film you can't turn off. You, as minor character, extra, object.

You float.

Anywhere else. Anywhere else. Anywhere—

Sixteen.

Hi, Amie. Beautiful Amie. Dog-eared page in the story of my life. Your shoulder blades under the palms of my hands. A room awash in rhapsodic silence. You, as my first communion and my first confession. Lead me home to my body.

Megan Nichols

She craved the sound of glass shatter

so we tiptoed our childhoods
through shards & learned to carve
crystals out of the caverns in our soles.
We splashed in pink peroxide bubbles.
We wrapped our wounds in unwashed socks.
But my older brother dug his tweezers
past the point of extraction, leaving
no injury undissected. If you ask him
about our mother he will tell you everything
you want to know & everything you don't.

Megan Nichols

When depression ebbs

I fall in love with my life
again, back in step
with its primary colors
and coffeeless mornings.
I can feel the kitten bite my toes
when the dog wakes him
and the dog wakes with the sun.
I stop sleeping with grief
over my head like a mobile.
My son needs a temporary
tattoo each morning and I
need to preserve moments
like jam for the fruitless years.

Laine Derr

You Ask

You ask how the dead
can reach; how we shimmer
our cicada song, sourwood
shade, swarm of bees.

A killer values our moist fall,
summer taproot – a vibrant red,
but how? you ask,
not why, but how?

If I had time
I would offer you a steed
of soft, brass vowels
jaunts through mulberry trees
my body translated, trans-
formed by verbed hands

Yes, I reach

Look at my form in disarray.
Look, for once: annunciation,
the lily, I am kneeling
offering my wings, but you ache for your bedroom,
its dresser, chafing the rosaries your grandmother left,
a gift of dying, for one who still questions the dead.

Johnathan Focht

Madhouse

in the tavern's back
we await an explosion.
sprinting men bounce a ball on a screen.
a cattle bus of closed mouths passes
as women with bratwurst arms sedate me.
swanky folk windows over
lie in beds with heads to walls
thinking it all, churning inside
and drawing on their pneumas.
here spines droop as minds unwind
and matter spans to every crevice
as seconds travel faster
than any hope we ever had.

Jarrett Ziemer

Old Meditations on Lumpia

Dawns first light stirs
slow this morning and I think
about wrapper, meat, crusty,
lumpia.

And about the boy in the small stilt village, high
in the mountains
that would stand on the edge of the river clapping, under light
fading,
soft hands, laughing, watching, the bats, just dusk birds then, dip,
sonar.

I think about him, dancing with the doctors, chest heaving,
exaltation.
Me, in and out of a fever, typhoid.
Him, diarrhea dribbling down reedy legs.
My mother, clammy hands shielding immature eyes
from the truth in the small
sanitorium.

Death smells like rotting fish flesh, wrapper, meat, crusty, lumpia
on the table next to you.
I wonder
if there are still young boys in small villages
who clap
and watch the bats dip,
Sonar.

S. T. Brant

The Shepherd, Life

To Yeats

Dream,

Dream,

Dream,

O sylvan hero- sing!

 sing as well.

There is nothing worth concern

Within this world-

 Power dies and Time

 itself sings to Nothing;

 so bask in the world

 immune to those

 whom hunt for things

 that quicken All's destruction.

Salve your heart! it hosts dreams,

And the words it speaks:

 as true as Time and its undoings.

The Five Senses

Sight:

The least trustworthy of all the senses. Any story of crones and enchantresses, beasts and princes, broken mirrors and ice queens will tell you that. And at the dungeon, the lights were always low, a perpetual twilight. (Occasionally, the most elderly clients would ask me to turn the lights up all the way, complaining they “couldn’t see me.” I always gritted my teeth as I switched on the lamps and raised the dimmers. “Couldn’t see me” would have been just fine with me, especially on days I was trying to hide a blemish behind my hair, or a bruise on my ass cheeks.)

As for what I saw? I avoided faces, especially eye contact. While many of my clients kept their clothes on—especially the more dominant ones, like Arthur and Stan and my second client, Jason—others did not, and after a few close encounters with the topography of old men’s bodies, trails of wrinkles and outcroppings of moles, I realized it was better to keep my own eyes closed whenever possible. Even with the younger, better-looking clients, I looked down and away. I became intimately familiar with the rivets bordering the leather surfaces of the spanking benches; with the one tear in the bondage bed in the Venus room, and the sliver of white stuffing peeking out; with the pills on the zebra-striped and leopard-spotted blankets in the Athena room, all of which had been washed far too many times. Those little imperfections provided the scenery as men’s hands and eyes roamed across my body, till I forgot what it had ever felt like to be unseen and untouched.

Smells:

Air fresheners in every session room, the kind that plug into the wall, an absolute necessity. Artificial florals you didn't even notice after a while. Lysol, lemony and astringent, sprayed over the furniture and implements after every session. (Sometimes misted over my body, too, as terrible as it might be for my skin, if an unpleasant client got too close.) Downstairs, a miasma of mingling perfumes and body mists in the Siren room, though we weren't supposed to wear them—they could rub off on our clients and follow them back to the real world. That was exactly why we needed perfume, though: because our clients' scents had rubbed off on *us*.

And that, of course, was the overwhelming scent, the one all the others were meant to conceal: the clients. Some smelled good, like woodsy cologne or minty deodorant or some unique scent I came to associate with a pleasant session, a comforting presence. But once a session progressed and sweat and arousal grew stronger, many smelled less than ideal. Especially when they brought their faces close to mine and blew against my ears, their stale breath wafting across my cheeks to my nostrils.

Someone must have told an entire generation of men that breathing into a woman's ear would turn her on. But most of the time, arousal isn't that simple.

Sounds:

Downstairs, between sessions, were the sounds of girls chatting and laughing and Lady Margarita's "Oh my *gods*" and "*Wows*" from the front desk. It wasn't like that all the time—there were rainy mornings and dull, dragging afternoons when no one

wanted to talk, and the silence filled the spaces between laptop screens. But usually, there was noise, gossip and giggling and complaining about clients, boyfriends, other jobs, all the frustrations of life in Los Angeles. I was an introvert who, up to this point, had spent most of my working hours alone with my computer, or teaching young children. Now I was surrounded by a bunch of girls who discussed tying up dicks and testicles as casually as they debated what to order for lunch. I loved it, even if I usually basked in the conversations without contributing much to them, soaking in the words as I worked on my computer in the corner of the Siren room. This was the most consistent social contact I'd had since college, and it filled some empty space that had been waiting inside me, as surely as the bondage and impact play did.

But if downstairs was a slumber party, full of bright and light sounds—most of the time—upstairs was a different story. Some of the clients were chatty, sure, like Tickle Rick, but many of them were quiet. We played music to fill the worst of the awkward silence, scratched discs on ancient CD players, lots of Dead Can Dance but also Enya and classical music. Every once in a while I'd recognize a Chopin Nocturne I'd performed at a piano recital in high school.

Over the sometimes-skipping CDs, the men would make occasionally bizarre noises: When Tickle Thomas felt particularly relaxed, he let out high-pitched, kitten-like mewls that alarmed me every time I heard them. Other men had their distinctive grunts and groans and “*oh yeahs*,” the phrases they repeated multiple times per session till they wore a track through my brain. “I guess I’m taking over your father’s job,” one client always said as he spanked me. “I don’t want to hurt you,” said another, over and over, even as he smacked me harder with a paddle or a leather strap.

Sometimes it was better not to think too much about what the men were saying.

Most of the time, though, it felt quiet in those upstairs rooms. I didn't want to lapse into nervous babbling, so it was safer for me to say as little as possible. Still, I knew I had to make noise, like Amanda had said. I had to be a living, breathing girl, not a wall the man were smacking. So I tried out different sounds. Little “*mmms*” or moans if a slap was so light it could only bring pleasure. Yelps and gasps when the impact grew stronger. A puppy-like whine if the punishment was going on too long.

I tried to put on the act, I really did. I tried not to lose myself.

Taste:

There was a bowl of peppermints in the dungeon lobby, and around two p.m., when my blood sugar started to descend, I would always grab a handful. I didn't like eating at the dungeon—a client could walk in at any time, and being tied up or flogged while I was digesting was an unpleasant prospect. So all afternoon, if I wasn't in session, I would suck on those red-and-white striped candies.

I'd always thought peppermints were a strange sort of confection. They made your mouth feel clean, like toothpaste, while they were actually coating it with tooth-rotting sugar. The sugar gave you a shot of energy through your veins, but it was as false as the fresh feeling in your mouth. That energy rush would dissolve before the last remnants of minty flavor disappeared from your tongue.

Those first few years at the dungeon, I was spanked and

flogged, tied up and tickled, crawled across the floor and dodged men's hands and lips in the wrong places, all with the taste of peppermint in my mouth. It felt sparkly and effervescent; it felt like something good. How could anything too terrible happen to me, with that sweet smoothness against my tongue?

Touch:

If sight was the weakest sense at the dungeon, touch was the strongest. The strongest, but not—with that layer of invisible smoke surrounding my skin—the most reliable. When I was alone in the Athena or Venus room with a man, if I closed my eyes, everything except touch would drift away. There was the bite of paddles and canes, the embrace of soft, worn floggers, the pinch of nipple clamps, the sticky leather surface of the spanking bench or bondage bed pressed against my nearly naked body.

But none of those leather-wood-fabric touches affected me the way the men's hands did. There were the sweaty and gropy ones, yes, the ones that made me bathe in Lysol afterward, but even those didn't bother me too much. I rearranged and reinterpreted them in my mind, allowing the punishing touches and the comforting ones, the rough and the soft, the dirty and the clean to comeingle, one magical bonding of myself and these men I chose to submit to. I was Lily, here, and it was the men's hands that shaped this flower girl, that made her real.

That was how you knew a flower was real, right, and not a mirage made of fabric or plastic? It was that desire to lean closer and touch the petals, stroke them, pluck one and take it home.

Interview with the Artist

Ishaq Adekunle

What, in your words, is this a photograph of?

In this photograph is a religious Nigerian teenager I met on my quest for making this album. [It was] unknown to me that there was a tragic story which...hung around him, I asked of his welfare and his parents'. As clear as I remember, he gave me this look like [I'd] pierced a dead wound on his skin thus giving the title - 'Pierced Wounds Bleed Again'.

How did you first become interested in photography? What or who were your first subjects?

I grew so much interest in photography [up]on getting a phone a year ago. I would go out purposefully to take pictures of plants and insects. I would visit dusty places with rusted roofs, slums and opulent areas. I felt I was doing extraordinarily well until I saw an artwork titled 'Nostalgia' by a photo guru named Martins Deep.

Where do you find your inspiration now?

I explore other artists['] artworks, think wild, see a lot of movies when less busy, visit abandoned places and the eerie feeling of my dark old room.

Who are a few of your favorite artists, or a few who have influenced your work? (Writers, painters, photographers, dancers, anybody!)



I so much love Martins Deep[’s] works that he ends up being my only favourite artist!

How would you describe the relationship between your writing and your visual art? What is it like to be both a writer and a visual artist, and do the two forms influence one another?

I would have said my writing is only to complement my artworks/photographs, although I'm recently aiming to make it vice versa. I write a lot of 'Dark-Blank-Verse' and I take especial[ly] broken pictures trying to make [one] suitable for the poem. This usually doesn't work but the feeling is heavenly when it does.

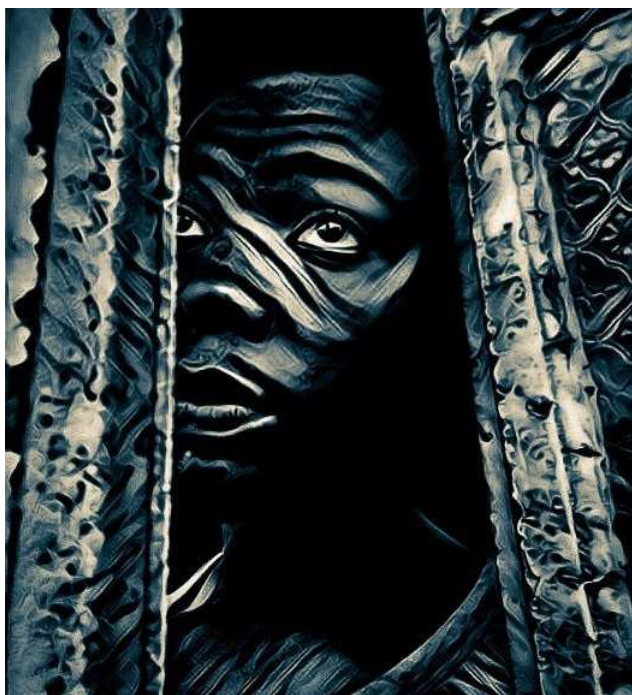
To be born under a lucky star is to be both a visual artist and a writer. One makes the other easier and sometimes the entire opposite.

Why do you make art?

I discovered that art is the undemanding and contented way of expressing what I feel, think, intend, presume. [It is also] the easiest way to unleash my passion for telling the African story. So I decided to make art and carve it in a way almost everyone will understand.

Is there anything else you'd like us to know about you or your work?

Only that I'm not a professional artist or writer. I write and take photographs as passion drives me to. My artworks are intended to tell the tales of African children and serve as a voice for the voiceless.





This Digital art expresses the tiredness of the African child voice being smothered in the raucous din of groups and crowds that madly shout their secrets and forget their own children, making it impossible for them to communicate their fears, their voice inaudible thus

governing them into an introverted life and destabilize their confidence in speech while they grow. —Ishaq Adekunle

A Recipe for Scrambled Eggs

1. When Mama cooked eggs, she first seared the pan with a pat of room temperature butter. She knew just how long to leave it out the fridge for the butter to be warm enough that you could press into it and the top would slowly give under the weight of your fingers, but not too warm that you smashed it everywhere and it turned into a mushy, melted mess. Mama was like that. She was a woman of balance; always giving just enough advice for you to think it was your idea, hovering just enough that you were safe, but you never noticed her shadow behind you, giving you just enough freedom that you never felt smothered, yet also enough love so that you always felt like you had something to come home to. When Sasha decided she was going to run off and live with her boyfriend, Mama said okay, just make sure you find yourself a job, and then Mama told her that the grocery store might be hiring and she would ask next time she went shopping. Sasha was surprised but she went with it, and the next week she had a brand new job bagging groceries and she decided she didn't even like that lowlife boyfriend of hers too much anyways.

2. In a separate bowl, Mama would beat the eggs and milk together. She told me that the secret to this was to make sure not to put too much milk in, or else the eggs would be soggy and flat, and to whip the batter until you saw bubbles. I tried to make scrambled eggs with Mama one time and she put me in charge of whisking the milk and eggs. I got nervous and didn't put enough milk, and Mama must have noticed because the egg batter was a deep orange color, like the middle of a sunset, instead of that pale, Easter yellow that she made. But she didn't say anything, and when we finished cooking the eggs and put it onto the plate Mama

told me to have a taste and I did and I wrinkled my nose up a little bit.

“It tastes like eggs,” I said, and she laughed and sprinkled a bit of salt over them.

“Nothing a little salt can’t fix,” she replied, “and now you know to add more milk next time. It’s just eggs, after all.”

So we ate the eggs and I took note of how the texture was a little flatter and the eggs were a bit rubbery, and the next time I helped her make the eggs I made sure to add just enough milk. “These are perfect,” she said, as she brought a forkful to her mouth, “and now you know the magic.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me that I messed up the first time?” I asked.

“Then you wouldn’t have gotten to know the importance of milk,” she said. “You can’t learn without messing up a few times.”

3. After mixing the milk and eggs, Mama poured the batter into the pan and let them sit for a few moments. She watched until the bottom of the mix began to harden, and while she waited she would pet Ruby, our dog, or watch the sunrise, or twist the strands of her hair between her fingers.

“Don’t you just get tired of waiting?” I asked her one time, after begging her to just hurry up and break break up the eggs.

“Not once,” she replied. “This is my favorite part.” So we stood together and listened to the birds sing and watched as the

edges of the eggs began to curl. Sometimes I complained to Mama about friends or boys or school and she leaned back against the countertop and listened, nodding when she needed to and wrapping me into a hug if I worked myself up.

4. Finally, it would be time to break up the egg batter. Mama took a rubber spatula that she inherited from Grandma and she chopped the batter into the smallest pieces so that we could spoon the eggs into our mouths. The spatula was old and its floral design had faded over the years, but Mama loved that thing like a child. One year for Christmas, me and Sasha got her a new spatula from one of those shiny corner stores, and Mama thanked us and used it whenever we were around, but when we weren't looking she'd whip out Grandma's spatula. When Mama died, Sasha wanted to throw away the old spatula, but I kept it and I use it every time I make scrambled eggs. I swear on my life, it gives my eggs some flavor that my shiny new metal spatula never does.

5. Mama's funeral was so crowded there was a line out the church all the way down the street. She would have loved it. Mama said there was nothing better than the company of others, which is why she made us sit down together and eat our eggs, even when Sasha and I were teenagers and we wanted to go out and kiss boys and drink liquor. But no, Mama made us sit our butts down at the table, as she put it, and for that I am so grateful, because nothing hurts my heart more than imagining Mama alone at a table eating her eggs. She thrived off of people, and if she could have risen from her coffin and shook the hand of every person who attended, she would have.

6. A few weeks ago, my son asked me to make him some scrambled eggs for breakfast.

"Okay," I said, "but this time, you're going to add the

milk to the eggs.” I watched him pour the carton into the bowl, the batter slowly fading from orange, to yellow, to nearly white, but I didn’t say anything when I took the bowl from him and poured the mix into the pan.

When he took a bite, his lip curled back and he exclaimed, “But why are they so wet?”

I laughed and kissed his forehead. “Nothing a little salt can’t fix,” I replied.

The Mona

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Ramona eating spaghetti with chopsticks. Naturally I turn my head and ask, “Why the chopsticks, Mona?”

“Sweetheart, you wouldn’t understand, it’s eastern.” I guess I wouldn’t. Ramona took one trip to Japan in 1973 because some rich man that she’d tickled took her along for a business trip and the woman simply cannot stop parading around eating with chopsticks.

“You know the Italians eat with forks,” I say as I scan the restaurant for chopsticks—none are in sight, just the daunting Mr. Wilson making googly eyes at Ramona.

“Roger,” she says to me, “you’ve never been to Italy. Don’t pretend like you’ve ever seen a real Italian in your entire life and not those pizza makers whose grandpas came from Italy in the 20s that don’t know anything about the culture, I mean a real born-there Italian.” Mr. Wilson giggles. It’s odd to see such an absurdly large man giggle. I’ve been to Italy twice to visit my maternal grandparents during two separate summer breaks when I was in high school.

I can’t help but to be amused; Ramona’s confidence is so admirable—no matter how deeply embedded in ignorance I feel it may be. Here I am sitting meekly next to my aunt eating spaghetti with chopsticks, hoping that some rich man (this one doesn’t enjoy tickling) will offer me a job at his publishing company. It’s been forty minutes since we’ve been seated here and Mr. Wilson has already referred to Ramona as my “sweet little Mona” three times.

My father always told me to “talk sweet” when dealing with Ramona because she always knows somebody who knows somebody. Apparently, ever since they were kids she always had

her foot in someone's business—especially my grandparent's divorce. In fact, at the ripe age of fourteen Ramona asked my grandmother about her sex life and if it was enough to satisfy her desires. This question was profound enough to fuel a broken home.

Mr. Wilson seems enamored by this delicate yet destructive creature. You'd think a 6'4" publishing tyrant would hold himself to a higher standard than to be at the will of a 5'3" expert manipulator. His self-esteem must have been ruined by his wife—or that's what I've found compulsive cheaters say so that their adultery is easier to defend. I'm not sure if he's married, neither does Ramona, but I assume so—they're *always* married.

Apparently it's very easy to forget about marital obligations in the presence of my aunt. But I understand, she is *excellent*. The type of excellence that I've observed few women to achieve, and no man to ever come close. Mona is subtle yet abrasive. She is tough yet smooth. She is feminine yet dominating. She is compassionate yet selfish. Everyone knew that she cared about them but not as much as she cared about herself. It was just *her*.

She had an explanation for everything too. Ramona's black straight hair is self-proclaimed to pay homage to the failed marriage of Sonny and Cher. It's not *just* black hair. She paints a beauty mark on her lower left cheek every day to mimic the late Marilyn Monroe. It's not *just* a dot on her face.

As the chicken alfredo I ordered sits pale with a blank stare looking back at me, Mr. Wilson's pale and blank stare fixates on Ramona. "How beautiful and rare is your beauty mark, Mona." Does he think it's real? I actually can't tell by his hypnotic expression.

"Thank you, Mr. Wilson, but did you know that Roger here was actually president of his university's publishing club?

Mm-hmm, my Roger is a smart one.” That wasn’t true.

I interrupt and say, “Actually I was an intern...”

“Wow, Mona...” No one ever listens. “Is everyone in your family as smart and put together as you?” Mr. Wilson says as he smirks under his mustache.

“Yes, we’re all smart,” Ramona says.

“Sir, I would love to talk about the qualifications that I would have for your company,” I say, trying to make my way into Mr. Wilson’s field of vision. Even his mushroom risotto didn’t get the luxury of his attention yet—only Mona.

“Sorry, kid we’re not hiring.” He still doesn’t bother to make eye contact with me.

Ramona tries to retrieve Mr. Wilson’s attention back on getting me a job. “Oh, Mr. Wilson—”

“Red, you can call me Red,” he interrupts.

“Red,” she says emphasizing the r. “I’m sure there’s always some entry level positions that Roger can acquaint himself with.”

“I don’t like my secretaries to have penises, and that’s the last I’ll speak on it,” he says eating his risotto.

“But, Red, the boy just got out of college.”

“Lots of kids are always getting out of college,” Mr. Wilson says. “Tell me, sweet Mona, did you study somewhere?”

Ramona begins laughing with a timid giggle. Mr. Wilson seems unamused and rather annoyed as he scrunches his eyebrows with disapproval. I suddenly catch Mona’s eyes and cannot help but join in her amusement. I think about the lie that Mona is going to tell next to preserve her false sense of high society. “Actually I never had to go to school, my parents let me live a comfortable life.” There it is.

Ramona and my father lived on the modest side of Vermont in a small house surrounded by many apple trees. That’s why Ramona refuses to eat apples; it reminds her of being young

and fragile. It was pleasant, my father recalls, but never enough. My mother often pitied Ramona for always getting herself into “situations” with men. But I always respected her for it; she did what she had to do to live amongst the comfort she deserved. A woman is only considered successful if she acts like a man or takes advantage of a man.

“It’s always about a man,” Mona would often repeat. During my family’s yearly visits to Mona’s posh Manhattan apartment (given to her by yet another lover), she vowed never to let me become my father: “Old-fashioned and completely unimpressed by women.” I feel like Mona placed emphasis on being admired and appreciated by my child-self since she never had any children of her own. She would sometimes boast about her many adventures taking advantage of wealthy men and make me promise to never be so easily swayed by a woman’s lure.

“You know I live very comfortably, Ramona.” A smirk escapes Mr. Wilson, revealing that not all of his teeth are housed in his exceedingly large mouth.

“Oh, I’m sure you do.” Ramona looks at me as if she knows what he’s about to say next.

“Me and you could be real comfortable.” I feel as if I’m intruding by just bearing witness to this conversation. “Why don’t you come over after this,” Mr. Wilson says as he leans back on his seat and rubs his protruding gut.

There’s an awkward silence. I think this was what Ramona was expecting him to say— she’s heard it too many times. She gently places her chopsticks on her plate and looks up to Mr. Wilson.

“No, Red. I don’t think I would like to do that.”

“Whatta tease.” Mr. Wilson pushes back his seat and stands up with not enough propriety. He clears his throat and waves around a napkin like a badly trained composer. “You know, Mona, the Mona Lisa sits nice and pretty in her frame and lets

people admire her. Let me admire you.” He seems quite proud of himself after this comment.

Ramona looks at Mr. Wilson in the eye with the same fierceness she often claims to have and says, “The Mona Lisa is ugly, don’t ever compare me to her. It’s just The Mona, no Lisa.”

I watch the napkin drop from Mr. Wilson’s hand. It falls slowly with no hurry to make it to the ground. I think I heard Mr. Wilson raise his voice. Maybe it had to do with Ramona’s lack of willingness to go home with him. I’m not sure. I think I saw him leave some money on the table; I think it was enough, but I’m not sure. I think I heard his heavy steps march out of the restaurant. I think I heard Ramona’s silence too. I’m not sure. But I know that the napkin made it to the floor.

I look up slowly and Mr. Wilson is gone.

“One day you’re young and you think you’re gonna meet a nice man.” A tear escapes Mona’s eyes, but she’s quick to catch it. “And then you don’t.”

“There’s plenty of men, Mona,” I say.

“And there’s plenty of hotshot twenty-something year old’s. I know, I used to be one.”

I often wish I could tell Mona the significance of her charm. I never get around to speaking to her about it. I figure this moment might be the best time to tell her.

“So what are you gonna do?” I ask.

“I’m not sure.”

I think I’m supposed to say that I’m sorry. Or that she will not be miserable for the rest of her life. But Mona is so charming and beautiful that it would be a crime to have her be happy—it simply wouldn’t be fair to everyone else. Me and Ramona always had an understanding of the other’s tragic condition. I feel the urge to say something to her—a few words of comfort—but then her right hand picks up the chopsticks and continues to eat her spaghetti. I figure it may be better to leave things as they are.

Dancing in the Dirt

I knew it would be sunny when it happened. I was walking back home from my parents' house, using the old country trail. It wasn't set in stone, but it had become a routine to visit every two weeks. I could've got the bus and been back in the city in half an hour, but I always liked the walk. Apart from the odd dog walker, not many people knew about it. It felt like my own private route, a little secret that only I held. It was like I had gone back in time when I walked down those grassy lanes, the trees and thickets providing only glimpses of the vast city down below; with its skyscrapers and endless windows reduced to nothing but a snow globe dropped in a field, isolated and surrounded by green. It was always going to be sunny.

The alarm sounded.

I remember trying to figure out what it was, this low hum that entered sideways into my conscious. I was so lost in the soft crunch of my footsteps hitting the stony path that it took me a moment to realise what was happening, but the flashing caught my eye. I brought my wrist up to my face. Everyone knew the little phrase—the four small words. They had been drummed into us since we were kids. We had to practice in school, at work, there were days dedicated to such an event. We all knew it would come—it was always in the back of our minds, draping over us. Sometimes, when we were busy with our friends and family, it lived only as a veil, transparent and almost delicate; other times, normally in the moment between staring at the wall and falling asleep, it would become thick and coarse, like a hessian sack.

“Missile incoming. Take shelter.”

I stared at my watch. The letters flashed on the small, rectangular screen, repeating on a loop as I tried to make sense of it all. In the distance, the incessant hum of the sirens seemed to be growing louder, reaching their grip towards me, dragging me from my hillside back to the metal streets below. I stepped forwards towards them, as if obliging, before turning back to the path behind.

My Mother’s voice was empty, like her lungs had been ripped out, her throat scratched. Twenty minutes until impact. She kept repeating it, as if saying it made it stay still, that as long as she kept saying twenty minutes, it would always be twenty minutes. I knew I’d never make it back, no matter how many times she said it, but I told her that I was running. I even stamped my feet on the spot, trying to convince her that I was on my way. I remember smiling to myself, laughing, if anyone could see me now. What a sight. The world is ending and I’m jogging on the spot wearing clown shoes.

She was just about to pass me over to Dad before the bleeps. I could hear him standing by the side of her, in anticipation, waiting for her to finish the sentence and hand me over. And then they were gone. Three high-pitched bleeps, the phone froze for a second, and that was that. No signal. I redialled and redialled but there was nothing. After the first few goes it stopped even bothering to give an apology message. It just stopped working. I tried to message, to search online, but everything had just ended. No connection to the outside world. And I realised I had stopped jogging too. I was just stood in the middle of the path, staring at my phone. I remember there was an advert on one of the open tabs that had been left abandoned—an article about origami I had been meaning to read for the last six months. The advert was for a clothes shop, there was a person wearing a summer dress,

smiling towards me as they bit into a strawberry. I thought back to the meal I had just eaten at their house. Tomato soup and a slap of crusty bread. I could still feel remnants of it between my teeth. It wasn't the best meal I had ever eaten. It wasn't even the best tomato soup I had ever eaten, reheated from what my Dad couldn't manage the night before. But, at the time, we didn't know it mattered. A bird flew past my head, hopped about on the path ahead, pecking at something, before flying off. It's an odd feeling to know for sure that you'll never do something again. I think I said it out loud. 'I'll never eat again.' It was such a nonsensical thing to say, like a child shouting random facts they'd just made up in class. I remember looking towards the grass verge that rose up beside me. For a moment, I swear I contemplated grabbing a handful of turf and shoving it into my mouth, just to prove everything wrong.

And then it suddenly dawned on me that I would never speak to them again. I looked at my watch. Fifteen minutes until impact. I had spent five minutes thinking about tomato soup and not about them. I laughed, looking down the dappled sunlit trail to the general direction of their house, somewhere behind the hundreds of trees I had just walked past. I knew what they would be doing. Dad would be getting Mum in the shelter, as if it mattered. And Mum would be washing my soup bowl because it definitely did matter. Or maybe they wouldn't be. Maybe they would be still discussing whether my shoes were worth the money I paid for them. Mum thought they looked smart. Dad seemed to think they looked like clown shoes and that he had seen the exact same pair in a shop window for half the price only three weeks ago.

I looked down to my feet covered in pastel green with light pink trim, and wondered if I should just start running anyway. I'd never get there in time, but I wondered if I should just see how far I got. Make a game of it. I looked at my watch

and then down the path. I reckoned I could get to the first clearing, maybe even the point where the trail splits off and forks to the left. I kicked a stone there just now, within the last hour. It would still be where it landed. I was walking along the edge of the verge where the smaller stones get crushed up against the grass, and noticed a larger one mixed in with the rest. It was almost a pebble, cracked and grazed on one side but smoother on the other. I remember absentmindedly sweeping it aside with my instep, kicking it along for a bit before pushing it up onto the verge. It seemed to look proud, as if it were watching over its children down below. Except, it stuck in my mind for a good couple of minutes as I walked, that it was the youngest of them all. That every one of those little stones had once been that size, only to be worn down over the years. If I made it, if I managed to reach that spot in time, I would probably pick up that rock and put it in my pocket. I don't know why, I just feel like it would be nice to have it in my pocket. Something of substance, of weight. A connection to it all.

I thought about when I was a kid, all the stuff I used to carry around with me. A soft breeze rustled the leaves of the nearby trees. I was almost at eyelevel to the tops of the ones further down the verge. I remembered collecting conkers in a bicycle helmet, too many for one person. There was a chestnut tree by my primary school that used to drop hundreds, thousands, onto the floor by its trunk every year. I hoarded them in my wardrobe, waiting for an opportunity to use them, but it never came. I don't really know when I expected to use them; I didn't plan on duelling with them. I guess I just liked the idea, the feel of them. Each one looked like an ornament made by a woodworker, solid and perfectly polished. And then, before long, they went rotten and my bedroom stank of musty earth.

Everything was quiet.

The siren down below had stopped. The quiet before the storm. I looked at my watch. The alert message had frozen, stuck suddenly between a flash, half on and half off, the letters faint and ghostly. I sat down on the grass verge, looking over at the panic. There seemed to be smoke coming from the skyscrapers; thin ribbons rising up, contorting towards the pale blue, before mixing with the clouds. I imagined the buildings to be candles, with someone having just blown out the flame. I never was religious. I thought about whether it would help now. I wasn't sure. Whatever happened next—I remember following the smoke ribbons up to the sky as I thought—whatever I was about to meet, if anything, would surely allow me to explain myself. And based on the evidence I had been given, surely wouldn't begrudge me the way I've lived.

I felt something land on my forehead. I thought it was an insect, but it was just a tiny leaf, blown down from the trees above me higher up the ridge. I studied the lines on its yellowing green skin. Each vein was threaded with miniature copies, splitting off and meandering their way down to the edges. I pulled up the photos on my phone. A light pink rectangle filled the screen. It was a swatch of paint I had taken to show them. I flicked my thumb across the screen and a light yellow rectangle appeared. I wanted their opinion on my bedroom walls. It was this creamy-beige colour originally, and I liked it, but there gets to a stage where you just want something a bit more colourful. I pulled them both up onto the screen and compared them. The pink was subtle and calm; and the yellow was loud but not overpowering. I flicked back and forth, trying to decide what I liked better. Then, I accidentally swiped too far and a picture of myself jumped onto the screen. It was for a dating app I had installed just two days before, during one of those lonely sunsets where you sit alone in your lounge watching telly, as the room darkens around you. I never even got chance to message anyone. I had browsed

through a few profiles after it had installed, looked at some pretty faces, but I never dived in deep. And by the morning, distracted by toast and the day's jobs, it all seemed a bit silly. I remember this one person; they were the second profile that popped up. I can't remember their name but I can remember they liked the same things I liked. And they wrote in this way that seemed so effortless, like we were sat on some park bench and they were talking directly to me.

There was a muffled explosion down below.

I watched as the burst of flames rolled into a ball before unravelling itself. I smiled, thinking of Pompeii and the person caught with their hands down their pants. I picked out one of the tall residential buildings to the edge, and wondered if anyone was having it off with someone, or themselves. Making love one last time. What a thought, to bring in the end with a fuck. What a beautiful act of life. I imagined a couple dancing in full-length satin ball gowns, performing pirouettes in their lounge as their pets watched on apathetically. And a woman, finishing off the paper windmill she had started for her window box the day before, fully aware she may only see it spin once. What acts of heroism. What defiant laughter.

I looked down the path again towards their house. It was too late now. It had always been too late but it was definitely too late now. I had a photo of them on my phone, just a couple of swipes from my selfie, but I didn't need to look at it. They were fresh in my memory. The image of Mum leaning against the countertop, and Dad fiddling with that bloody lamp he was trying to fix, as I shovelled tomato soup into my mouth, was all that I needed. I looked at the time, before remembering it had been lost. There mustn't be more than ten minutes to go, probably less.

I looked around at the scene in front of me. I wanted to have my own little act of defiance, like those people I had just made up, fucking in that residential block. In front of me

was a stick, thin and short but relatively strong. I picked it up and held it in my hand like a pencil. Next to the trees, on the other side of the path, was a large strip of dried dirt where the grass struggled to grow between the shade and the stones. I walked over and bent down beside it, taking off my shoes and socks and lying down under the biggest of the trees. I placed my bare feet on the trunk and felt the rough bark across my soles. Between the hanging branches, and the leaves of trees further down, I could just catch the metal frames of the city. I leant back on my elbow and slowly carved into the dirt with my twig. I sketched whatever I saw, whatever came to mind. I sketched the city, the flames and the smoke; the couples fucking and making love; I sketched the dancers in their ball gowns; and the woman with her paper windmill. I used my fist to make the stone, pressing hard into the mud, creating the veined leaf with my fingerprints, channelling out little routes, my nails black and fantastic, tears streaming from my face, wetting the ground, mixing in and smudging everything.

But it was okay. I was laughing just as much as I was crying.

I threw the twig down the verge and watched it tumble in the air, spinning again and again before diving down towards the grass like a swallow. I couldn't see where it landed, somewhere in the grass near the edge of the trees. I leant back, my head next to my drawing. And then I saw it. A bright light in the sky, shooting across from one side to the other. It was strange to think something so beautiful would end everything. It was like a falling star, glowing bright hot. I stood up, pirouetting my bare feet across the dirt, smudging the little world I had created to nothing more than a haze—my soles black. I closed my eyes and made a wish. I could feel the silent energy above me, like a wave just reaching its peak. I thought of my friends and family, of the dancers and love makers, of the burning city down below, of my bedroom walls,

of the stone in the grass, of the leaf, of the face I never got to meet, and of the tomato soup I could still taste on my lips.

My cheeks were wet with tears, but I smiled in its face. It was always going to be sunny when it happened; I made sure of it.

Unicorn

I ducked behind the open locker door to grab my Biology book, threadbare from generations of uninterested academia, along with the ripped binder that still had to make it through two more months. I couldn't afford another, but dad would think buying a new one was a waste of money, like he thought anything school-related was. March, and everything in my locker was war shrapnel—busted, disemboweled intestinal carnage of patriotism—God bless Carter County High School, with the same books full of misinformation and decades-old old data my dad had used. Even the teachers were ancient veterans of long-ago battles I'd only heard rumors of: the Great Banning of *The Great Gatsby*, the Revolution of Sex Education and Free Condoms in the Bathrooms, the Destruction of the Free Lunch ticket. I was an idle pacifist in this war; I just wanted to make it out alive.

Conway sidled up beside me and said real low, “Hey, did you catch Alyssa’s skirt? Hell, any shorter and I coulda been her damn doctor. Her *gynecologist*.” Everything that came out of Conway’s mouth stuck to your skin like poison ivy oil—you needed a shower to get the itch off. Though I was impressed he knew what a gynecologist was.

“Yeah, I saw her.” I slammed the locker, almost grazing his knuckles, but he didn’t notice. He scrutinized the ocean roll of bodies around us, his eyes nervous tides between the crowd. Without looking my way, he said a few more filthy things about Alyssa’s skirt, but his heart wasn’t in it. He clearly had something else on his mind.

“Whadya want, man? I gotta get to class.” Conway had the grating habit of making you wait before he made his pronouncements, like you were just sitting there with baited breath, anticipating the genius that would vomit out of his precocious mouth. I could smell the rancid earthy tobacco on his breath—he dipped snuff, keeping a pinch of shredded Copenhagen tucked between his bottom lip and gum, the false tang of wintergreen hiding nothing. He proudly wore the tell-tale faded ring in his back pocket, kept an empty bottle of Mountain Dew with him as a spit cup. He maintained scrupulously clean pearl-button shirts, just like he kept his twenty-year-old Ford F150 and his boots. He was a vulgar caricature of a cowboy, some picture he had pinned up in his mind of manhood, stained by sweaty hands and spit until it was a just a faded outline of some romanticized image that didn’t exist. What filled in the broad lines of his impression was acidic and venomous, cruel. But if he wanted to include me in his cruelty, I always went along. You were either a part of his schemes, or you became the victim of them. Better to walk beside Conway than to show him your back.

He grabbed the lapel of my faded army jacket I’d gotten at the surplus store and yanked me across the rising swell of students toward the bathroom. “Come here, I got something to show you.”

“Class starts in a minute. I don’t have time...” I tried to twist out of his hold, but I didn’t try too hard. We ducked past the guys leaving the bathroom, and he checked the stalls before he sat against the sink, spitting a stream into his bottle, flicking it expertly away from his bottom lip to cut the tobacco juice cord. I dropped my books on the floor and folded my arms, a sham of disinterest. “What’d you want to show me? The hall monitor’ll be in here any minute.”

“Nah, it’s old Crumley this week. He don’t even bother

comin' in, just opens the door and yells. But look at this." He reached into his back pocket and held out his palm. Resting in the center, like some kind of jewel, was a Hot Wheels car, a glittering blue Trans-Am.

Aw, hell.

He grinned at me, lips curled and eyes shining. "You know what this is?"

"I know what it is." He cackled in glee and pushed it back in his pocket.

"Know what it means, don't'cha?"

I did. I stood for a minute, wishing I'd just gone to Biology. "I shoulda known you had something to do with all that shit." He raised his eyebrows and winked.

For the past two months, the newspapers had raged against the town's teenagers, against the recent increase in vandalism and destruction. Cow-tipping and trespassing through a farmer's field were all well and good, but it had gotten worse. First it was the mailboxes. Conway and a bunch of guys that hung around him had been spending their nights playing baseball against the town's unprotected mailboxes, driving by at high speeds, hollering drunk, swinging their Louisville sluggers and hitting home runs against the metal sides. I never saw the fun in smashing up stuff and I'd taken a lot of crap for bailing. It might have turned into some trouble for me, if it hadn't been for Jeff Davies, a junior and a wannabe part of Conway's gang, getting his arm shattered when a frustrated old farmer filled his innocent-looking mailbox with cement. The wooden bat had splintered, and so had Jeff's right arm. Conway might've gotten in real trouble if

Jeff's parents hadn't taken the offensive and sued the old guy first. Conway and the others quieted down their actions for a while, but the predator in him needed a new way to amuse himself.

It was in the paper all the time. A family would come home from Wednesday night church or a late-night supper, to find all the lights in the house on and all the windows wide open. Their books escaped from their book case to lay in neat piles on the floors. The kitchen cabinets open with all the cans lining the countertops. Nothing missing or damaged, harmless except for the unsettling violation. The proof the stupid stunt wasn't supernatural was always something small and innocuous—a plastic SpongeBob figure sitting on the books, a Lego figurine on the hall rug. Most often, a Hot Wheels.

"You're idiots," I told him mildly, which he found funny. "You're gonna get caught and they're gonna send you to baby jail for sure."

"For doin' what? We don't hurt nothin'."

"Breakin' and enterin' ain't nothin'."

He scoffed. "Nobody's gonna press charges on some pissant shit like this. We ain't hurtin' nobody and besides, we ain't gettin' caught, either."

"Not yet." I turned toward the mirror, inspecting my face like I was bored with the conversation. But my insides were tense. I'd managed to avoid the mailboxes; I knew it was time to pay up.

Conway spit again into his bottle and pierced me through the mirror with eerily intent eyes. "The boys and I thought we'd bring you along next time we go. Thought you'd like in on the

fun.”

I rolled my eyes. “And risk getting’ a shotgun up my ass by some little old lady? No, thanks. Besides, my old man’ll kill me if he found out.”

“Nobody’s gonna find out, dude. I told you. Besides, we don’t go to houses where anybody’s there. We wait ‘til they’re gone, we break in—hell, we don’t even have to break in half the time. The door’s usually unlocked, or else the key’s right there under the mat. We have a little innocent fun, we leave our calling card, and we’re gone. Nobody gets hurt and they get a story to tell at work the next day.” He turned on the tap and lifted the handle of the stopper. The water slowly filled the clogged sink. He watched it silently and so did I, until he said, “This shithole of a town needs some action. If this gets everybody in an uproar, fine by me. I’m bored, and you are, too.” The water rose to the top of the sink, and we both watched it gracefully waterfall over the edge onto the floor. It inched toward my books and I nudged them out of the way. I didn’t stop the water, though.

There was a knock at the bathroom door and I jumped. Conway didn’t move, but his eyes tracked me in the mirror. “The bell’s rung, gentleman.” Mr. Crumley’s voice reached through the door. The coward didn’t even have the guts to confront the delinquents in the bathroom. “Get to class.”

“Sorry, Mr. Crumley,” Conway called politely. “We’re comin’.” He lowered his voice. “I’ll pick you up at seven.” He closed the Mountain Dew bottle, grinned at my reflection, and headed for the door, not bothering to turn off the tap. With the arrowed toe of his immaculate cowboy boot, he kicked my books into the puddle.

A shrill honk called me to the door, and I slid out the door past dad's half-hearted complaints from the couch, where he nursed a Budweiser, his head propped up on a throw pillow with the words, "Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread" stitched across its brocade face. By the end of the night, those words would be printed backwards on dad's unconscious cheek.

Conway hadn't bothered to pull into the drive-way; he blocked the road, his arm hanging out the window. When he saw me, he good-naturedly flipped me off. I crowded into the truck, where Mike Gouge and Skip Peters, Conway's older cousin, sat in the back seat of the cab. Skip didn't bother to look at me but took a drag from a beer bottle he half hid, probably because he didn't want to share. I didn't know how old Skip was, probably still young enough to be in school, but he'd dropped out a few years back. No one seemed too eager to get him back. He'd already done a stint in juvie; next time it'd be jail. I side-eyed him as I climbed in the front seat. Mike grinned at me and punched my shoulder over the seatback. "Your old man let you out?" We had a couple classes together and sat together at lunch. If it weren't for Conway, we'd've probably had a pretty quiet high school career. Bored, maybe, but not blurring the line between misdemeanors and felonies. He was alright, Mike.

"Yeah," I said. "He don't care." Conway picked up speed on the neighborhood street, begging for a speeding ticket before we even got started. "Where's Davies? Figured he'd wanna come along."

"Shit," Conway vented from the side of his mouth. "Davies' arm's still givin' him hell, plus he's been layin' low. His parents are on him like white on rice."

"Coward," Skip offered dryly. Maybe, but common sense

and cowardice seemed to be the same thing to the occupants of Conway's inner circle, and I kind of wished I could be a coward right along with Davies and his busted arm.

Conway peeled into the Winn-Dixie on the south side of town, parking his precious truck at the far end of the lot. Everyone climbed out and I followed them, slouching like I knew what the plan was. We got to the front of the store but we didn't go in. Instead, Mike and Skip sauntered to the kid section outside the doors. Mike sat on the back of the quarter-a-ride pony, its cast iron body overlaid with shiny ceramic paint, its mane flowing and its hooves raised like it was escaping scalp-hungry Indians. Mike grabbed the reins and kicked up his heels with a jubilant, "Yeeha!" Beside the horse was a red row of vending machines, the crank kind with cheap toys and fuzzy candy that nobody but a little kid was ever enticed to spend money on. Conway cuffed Mike's shoulder and crouched down in front of one of the machines, the one that held plastic eggs and cost fifty cents.

"What're we doin' here?" I asked. He tossed me a knowing smirk.

"Here's where we get our totems."

"Our what?" Conway might act like an idiot, but there wasn't anything stupid in his head. It's what made him dangerous. The word totem was precisely chosen for the moment.

Balancing with a hand on the rusty machine, knees spread wide in his jeans like wings, Conway explained with a condescending, pedantic air, "Our totems. The thing we leave behind at each house to prove we've been there. Our calling cards, you could say."

“I thought we left Hot Wheels.”

He snorted at the insult. “I leave Hot Wheels. That’s my thing. You guys leave something else, somethin’ random that doesn’t have any connection to us. Hence...” He gestured grandly to the toy machine. I nodded, my cheeks heating. I didn’t dare tell him I had three Hot Wheels in my jacket pocket, selected out of the dusty box under my bed to leave my mark at the crime scene.

“I get it,” I said. “But I didn’t bring any cash, not even fifty cents.”

“This one’s on me, boys,” he said and dug into his shirt pocket. The jangle of change rang out and Conway dropped the quarters into the sliding disk on the front of the machine, one behind the other like twins, and gave a satisfying, grinding crank to the silver toggle, reviving an expectation I hadn’t felt since I was five years old and Mom had let me have a prize for behaving in the grocery store. The disk turned, the money disappeared, and like a magic trick, a bright orange egg fell into the newly-exposed opening at the bottom. Not wasting time, Conway repeated his motions once, then twice, the eggs piling up in the cave like a chicken’s clutch. He scooped them out, an orange, a boring white, a red, and tossed them to us. I caught the white one.

“Let’s see what you got.” He stood and crossed his arms over his chest to beam with the indulgence of Santa Claus. Skip, who’d hidden his beer bottle in the inside pocket of his jean jacket, broke the red egg indifferently. He dropped the two halves on the ground and held up a ninja figurine, painted black with pinpoint eyes staring above its mask, frozen in a side kick. There was a hole on the bottom; I guessed he was an eraser.

“Hey, that’s cool!” Mike commented, leaning forward

from his metal ride. Skip shrugged and stuck it in the same pocket as his beer.

“Me, next!” Mike jumped line, impatient for his turn, making me wonder if he’d have been just as happy if this was all we did tonight, open plastic eggs and play with overpriced junk toys. “Awesome...” he breathed, shielding his prize in his hands, eyes wide with enthusiasm.

“What’d you get?” Conway asked, still smiling like a proud uncle. Mike laughed, lifted his hands, popped something in his mouth. Then he grinned at us, his mouth replaced by bright red lips with molded white fangs. “I want to suck your blood.” His fingers cramped into talons, while he wagged his eyebrows suggestively. I smiled at his antics as he spit the wax lips into his palm. “Shoot, I want keep ‘em, Conway! Got any more cash? Let me get somethin’ else.”

Conway wouldn’t hear of it. “One per person. I ain’t a bank.” He turned to me, the newcomer, the potential risk to his expedition. “Open yours,” he commanded softly.

I cracked the white plastic. A purple rubber unicorn figurine fell into my hand. It wasn’t majestic like unicorns are supposed to be. It was rounded and bubbly, a cheerful everyday pony with a horn molded to its head.

I held it up for everyone to see. Sure, it was a little girly, but I didn’t see the big deal about it. Neither did Skip or Mike, but Conway was busting a gut. He made a big deal out of taking it from my hand and scrutinizing it carefully, the grin still wide on his face. “A unicorn, that’s perfect for you.”

I was defensive for no reason and yanked it back.

“What’d’ya mean? It’s just a toy.”

“Don’t you know nothin’ about mythology? Unicorns are attracted to *virgins*.” At the punchline, Mike hooted, and even Skip’s jaded lip curled. My face burning, I stuck the stupid toy in my jacket pocket, next to the secret Hot Wheels. My pockets were filling up like I was a little kid.

“Whatever.” I deflected their laughter. “When’re we going to start?”

Conway made a point of laughing a little longer, to make me wait for his answer. “We’ll go in a few minutes. Wednesday night church usually starts around seven. We want all those good Christians in the middle of their service before we start.”

We hung around the Winn-Dixie for another twenty minutes, while the manager came out and stood at the front doors to peer stupidly into the parking lot, trying to intimidate us without having to actually deal with us. I was used to the hoodlum treatment when I hung out with Conway, but it still stung. The boss’s presence quieted Mike right down, and he dismounted his pony sheepishly; Conway offered a perky salute to the manager; Skip took an insolent pull on his near-empty beer. The couched, hitched up his pants, and went back into the store without acknowledging us, probably to the cops.

“Time to go,” Conway pronounced.

The first house was a real challenge. Right in the middle of town, a two-story rundown with neighbors only a few yards away on either side. Cars lined the street. “Doesn’t it seem a little

crowded?" I offered. Conway shook his head.

"Most these guys walk to the church at the end of the street. Nobody's home tonight, I guarantee." He made eye-contact with Skip in the back seat. "Besides, you don't got to worry. This is Skip's house." He pulled the truck behind a battered brown El Camino with a For Sale sign in the front windshield. Skip got out without a word, sauntered across the front yard like he knew what he was doing, bouncing up the front steps with more energy than he'd shown all day. He knocked on the front door, waiting politely on the welcome mat. After a minute, he tried the knob. It didn't open, and I could see his shoulders tense. He clinically surveyed the rest of the porch, before casually lifting the flower pot to the left of the door. He didn't bother to flourish the key at us; he was all business. The door opened and he slipped inside.

Five minutes feels like an eternity when you're waiting for the criminal to leave the scene of his crime. Nobody spoke in the car, even Mike, who usually kept up a steady stream of nonsense. Conway had replenished his cheek, and he spit tobacco residue into a fresh Mountain Dew bottle. I watched the house, then the street, waiting for a neighbor to point a finger at us, or a police car to crest the hill and catch us in the act. My hand stayed on the door handle, ready to run, and Conway looked at me steadily as if my plans were written on my face. He casually locked the doors.

Only a little while later, Skip reappeared on the porch. He deliberately locked the front door from the outside, deposited the key back under the drooping pot of pansies. Not in any hurry, he strolled back to the truck and settled in behind Conway after the locks popped. Without a word, we pulled out, not speeding this time, and were almost a mile away before Conway asked, "What'd you do?"

“I pulled down all the bedcovers, like they do in fancy hotels.” Intensity pulsed off Skip, for all his nonchalance. “I left that little karate thing on the pillow in the master bedroom.”

Mike and Conway released their tension with loud laughs and I joined in with false amusement.

“I love it!” Conway praised. “Nothin’ wrong with a little courtesy, right, my man?” He hit my shoulder and I nodded.

“I thought there was somebody still in the house,” Skip admitted off-handedly. “I heard talkin’ in one a’ the rooms, but it was just the tv.” We all shuddered at the near-miss. I wondered if a guy like Skip stopped at pulling down the sheets, or if he did a little petty theft on his way out, slipped in tight beside his beer bottle.

We drove out of town into dark acres and two-lane roads. Houses were farther apart out here, separated by farms and fields. We headed down a quiet road, the slipping sun washing the day in an orange glow. We reached a gravel driveway and Conway parked behind the mailbox, shiny silver on a brand-new post. You couldn’t see the house from the road; the drive curved away behind the trees.

The truck idled while Conway turned in his seat toward me, pulling his left knee up between us. He gave me big eyes and I got the message.

“This one’s mine? What about you?”

He wagged his head like he was disappointed. “I go last. This one’s for you. Picked it out special.”

I couldn't make myself move, staring into the copper-penny glow of the sunset. "You scared?" he asked in an oddly sympathetic tone. I was about to deny it, but he cut me off. "Mike'll go with you. It's easier with two the first time."

Mike nodded, already exiting. "Sure, I'll go with you." I tried to match his enthusiasm as I got out. I glanced again at the mailbox. It was brand-new with no number on it, but the old one was still laying in the ditch. I squinted and looked closer. Its insides were solid and gray, filled to the brim like a cinderblock. "Wait, is this the house where Davies busted his arm?"

Conway nodded. "I think it's about time that old bastard got some payback." I revisited the idea of running again, but this time I wasn't scared of the cops—I was scared of Conway. He watched me calmly, reading my mind, daring me to back out, and defy his wrath.

"I don't think this is a good idea," I said, wiping my hand over my mouth. "How do you even know he ain't there?"

"He works second shift. I checked." I didn't question Conway's weird knowledge of the old man's comings and goings. "You'll be fine. He don't know you."

Mike had disappeared into the woods bordering the drive; the choice was taken from me. I took a steadying breath and left the relative safety of Conway's truck, Skip and Conway sizing me up like hyenas through the glass.

The walk along the drive didn't take long. I could see the peak of the house, a turn-of-the-century farmhouse. It was nice, well-taken-care-of. Mike was already on the front porch, waiting for me. I thought maybe we'd knock on the door like Skip did, to

make sure nobody was home. Pretend to be Jehovah's Witnesses if anybody answered. But Mike wasn't cautious like that. He rattled the door handle, felt the denial of a locked door. He looked around, but there wasn't anywhere on the porch to hide a spare key. Only two tired rockers to the left and a pile of split logs to the right. I slid a hand along the door frame, to be sure. Mike eased over to the window behind the rockers and pulled out his pocket knife.

"What are you doin'?" I hissed.

"It's only the screen," he said as he sliced the pixelated outline of the window. He grinned at me and ducked inside. I followed slower, listening for footsteps.

The living room was tidy but outdated. A decrepit tweed recliner sat in the corner, its leg rest jutting into the room. A box tv was angled toward the chair, and a cold woodstove took up another corner. There was no suggestion of a female touch to the room, no flowers, no artwork—felt like my house. I was embarrassed for the old guy that lived here.

"Whatcha want to do?" Mike asked, scoping out the space, fingering the old guy's stack of magazines on the dusty coffee table, *Guns and Ammo* and *Farmer's Digest*.

"I dunno." I hadn't given much thought past getting inside a house. But part of me wanted to do something nice, maybe the dishes. Fold the laundry. Something the owners would be confused by but not really angry about. We'd already committed a misdemeanor by cutting up the screen. I didn't want to add anything else.

Mike plotted a minute, then whistled low. "I got it." On a

neglected side table, an arrangement of picture frames told the history of the house's owner. Black-and-white pictures of serious-faced farmers, pudgy babies staged on anonymous laps, a happy border collie next to a surly kid in overalls. Mike scooped up the lot before grabbing pictures off the walls, too. Like an interior decorator, he analyzed the room for a moment, then laid a track of pictures down the center of the room, starting at the woodstove. The row of frames bisected the space into neat triangles. Looked like Mike had a knack for creating a scene that was both harmless and weird. He grinned at me before bending over to place his wax teeth on the last photo, a yellowed wedding portrait. The red lips grinned garishly at me, too. "Put yours down," he told me, and I reached for my unicorn.

"Who the hell's down there?"

The furious roar paralyzed us, the definite thump of someone stepping out of their bed over our heads starting us up again.

"Shit!" Mike whispered, and he pivoted on his heel, heading for the front door behind us. The steps above us were shuffling and unsteady, but it didn't slow me down. Mike hit the door but I remembered it was locked. Not wasting time, I dove through the cut window screen, crashing into the rocking chair and sending it sideways. I was off the porch before Mike made it out the door, fumbling with the lock. He was faster than me, and in two long strides, we were side by side, our feet pounding through gravel.

The explosion of a shot gun tore the sunset. Shock and fear pushed me faster, Mike right beside me. He was laughing, I could hear it through the rattle of my own breath. "That crazy old bastard," he wheezed. He kept pace with me, his head turned

toward me to share the joke. There was no fear in his eyes, only humor and excitement. Some fun.

Another shot rang out. The old guy had shot the first in a panic; he'd taken time to aim this time. But he missed. I felt the free wind whipping my hair, throwing back my jacket like a cape. My shoes skidded in the rock—Conway would've hated the dirt on his boots, I thought wildly.

Mike wasn't beside me.

I had eaten up yards before I noticed. Daring to glance back, I saw his body sprawled out on the green yard like a ragdoll, face down. I didn't stop, didn't go back to check. I found reserves I didn't know I had and ran like hell away from my friend.

I hit the side of Conway's truck full force before prying open the door to launch inward. Conway was grinning like Mike; he'd heard the gunshots and knew the old man had scared the shit out of us. I couldn't breathe, sticking my head between my legs, suffocating. He waited a second, looking past me. "Where's Mike?" I shook my head, locked between my knees. He didn't move and I shook my head harder, harder. "Go," I whispered low. Conway sat still, not understanding.

"Go," Skip's voice from the back was firm and commanding. Conway obeyed his cousin blindly, spitting gravel with spinning tires. I sat up and held onto the door handle, my forehead against the window. The image of my mom's old throw pillow on the couch filled my mind, the bible verse screaming in my head.

"What?" Conway's gaze skittered between me and the road. "What are you sayin'?"

“Our bread...Give us this day...give us...daily bread,” I muttered into the window, my breath steaming the cooling night air on the other side of the glass.

“What does that mean?” I could hear his scowl, his rage, and something else—he sounded scared.

“I don’t know.” A whimper into the dark.

“Then shut the hell up!” He screamed at me, all composure gone, as the weight of the night fell on him like hot breath on cold glass, icy and hot all at once.

“Chill, Conway,” Skip calmed him from the back seat, eerily cold and disembodied in the truck cab.

“Shut the hell up,” Conway repeated, but quieter.

My chest spasmed between fractured gasps, my ankle throbbed like a heartbeat, my fingers clenched tight around something in my fist. “Give us this day...” I repeated a spell, the only bible words I knew, like Jesus was finally going to listen to me now. I loosened my white fingers, and the happy purple trophy regained its rubber shape in my grip. My totem. The unicorn.

Choice

My days were chaotic and upside down. It wasn't until 9pm when the kids were asleep that I got around to drinking coffee and reading the morning newspaper. The Wednesday edition was thick with grocer advertisements. I was at the Metro section when the phone rang. It was the woman from the agency. She asked after Brittany and then Alicia.

She had my youngest daughter's name wrong. I corrected her. "Ashley's fine too."

"Oh, I'm sorry; I meant that." I heard the shifting of papers. "How are you?"

"I'm fine. How are you?" I asked her.

"I'm fine."

"Good."

"Good."

Next, there was deep blue silence. I sipped my coffee and glanced at the end of section B, the obituary page.

"Their mother had another, Miss Phillips. Another girl. It was born two days ago. It has all ten fingers and all ten toes."

From the living room, I eyed the door to the girls' room. My eyes then lowered. "How did she get pregnant again? I thought she was in jail."

"She is."

"She's in jail and pregnant?" I asked.

"She gave birth. I really hate calling you. I hate telling you this."

"How could you let that happen?"

"I'm really the middle man," she explained.

"I can't take on an another child," I told her.

"You don't have to decide this minute. Why don't I call

you in a few days?”

“Where is she now?”

“In jail.”

“No, the baby.”

“The facility has temporary housing for –“

A chill went through me. “That’s a sin. The baby is in custody?”

“Miss Phillips, this is the way things work.”

“How could you let this happen?”

“Please, I almost didn’t call, but I thought you should know. Miss Phillips, I’m giving you too much at once. I’ll call you back in a few days.”

“Her tubes should be cut, and they should be fried,” my sister told me the next day.

“The child is already here.”

“Then let Steven Spielberg adopt it. He likes our people. He’s a millionaire. You’re a secretary, barely making 30 a year. He has an estate. You have a lousy apartment.”

My sister was in finance and dapper like a cat with large made up eyes and a new outfit every week. She always railed at me about my cramped 700 square foot apartment. Helen was self-oriented, so naked in her hedonism, so singular, so opinionated. But there are advantages to being a deadbeat. She sat as I unpacked the groceries and sat as I put away the groceries and sat as I began making supper.

I was making steak sandwiches just like the sub shops do with all the fixings: tomatoes and peppers and fried onions and grease. I placed the frozen meat portions in the pan.

I work in a gray building filing papers. There, when phones ring I answer them.

We look alike, my adopted children and me. The rich mocha and cocoa hues of my skin matched theirs. They look like childhood pictures of me and my sister with our wide brimmed noses, rust colored plaits, and genetic trademarks.

Four could live as cheaply as three, right? Right? What's another pair of school shoes, more money for milk, another college fund? I should take in that child. I have to.

I kept my hair short, but I do straighten it. I wear slacks most days, not skirts because I don't have the time to fuss with leg shaving and panty hose.

I haven't had a date in two years, but it's not my kids' fault. I never dated much before them.

"Stop trying to save the whole goddamned world."

"Do you have to put it like that, Helen?"

"What, you want to be like everyone else? So PC that I'm not saying anything. Look, I voted in the last election. I serve on juries. I pay taxes on time. I've even given the Red Cross a whole freaking, fraking pint of my blood. I'm a good person."

"They aren't the kind of girls where a lot of strangers would coo over. I don't think Steven Spielberg is the answer," I said. Brittany came addicted: underweight, about as heavy as a shadow, shaking, ashy complexioned. I sat up with her many a night trying to undo what had been done to her while she lived in someone else's womb. I didn't choose to have Ashley one year later. If it was up to me, I would have spaced them in a three years span. I got Ashley at two weeks and even then, she looked stunted and underdeveloped.

So, now six years later, there's an addition.

Ashley has trouble sleeping. What would it be like with a crying baby in the house?

"Why didn't this woman have an abortion?" Helen asked. "At least with an abortion, you know it's over. Shit, doesn't it bother her not knowing what happened to this little girl?"

Babies are so easy to love. They are so small and helpless looking and have limited emotional range: they laugh and cry easily and are entertained with animal quilts and balloons and monotonous music.

What would a boy be like? But it's already a girl.

I could recite “twinkle, twinkle little star” to her.

“I can’t leave her in there,” I said in a clear defeated voice.

“Why not? She’s not yours. You keep messing around and you’re going to be like those people on 20/20,” Helen said with dull bluntness. “They got a kid from each country. Shit. It’s not your problem. Have them call up one of those Scientologists. Are you crying?”

“No, I’m just slicing onions.”

Helen got up and took the knife from my hands. She began chopping, without tears or remorse.

“Jesus is sitting around the table with the apostles and he asks Paul, “Paul, what do you bring?” Paul says, “Sorry, Jesus, I forgot.” Then Jesus turns to John and asks John, “What did you bring?” And John says, “I’m sorry, I didn’t bring anything.” So Jesus says, “Okay, apostles, you have done this to me time and time again: This is your last supper.”

The girls laughed. The joke was a little long for the payoff, but I was grateful that Helen had told a clean joke.

“You see, even Jesus had His limits,” she said, winking at me.

Now, I got it. I never figured my sister as a wit.

The sandwiches had come out well. The bread was juicy with beef grease.

“T-t-tell us another joke, Aunt Helen,” Brittany said. She stuttered when she got overexcited.

Helen basked in the attention. She leaned back and thought hard.

The phone rang. I went to pick it up.

“Miss Philips?” The voice on the other end was the agency woman.

“You said you would give me a few days,” I reminded her.

“Mommy, who is it?” Brittany asked me.

I put my hands to my lips gesturing for her to shhh.

“Is it -- ” Helen began but stopped herself. She nodded

knowingly, and her eyes burned into me.

“Miss Phillips, I know, but I really want to move on this. We can arrange to have you take the child –“

“I’m not going to do it. Find another home for her.” I kept a hard face as if she could see it though the receiver.

“W-w-who’s h-her, Mommy?” Brittany asked.

“Brittany, be quiet,” Helen said and gave me the thumbs up.

“Are you sure you don’t need more time to think about it?” the agency lady asked me.

“Who’s Mommy talking to?” Ashley asked.

“I can’t,” I told the lady. “Helen, could you take the girls into the next room?”

Helen took their hands and lead them away, looked back at me and said, “You’re doing the right thing.”

“You can name this one,” the social worker told me. This dangled like a charm. Adoptive mother don’t get to make many decisions. My mind went heavy for a moment. I did hate the names Brittany and Ashley. I know of no famous women in history with these soulless, polo club names. I would like to name a daughter after my great-grandmother Bessie or maybe even something afrocentric.

“Miss Phillips -- ”

With dry tearless eyes, I hung up the phone before I had a chance to change my answer to yes.

Brittany Micka-Foos

Thumb Stump

*The balled
Pulp of your heart
Confronts its small
Mill of silence*

*How you jump—
Trepanned veteran,
Dirty girl,
Thumb stump.*

— “Cut,” Sylvia Plath

Emilia Ann Carter was born on the same night the president of the United States shot himself in the head. When the baby’s mother, Polly, heard the news a full week later, she only felt as though she had stepped out of some long, languid dream. Emerging from the maternity ward clutching her newborn baby, she recognized everything in the world had changed. There was life before the hospital and life after, when the president was dead and she would forever be known as somebody’s mother.

The birth itself was a violent and bloody affair. After seventeen hours of blurry, hysterical contractions, the obstetrician put her hands inside Polly’s dumb cavity and relayed that the baby was in brow position; that is, eyebrows

first, the baby's neck extended slightly down the birth canal, instead of its chin tucked in, crown pointed at its eventual escape. As such, the obstetrician informed Polly, vaginal delivery would be inconceivable. Polly's body was rolled into the OR for an emergency C-section, which Polly experienced as a waking autopsy. She thought she had died on the operating table from shaking. Afterwards, she couldn't explain this continued conviction that her body was a shattered, glasslike object, and not the malleable lump of flesh her rational mind knew it to be.

After, Polly was repeatedly advised by family and well-wishers to refrain from retelling such grisly details, seeing as the baby was born perfectly well (with ten fingers and as many toes, her aunt continually reminded her). To complain of a healthy baby was simply to invite disaster into one's life.

As the damage to her stomach was quite extensive and reluctant to heal, Polly remained in the hospital with her newborn for seven days. With little to do but nurse, days passed slowly, sullenly. Golden streaks of colostrum congealed on sterile, white sheets, like slips from a leaky ink pen. Polly tried hard not to think about her body: cut and tender to the core, full of gauze, prone and inert on the stiff hospital bed. Instead, she watched the baby—its face folded up and vaguely gelatinous. The baby wore a pair of thick, green mittens to keep from inadvertently scratching her delicate skin, giving her a turgid, amphibious appearance.

Little polliwog. Like her father called her as a child.

Little polliwog. Little pilgrim. My Polly. Her father had

called her many things, like a frenzied Adam blithely bestowing monikers upon the creations surrounding him. He peopled their private interior with his cryptic mythologies.

There was the *homunculus*. His pet name for her left thumb, cut short by nearly half an inch compared to her right. It was squat and slightly bulbous at the top, with a short, wide nail bed. Her grandmother had once called it “murderer’s thumb” as she murmured prayers under her breath and bemoaned the base-born blood from the mother’s side. Her father—a man of science not superstition—had christened it the homunculus. *Little polliwog and the homunculus*. His low voice creeping over her bed: *You are beautiful, no matter what*. And he would silently take her thumb in his mouth and suck on it, slick tongue probing the ridge of nail, teeth lightly resting on knuckle.

Polly adjusted the bundle on her chest. As she bent her left wrist, the IV probed sharply against her bones. Her hands were cold, her knuckles throbbed. At once, she noticed her left thumb, suddenly unremarkable. She held it up to the right. They were symmetrical: slender and inviting, with two nail beds, pink and spacious. She felt a sinking hole in her chest, an endless mouth of grief centered in that space now occupied by the newborn. The clubbed thumb was no more.

On Wednesday afternoon, Polly’s sister Leah arrived at the ward. The baby was sleeping in the bassinet as Polly spoon-fed herself cold pasta from the hospital tray. Leah sat in the room’s only chair, positioned in the far corner by an industrial-grade breast pump. Behind her on the wall was the pain scale chart, cartoon faces aping the spectrum of human

discomfort.

Polly punctured a hole in her box of prune juice. “Do you remember my weird thumb?”

Leah shifted in her seat, folding her arms across her chest.

“The toe thumb?”

“Yeah. It’s the weirdest thing. I noticed yesterday, it’s gone.”

“What do you mean *gone*?”

“I mean, it changed ... It’s completely normal, like the other one. Look—” she held up both thumbs side by side—delicate mirror images.

Leah uncrossed her arms, but didn’t budge from the chair.

“Look!” Polly persisted.

Leah sighed and pushed herself up. At the bed, she held both of Polly’s hands noncommittally in her own. Slowly, she lowered them. “You got surgery?”

“No. It just happened. I noticed it yesterday.”

Leah shrugged. “Pregnancy is strange.”

“But the bone ... how could it just grow like that?”

“After what you’ve been through, growing out a thumb’s nothing.” Leah moved back to the chair and sat down. “Did you tell the doctor?”

“No, how could I?” Polly threw a crumpled juice box back on the tray. “It doesn’t matter anyway.”

Leah frowned. “You don’t miss it, do you?”

“I barely even thought about it. But it is a little unnerving.”

“What’s unnerving?”

Polly hesitated.

“It’s genetic, right?” Leah continued. “Does Emilia have it?”

Polly looked down at the baby in the bassinet, fingers obscured by green mittens. She said quietly, “I haven’t checked.”

“Oh. Well, you definitely would have noticed.”

“Like I said, it’s not something I think about—”

“You would have *noticed*.”

Both women regarded the sleeping infant between them. Neither moved.

On Saturday, Polly’s discharge paperwork was approved and she was allowed to leave the hospital. The cab driver helped her out of her wheelchair and into the idling car. He would not help strap in the baby’s car seat—liability reasons, he explained. Polly bent over the car seat to secure the middle buckle herself. Then the three of them drove on to the interstate. Polly looked at the sleeping baby in the car seat and beyond, through the window on the other side of the cab. She watched the city skyline bleed by as they moved towards the outskirts, with its barren parking lots and aging fast food chains. A cramped-lettered sign outside a darkened strip club read, “Closed for good. Thanks for all the great memories.”

At home, Polly fed the baby again and laid down on her bed. She turned on the news and fell asleep to the thrum of conspiracy theories and gun control. Some time later, the baby awoke, hungry. Polly rolled over, peering into the bassinet. The baby wailed, mouth red and wide open. Its face seemed too small to contain the mouth that gaped at her.

Polly muted the television. She picked up the baby and sat on the bed, arranging her on top of a pillow and then to her breast. The red mouth latched and was silent. Polly leaned back against the headboard. The baby pawed her froggy green fists at the breast. Somewhere in her head, a nurse chided Polly: *She needs tactile stimulation. She needs to use*

her fingers to explore her new world. Polly peeled off the green mittens, one after the other. The baby's hands moved, delicate fists curling and uncurling. Polly held out her pinky and felt the baby's tiny grip surround it with a sudden sturdiness. *You are beautiful, no matter what.* Polly rolled her pinky over, studying the fingers that clutched. One, two, three, four...

And there it was, bordering its four upright counterparts: a small homunculus. A blunt, thick thumb much like her own had once been. A puckered face with a sliver of nail like a creased eye. *Dirty pilgrim.* Polly jerked back, her nipple dislodging from the baby's lips. The red mouth howled with hunger. Revulsion settled over her body, murky and thick, a vernix-coat of shame. The baby strained, turned redder. Polly shivered. She put the baby back to her breast.

A quiet descended upon the bedroom. Some old feeling welled up in Polly as she watched the baby suckling; a distant déjà vu, an odd memory she couldn't quite claim. She glanced once more at her own left thumb—it remained immaculate, human. Polly looked back at the baby sleeping at her breast. She closed her eyes. *You are beautiful,* she murmured as she rocked them both.

Contributors

Mandira Pattnaik's first poem appeared in the national daily The Times of India. Her work, poetry and fiction, has since appeared in Eclectica Magazine, Citron Review, Watershed Review, Bombay Lit Magazine, Splonk, New World Writing, Amsterdam Quarterly and Passages North, among other places. Her writing has been translated and included in anthologies. Forthcoming are pieces in Prime Number Magazine, Feral Poetry and Reflex Press. She is BotN and Best Microfiction nominee this year. Lives in India, loves to embroider.

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Allison Whittenberg is a Philadelphia native who has a global perspective. If she wasn't an author she'd be a private detective or a jazz singer. She loves reading about history and true crime. Her other novels include Sweet Thang, Hollywood and Maine, Life is Fine, Tutored and The Sane Asylum.

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Bear Weaver, writing and residing in coastal New England, was built by Florida's Gulf Coast. As were their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, and great-great-grandparents. Bear's writing centers themes like identity, queer love, and the absurdity of being alive on Earth.

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Ishaq Adekunle is a Nigerian Writer and visual artist. Recently, he has been trying to learn about the state of well being and reasoning among the African children, their good and fair tales, also trying to lend a louder voice. To this effect, he has learnt to tell their stories in his poetry and arts which may be themed with anger, misery, woe, melancholia, heavy weight of sad times, hope, neglect and surrealism. some of these which have appeared or forthcoming on EyeEm NYC, Angst Zine, New Horizon Creatives, Chestnuts Review, Drexel Pub, Fragmented Magazine, PaperDragon mag, Superstition Review and elsewhere.

Irina Talty is a 21 year old teacher in Atlanta, GA who has been published in Modern Luxury, Hedgeapple, and the Odyssey.

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Andrew Hall is a ginger-haired disabled writer from Lancashire, United Kingdom, who uses this unique perspective to slap his everyday experiences onto the table for everyone to see, whilst maintaining a sense of dry humour and whimsy in the mucky, sticky process. He has been published in Magma Poetry and can be found on twitter: @CripOnATrip21

Born and raised in the shadows of the Appalachian Mountains, **Penny Milam** graduated from East Tennessee State University with a degree in English Education and has taught high-school English for many years. Her work has appeared in Still: The Journal, Deep South Magazine, and will appear in the 2020 winter edition of Valparaiso Fiction Review.

Brittany Micka-Foos is a writer and editor residing in the Pacific Northwest. A former victim's rights lawyer in Washington, DC, Brittany turned her attention to writing after the birth of her first child. She has published a smattering of poems and short stories in various publications, including Hamlit, fws: a journal of literature and art, CC&D magazine, and Blanket Stories (Ragged Sky Press). She is also Skagit Valley's municipal liaison for National Novel Writing Month. She earned her BA in English at the Evergreen State College.

