

the good life review



TGLR
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The Good Life Review is a 501c3 nonprofit literary journal independently operated by graduates and candidates of the MFA in Writing program at the University of Nebraska. Our group of writers, editors, and designers came together to craft a space intended to shine a light on the diversity that exists in the Midwest.

Based out of Omaha, Nebraska – astride the oft unnoticed – we recognize there are a myriad of voices that call the regions surrounding us home. We are committed to exploring the overlooked and want to champion and celebrate writing that takes risks and challenges perceptions; writing that reveals complexities hidden in the Heartland and beyond.

At TGLR, we strive to provide a beautiful and equitable platform for writers and artists to showcase and share their poetry, prose, and art, and we make every effort to offer a supportive, considerate, and professional publishing experience.

To our contributing writers and artists, thank you for trusting us with your valuable work and for your passion to create. To our readers, thank you for supporting independent journals and believing in the literary arts.

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ISSUE FIFTEEN MASTHEAD

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TGLR in this issue

COVER

Tona Pearce Myers * [Depths of the River](#)



“‘Depths of the River’ is an acrylic painting on canvas that is 20 inches x 16 inches. In the summertime there are beautiful colors in the depths of the Russian River in Northern California where I have my studio.”

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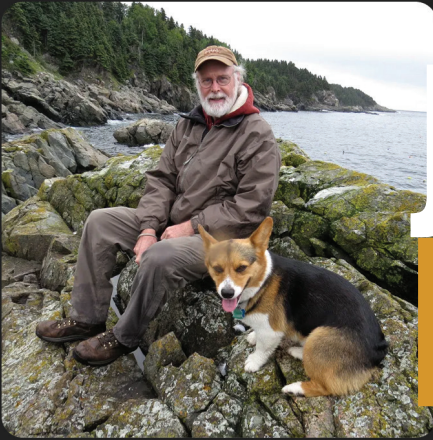
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POETRY



JIM PETERSON

Jim Peterson has published the novel *Paper Crown* from Red Hen Press in 2005 and seven poetry collections, most recently *The Horse Who Bears Me Away* from Red Hen Press in 2020 and *Speech Minus Applause* from Press 53 in 2019. His collection of short stories, *The Sadness of Whirlwinds*, was published by Red Hen late in 2021. He retired as Coordinator of Creative Writing at Randolph College in 2013 and remains on the faculty of the University of Nebraska-Omaha MFA Program in Creative Writing. He lives with his charismatic, three-legged Corgi, Mama Kilya, in Lynchburg, Virginia.

BEND
THE HAMMOCK
FARAWAY

bend

I found you walking beside a horse
without halter or lead. It shadowed you,
sometimes resting its enormous head
on your shoulder. I'd been alone
for a long time. I feared you were the end
of all that. Sometimes at night
we laid a blanket down in the pasture,
the dark, ground-hugging clouds of horses
grazing around us. I talked a lot
but you didn't care. You were already
who you were. Whenever a horse saw you
its ears pricked forward. Its eyes
followed you. When the horse stumbled
and fell, it was you who stumbled and fell.
When it flew over the fences and creeks
it was you flying. When its body curved
from nose to tail, when it shortened
or stretched out its gait, it was you.
I said teach me. You showed me my hands
that didn't know they were feeling
the horse in the reins. You showed me
my legs and feet that didn't know
they were shaping the stream of that body.
I couldn't fathom that my thoughts
fell into the river of the horse and altered
its course, its bearing. As I learned, I felt
the current of my body bend
toward the current of yours. Their confluence—
woman, man, and horse walking together.

*

the hammock

Four a.m., the hammock sways
in the fall breezes, carrying you

through the universe like a great seed pod.
Having abandoned your place in the bed

beside me, you study your pain, your thoughts,
withdrawing into the dark firmament

of the warm cocoon. You ride
the great river of the horse beneath you,

embracing it with your legs,
knowing it in the circle of reins and

heart and mind—the alignment of woman
and beloved beast you manifested day

after day in the fields and forests
and mountain gorges, in the circles

and angles within arenas. The hammock
binds you in that space where your life

rises before you like a colorful breath
and the dew lies down on your face.

New light feels its way through leaves
of the ornamental cherry and the redbud.

You swing between the trees
you planted with your own two hands,

riding that river of a horse down and down
its tortuous course to the ground you must walk alone.

*

faraway

Shin-deep leaves
cover the path. The soles
of my feet arch
over the hard surface roots
of maples.
The trail wanders
like a rope tossed in the air
down the slope
to the hub of a three-
spoked wheel of run-off
gulches, one of them
continuing down
to finally drain
into Blackwater Creek.
The center of this hub,
hidden from nearby
roads and yards
by the folding hills,
is where I stand.
I feel faraway
as if in deep forest.
Three deer, frozen
among the winter
birches, have seen me
many times, but still
they keep a close watch,
their black eyes
casting me
in the spell of these woods.
I'm turning on the axis
of the wheel of this place,
the trees spiraling up
into their high,
winter-stripped canopies

faraway

catching the last
elongated traces of sun,
the last breezes crawling
among the dead leaves
still holding on up there—
still capturing the first cold particles
of night, coming on.

*





ESTHER RA

Esther Ra is a bilingual writer who alternates between California and Seoul, South Korea. She is the author of *A Glossary of Light and Shadow* (Diode Editions, 2023) and *book of untranslatable things* (Grayson Books, 2018). Her work has been published in *Boulevard*, *The Florida Review*, *Rattle*, *The Rumpus*, *Bellingham Review*, and *Korea Times*, among others. She has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Pushcart Prize, 49th Parallel Award, Women Writing War Poetry Award, and Sweet Lit Poetry Award. Esther is currently a J.D. candidate at Stanford Law School. (estherra.com)

(NON)DETRIMENTAL RELIANCE

(non)detrimental reliance

I want to believe I see what is broken
because once I had seen what is whole. Far-off,
fragmented memory, from which I jerked awake
shivering, spitting pinecones, snapped twigs
like toothpicks in my teeth. My whole life
I have sewn in the cloak of your mouth,
sifting dark stones, searching for honey. Tell me
this is more than naivete; more than dreamwalk
through dross and debris. So often I would stare
at the skies full of dust & the swirl of gray hair
& snow dropping quietly on my city, feeling
a hunger too common to name. They say home
is where you no longer try to escape. Lately,
I've been seeing doors in everything: a glass poem,
a kind smile, my name thawing in somebody's mouth.
I have tasted you, resinous, rich with woodsap &
promise of spring. I cast my life on your waters.
Your hand lifts, flaming, torching
the dark: the first traveler, pointing us home.

*



LUCY WALKER

Lucy Walker is a Vermont poet. She received her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College and has work published in *Bodega Magazine*, *PANK*, and *Hole in the Head Review*.

INCOAGULABLE

incoagulable

Heat sweeps under the door jamb. Outside a car alarm.
Every half hour. The air brings the leaves to the window,
a spider about to drop into the alley. I could have loved it,
a life so small and dark like a pearl. Oyster smooth.
I hear young women laughing next door and it's fuzzed
like an ultrasound. Remember the ferry rides? Remember
the geese in the empty cornfield? I can't remember your voice
and you haven't left yet. Last night, I undercooked the cake.
The center was bright yellow and wobbling. I couldn't find
the right flowers, store after store, each face was too small
and smelled of nothing.

*



ADESIYAN OLUWAPELUMI

Adesiyan Oluwapelumi, TPC XI, is a medical student, poet & essayist from Nigeria. Winner of the Cheshire White Ribbon Day Creative Contest(2022) & 1st runner up in the Fidelis Okoro Prize for Poetry(2023), he and his works are featured in *20.35*, *Fantasy Magazine*, *Poet Lore*, *Tab Journal*, *Poetry Wales* & elsewhere.

BIOTIC

The wind hosts a funeral.
I don't feel too alive.
My heart whitewashed in bathwater.
I peel clean at the edge
of the butcher's sabre. My haemorrhage
blushes. This is how
I remind you what I am?
What am I? I can't discern
if the air is mourning or celibate.
The way my fingers mold the knolls
on my face like wild radishes.
Every touch retches me. I confess
and it is blasphemous.
I quiet and it crackles a potter's
clay. I vase into forsythias
and the fuchsia rots.
I sit by a pool and feel the water.
Its inferno engulfs me. I mouth a cigar
and its smoke thins into a thread
crotcheting my veins. Nothing should
have to suffer this way. Not
the ellipsis groaning in my throat.
Again, God heaves into my sutures.
My carapace, like a gill, exhaling
stale air. The air is stale.
My bones a cracker of dry leaves.
In a pocket of blunt knives,
the lungs still wound.
My tremor is wolfsbane—light
sinewed in the silver of full moons.
I must burn. I am something alive.

*



ENEIDA P. ALCALDE

Eneida Alcalde's poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in literary outlets such as *Pirene's Fountain*, *The McNeese Review*, *Zone 3 Literary Journal*, and *Huizache*. A Macondista, she graduated with an MA in Creative Writing & Literature from Harvard University's Extension School. Eneida's poetry draws inspiration from her young daughter as well as her Chilean-Puerto Rican roots and the places she has called home. Learn more at www.eneidaescribe.com.

AFTER THE BOMBING

after the bombing

Because our fathers mixed cocktails
and lit these in protest

while their friends bled dying
or tortured after the coup.

Because our fathers fled to escape
the abuse of citizens inflicted in

the name of order. Because our fathers learned
missing often means forever gone and *no*

votes are often erased. Because our fathers
despised the glare of European skin.

Because our fathers sought peace and equality and
risked their precious lives. Because our fathers

carried loaded guns when they picked us up from school.
Because our fathers knew we had to leave and

left everything behind. Because our fathers
learned English while scrubbing toilets and stripping chickens.

Because our fathers steered tractors over millions of miles to
fill our mouths. Because our fathers

mastered blue-collar schedules
and introduced us to Chomsky, Malcolm, and Wounded Knee.

Because our fathers hooked their backs to give us
healthcare and safer lives.

after the bombing

Because our fathers died, slipping into specters of who they were. Because we are their

children, we know the first step is to remember.

*



FLASH NONFICTION



GAIL HOSKING

Author of the memoir *Snake's Daughter: The Roads in and out of War* (University of Iowa Press), a collection of poetry *Retrieval*, and just out *Adieu*, a chapbook of poems (both from Main Street Rag Press). MFA from Bennington Writing Seminars. Taught at Rochester Institute of Technology for 15 years. Author of 60 published essays and 30 poems. Several have been anthologized. Two essays were “most notable” in Best American Essays, and several Pushcart nominations. At work now on memoir about mother’s life as a military dependent.

LINEAGE

lineage

I come from the land of Spam with steak on paydays. I come from men in uniform and army bases with barbed wire and no trespassing signs. I come from a place where everyone salutes the flag at 5 each evening, whether you are a child on a bicycle, a woman hanging out laundry, or a soldier ready to leave for war. I come from a place where men disappear, and children learn not to ask where they go. I come from Thanksgiving meals served in the Mess Hall, summer camp outfitted with military bunks and olive drab blankets, picnics at the rifle range.

I come from an island in the middle of civilians, a place easy to sweep under the rug as though it doesn't exist. I come from women who wait, who sew on stripes with tiny stitches, then rip them out with every promotion or demotion. I come from twelve schools in twelve years. I come from the challenge of that question: where are you from?

I come from a mother standing by for mail, for deployment possibilities, for babies to fall asleep. I come from women sitting on front stoops of army-issued apartments, toys scattered on worn lawns. I come from women who try to prevail against the bugle call but fail, no matter how beautiful they are. I come from the world of men who eventually die in war.

*



JACQUELINE GOYETTE

Jacqueline Goyette is a writer from Indianapolis, Indiana. Her work has been nominated for Best of the Net and has appeared in both print and online journals, including *trampset*, *JMWW*, *Heimat Review*, *The Citron Review*, *Eunoia Review*, and *Cutbow Quarterly*. She currently lives in the town of Macerata, Italy with her husband Antonello and her cat Cardamom.

ODORE DI NEVE

odore di neve

The drive is different in the middle of January. In the mornings on my way to work — on my way to Loreto — I can't even make out the mountains in the distance, where they would usually sit behind the city of Macerata. The drive is hazy here, and it feels like I'm driving through a dream. When I drive into the valley, the hill towns come into view through the fog, and I can see them: Recanati with its churches and castle walls, Potenza Picena like a tiny cluster of towers. Montelupone drawn in slate blue, a charcoal sketch of a city tipsy on the hill. There are times I want to stop and memorize it all, but I can't. There's no time. I drive on. I drive right through the haze and up the next hill, all the way to Loreto.

January is the hardest month to go back to work. I always find winters to be strange here, nothing like they are back home. None of that snow that falls in cartwheels and somersaults, winter is competing for your attention, drawing you in. Here one month fades into the next and when the new year starts, it drags its feet, making you want to stay cozy and cuddled up in the heat of the house with a kitten curled beside you. I've learned to savor the drives, readying myself for the busy blur of teaching and rush of students walking through the crowded halls. The drives are easy, slow. Back home, in the streets of Indianapolis, I would already be shoveling snow, dreading the icy stretch from Audubon to Emerson Avenue. But here, there is none of that yet. Not in December, not now. I drive home in the sun-blazed start of sunset, watching the hills catch the glint of golden light. The rain as it begins to fall. The pine trees that carry their backlit silhouettes like ostrich feathers, and once again I remember where I am.

On Thursday, the drive changes. The sky looks like it has caught fire, and rain streaks

down from clouds in the distance in sheets of silver light. Antonello once told me you can recognise the rainfall from here, you can see the clouds as they hug the horizon, rising like smoke from the fields. We've done that before: stood in honey brick piazzas in the small towns — his hand in mine, dry stones all around, as we counted the rain clouds that were heading our way, their countless thunderstorms. In Indiana we were warned to watch for tornadoes but here there is no need to: the storms are right there, announcing their arrival with battle horns. You could stand guard on a hillside and see the entire country sneak up on you, watch it invade the hills and set up camp in the Adriatic Sea. There is no hiding here. It is all spread out, field after field, a tapestry of painted land. Sometimes I miss the way the fields back home stretch for miles without me knowing. Feeling left in the middle of it — small and unknown — oblivious to where things really are.

I dreamt of home last night. Of Indiana roads — the network of them and their grids, the sturdy reliability of street signs and highways and traffic lights. I dreamt I was shopping with a friend I hadn't seen in years, and we were picking out bracelets, lip glosses, boxes of Mike and Ike's and Sour Patch Kids. We were storming through the aisles at Osco. My dreams are rooted in this childhood that lures me in with nostalgia, with boxes of candy, with friends that are long gone. No one tells you how easy it is to lose people. They say it is hard to make friends, but they don't warn you about the skill it takes to not let go. They don't warn that you'll get older, that you'll lose faces and names, entire cities will be gone, the roads and where they lead. They don't tell you how lonely it gets. How many postcards you will never send. How fragile the night can be.

odore di neve

There is a lamplight that flickers at the end of the day. It is near the grocery store where I've stopped to pick up things — red peppers for dinner, scamorza cheese. I am ten minutes from Macerata, home is just around the bend. Here the neon orange letters of the grocery store sign are crisper than the sunset, and they feel bright and cheerful against the blueish night sky, a strange mix, an unintended overlap — a day beginning just as it is starting to end. The clouds crease like a collar around the nape of the night, and I see what is left of a thread of lightning tumbling through, erupting into pale fireworks in the heart of the cloud. I think for a second of what a colleague said to me today as we were leaving work: c'e odore di neve. You can smell snow in the air. There is a chill here now, and I wonder if that's what she meant — that the snow will be here soon. As if we might know what is coming just by the chill, just by the scent in the air — standing on the hill and sniffing out the rest of the year like a prophecy, long before it has even arrived.

*



FLASH FICTION



SARA SIDDIQUI CHANSARKAR

Sara Siddiqui Chansarkar is an Indian American writer. She is the author of *Morsels of Purple and Skin Over Milk*, and is currently working on her first novel. Her stories and essays have won several awards and have been published in numerous anthologies and journals. She is a fiction editor for SmokeLong Quarterly. More at <https://saraspunyfingers.com>.

RAZIA, RAZIA

razia, razia

I select a yellow songbird from the cages the bird vendor dangles towards me and pay him 300 rupees. He thanks me, then asks, *Why do you purchase a bird every day, Amma?*

Curious as most are about a widow living by herself in the mohallah, the man tries to peek inside my house through the door slit.

That's none of your business. My bird, my money, I'll do whatever I want. I shut the door on his face.

Ammi, Ammi, Razia calls from the bedroom in her precariously thin voice, audible only to my attuned ears.

Yes, my beta, I rush to my daughter, making kissing sounds as if she were a child of four and not a young woman of 29. I prop her onto the pillows arranged along the headboard, my arms aching with her weightlessness. Her eyes are hollow, her head bare as an upturned handi, her body shivering under the layers of blankets.

So pretty. Razia's pale face lights up on seeing the songbird as if someone has turned on a lantern inside her.

It's just like the bird you had when you were ten, I place the cage on the stool beside her. *Remember how you stole green chilis and fruit to overfeed it?*

Chee Chee Chee, the bird sings for Razia, tilts its neck to look at her through the slats.

My daughter rounds her lips to whistle for the bird but her lungs fail her. How she used to elicit Bollywood tunes before. Before. Before I got her married to Shahid—an engineer working in the USA. Before she failed to conceive for five years. Before she was di-

agnosed with a late stage of uterine cancer. Before my application for a US visitor visa was rejected, twice. Before I watched her withering into a husk on video calls. Before I pleaded with Shahid to bring her to me.

I fetch some green chilis and Razia feeds the songbird with fingers just as thin and tender. She names the bird Sarson for her color. Yesterday, I bought a koel and she named it Kaali. Before that, it was a mynah she named Bhoori.

Razia's excitement wears her down, her smiles are pained. How I wish I'd let Razia marry the man of her choice, the math teacher at her college. At least then she would have remained in front of my eyes. My daughter never complained about her marriage, but Shahid's face when he brought her back said it all—it was the relief of a courier man having successfully delivered the last package of the day.

My daughter refuses further treatment, says she's tired of chemo. Her appetite is as small as a sparrow's. Her meals are bone soup and grapefruit, a bucket waiting beside the bed for her to throw up.

By mid-afternoon, Razia leans back, exhausted, while the bird is still active and singing. I ask her to open the cage and free her feathery friend. The songbird hops out, opens and closes its beak, looks at Razia, then takes flight. I kiss my daughter and hold her close.

The imam at the mosque says prayers continue to work after medicine fails. I entreat Allah—pray seven times a day instead of five, recite verses of Quran on the tasbih, fast from dawn to dusk every Friday. The next-door neighbor says that the prayers of innocent creatures are more effective than

razia, razia

those of humans. So I have Razia free a bird every day, hoping it will whisper a word to the skies, hoping angels will take the prayer to Allah.

The next day, the bird vendor brings me a handsome parrot with lush green feathers, a long tail, and a rose ring around its neck.

1000 rupees. He grins with his bad teeth and runs a hand through his black beard.

The bird says, *Assalamalaikum, Sister*, to greet me respectfully. I hand the bird dealer the money I've gleaned by selling my wedding gold.

Look, Razia, a talking parrot, I call from the doorway, excited to show her the lovely bird. *I know you'll name it Hariyala.*

No response from inside. Razia never sleeps during the day. She has trouble falling asleep despite the weariness. I latch the door and step in.

Razia? Razia?

Utter silence. My feet freeze, refuse to carry me across the courtyard into the bedroom.

The smart parrot mimics me.

Razia, Razia.

Not a peep. Only the bird seller advertising his wares through the alleys. *Parrots, mynahs, sparrows, koels . . . the very best ones.*

I shudder and tighten my grip around the parrot as it flaps its wings and claws at my arm to free itself. My palms are sweaty but full of unusual strength and purpose. I twist the bird's neck to the right with a quick motion. Snap.

It falls on the brick floor. A lone green feather breaks away from the lifeless bundle and rises towards the sky.

*



MARLANA BOTNICK FIREMAN

Marlana Botnick Fireman (she/they) is a joyful queer and Jewish writer in New Orleans. She is pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing at the University of New Orleans. Marlana's work can be found in *Hey Alma*, *Reckon Review*, *The Hooghly Review*, *Sad Girl Diaries*, and elsewhere. They serve as an Associate Fiction Editor for *Bayou Magazine*. Marlana was born and raised in central Ohio. When not reading or writing, Marlana can be found crafting with their partner or playing with their goofy dog, Dill. She can be found on Instagram: @firelightdisco.

SHADES OF JADE

shades of jade

It was happening again. My son Max was at the top of the oak tree, his feet wrapped around a branch, fingers stretching toward the blue-gray sky to snatch a leaf.

“Please come down.”

He shook his head. When he hopped from branch to branch, sometimes stuffing a large green leaf into his mouth, he never faltered, never fell. Max’s skin was glowing jade in the night; Max glowed from the inside out. I begged from the sunken shadows of the oak. “I’ll take you to the trampoline park?” Max tilted his head and jumped from the towering limb, landing like a cat at my feet.

Across the street there was a bar full of drinkers. I watched them from my porch. I didn’t know being a parent would be so lonely. They were always engaged in electric conversation, sometimes cracking the silence of the night open with their raucous laughter; other times conversing quietly in groups and sucking on cigarettes.

When school let out, I promised myself I wouldn’t bribe Max. I would be gentle and less protective of him, the sole survivor of twins I’d grown in my own womb. Made by science, twins for someone who wanted children and had no urge to marry.

My uterus glowed emerald through my soft, post-birth skin for days after I labored, and no one understood why.

* * *

After Max went back to bed, I watched the drinkers and cried. Not padlocks nor rock climbs could keep Max, whose skin glowed shades of fern, from ascending to the tip-top tops of trees. In the past I would watch for a while before calling him. When Max

thought he was alone, he moved with determined grace, a dance performed only among branches. I was too scared to say aloud that perhaps my child wasn’t human. At night, at least.

* * *

“Max,” I whispered. His long lashes fluttered. His jammies were buttoned up to his chin. “Should you be out there?” I gestured to the tree outside his window. He nodded. “You need it?”

“Yeah, I need it.” He closed his eyes like he was conversing with his intuition. “At night and in summer.” I looked at his Elmo wall calendar. Summer would begin her slow, humid haunt in a few days.

Max knew. He’d known the whole time that he was meant to be in the trees. “It feels like being thirsty.”

I kissed him, made him swear he knew how much I loved him. Max climbed, moved from one tree to the next until he diffused into night. He promised he would be back in time for kindergarten in the fall.

I closed the door to my empty house and went to join a group of drinkers. They were rapt with my story until I told them it was true. I shushed them and then called out:

“I love you, Max.” The drinkers got quiet.

From a distance we heard his voice: “I love you back!”

*

CAT CASEY

Cat Casey is an MFA candidate in Fiction at the University of New Hampshire. She currently serves as the Arts editor for *Barnstorm Literary Journal*, and as the co-host of the Read Free or Die live reading series. Her work has been published previously in the *Long River Review*.

SMOKE BREAK

smoke break

Having never been told no, table 404 asks for extra bread, pleading with the raise of their brows, with their fingers moving to the cash, singles in their back pockets, that I do not ring it in, not charge them and instead, trudge down to the kitchen to ask the kitchen boys, who love me, sometimes I think too much, to grill me up some extra bread – already chanting I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I love you, I’m sorry, before they can shout at me, like it’s my fault that four yuppie fucks from the city, but really from an hour out, want more more more – and wait there, at the line, as Tommy spreads butter, almost smacks it, onto the blacktop, not looking at me while throwing the bread, really smacking it now, onto the butter, which gives off a hiss like a snake, like the tattoo on Tommy’s left arm that holds his spatula and pulls at my hair, but only after work, that drowns out his first expletive but not his second, directed at me and table 404 and his boss and his mom and Jesus, before looking up from his hands, which I am also watching, with interest, to see my eyes, which I have purposefully widened to look totally innocent, like a girlchild, so that he’s nice to me, before his gaze darts down to my chest, which I have pushed out so my arms, which are framing the curve of both breasts, are pulled tight against my sides, cursing again when he realizes he burnt the bread, but only a little, not enough that I cannot still serve it, because of my chest and my eyes, but mostly my chest – which I know I will pay for later, in the backseat of his car, Weezer blaring from the stereo, because he is not a nice boy or one with good taste, with his left hand, the one with the snake, in my hair, and maybe I’ll cry, in the good way, the one I did not know existed before, that I had to bum thirty-two cigarettes off of Tommy to learn about, even though I don’t smoke, but for right now I just press my thighs together, pretending to be impatient – before I blow

him a kiss on my way back upstairs with the bread, that I really could have charged for or maybe had someone else get for me – it really, I guess, would have been smarter – in my hands that are shaking from excitement, despite myself, for what will happen later because I ran my own bread, but mainly from nicotine hunger – the kind that I’ve felt all night, even when I was talking to 404, especially then – because I was supposed to have five minutes, before they asked for the bread, which they stole, to run out the back door, the one that leads to the dumpster, hit the vape I borrowed from Kendra, who wouldn’t have asked for it back for another twenty minutes, close my eyes, sink against the brick of the building, ignore how my sweat, seeping out from under my arms, smells, underneath my supposedly sexy vanilla perfume, a little bit like leftover bits of Tommy’s skin, still rubbed off on mine from last night in his car – Weezer, left hand, snake, hair – and focus instead on myself, how proud I am that I did not, for once, trudge downstairs and waltz into the kitchen, act like I owned the place because the kitchen boys love me, too much, not the right way, with hands in my hair, lean against the expo line, widen my eyes so that he’d be nice, push out my chest, and ask Tommy for a cigarette – because I am supposed to have quit both for my health.

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LEA POUNDS

Lea Pounds holds an MFA from the University of Nebraska. She loves to explore brief interactions that tell a deeper story. As an avid people watcher, Lea gets her best ideas by eavesdropping on snippets of other people's lives. She's published in *Sand Hills Literary Magazine*, *Novice Writer*, and *After Dinner Conversations*. Lea lives in Omaha, Nebraska, and can be found online at leapounds.com.

RAINBOW MITTENS

rainbow mittens

One chilly fall morning long ago, Mama woke me before sunrise. She told me I was going to visit Gran. She and Papa would come as soon as he got back from the war. She packed clothes into my old school backpack while I dressed. When she wasn't looking, I snuck in my favorite doll and two of my early reader books. I put on my coat and hat, but I'd lost my mittens. Mama sighed and said we didn't have time to look. She promised that she'd knit me another pair. She held my hand as we walked to the road where the man who smuggled things waited in his truck. I climbed in beside him. She shut the door.

I wanted her to get in too. But the look on her face said don't make a fuss. We drove north up the mountain into the woods. I turned to watch between the trees. A truck pulled into our yard. A soldier from the other side got out. Mama stood, hands raised high.

Best not to look back, the man said. I hugged my backpack and pretended she'd been waving to me.

He handed me a cookie wrapped in a paper napkin. My wife makes them, he said. I thanked him and put it in my pocket. We hadn't driven very far when he pulled to the side of the road. He said now it gets tricky because you have to hide and not make a sound. He opened a panel beneath the seat. I slid into the opening. The space smelled like the restroom at school after the soldiers came for the janitor. When they came for the teachers, we didn't have school anymore.

Don't make a sound, the man said and closed the panel. We drove a while and stopped. I heard the man talking in the language of the soldiers on the other side. We started again. My stomach rumbled so I nibbled the cookie. We drove a little farther and stopped again.

The man got out. I heard him open the back of the truck. Men laughed, the coarse sound they make when they're talking about things children aren't supposed to know. I smelled cigarette smoke and he said something in the strange language.

We drove on. After a while he stopped again and opened the panel. I crawled out. Good job, not a peep out of you he said. I thanked him and brushed the dirt from my coat. We drove for a long time after that on rutted roads deep in the forest. I slept leaning against the door. When I woke, we were winding our way into a valley toward a car at the side of the road. There's your granny, he said. Gran, wearing a bright yellow scarf, waited by the car.

I hadn't seen her since the war started. When I climbed out of the truck, she hugged me tight. She was a trooper, the man said. Gran handed him an envelope, then drove us to her creaky old house at the edge of the village.

She helped me get undressed and into a tub of warm water. I scrubbed away the smell of the truck and the sound of strange men talking. For supper we had chicken stew with dumplings. Afterwards we sat on the porch and watched the stars. When her old hound dog climbed on the seat and put his head on my lap, I scratched his ears.

I helped Gran tend the garden and care for the chickens. Sometimes before dawn we'd walk to the river and catch fish. I went to school again where there were other children who'd come over the mountain to visit relatives or family friends.

The war crept north but here there was enough. Enough to eat. Enough to stay warm. Enough to sleep soundly at night.

rainbow mittens

Time passed, one season to the next.

In the spring the man who smuggles things came to Gran's house. She frowned when she opened the door. Because she was not pleased to see him, neither was I until he pulled a package from his pocket. This is for you from your mother, he said. Wrapped in pages torn from a math school book were a pair of mittens knitted with different colors of yarn.

That was all her effects he said to Gran. She swallowed hard and blinked her eyes fast before she said, well those are pretty like a rainbow aren't they. I thanked the man. That night I wore the mittens to bed and imagined Mama knitting after supper like she used to before Papa went away. I imagined her wanting to bring the package to me herself, but she couldn't travel because of the worsening war. I imagined her handing the package to the man and saying, for my girl.

Eventually the fighting ended. Papa came to Gran's but the war had stolen his mind. One day he went for a walk and never came back. After that, when Gran hugged me tight at bedtime she would say in a strange quiet voice, it's you and me sweetie.

The war has long been over and Gran lies in the graveyard beside the church. Now I help my own girl into her coat. Boots scrape on the porch and her father says, come and see the daffodils blooming. At the bottom of the basket where we keep the winter things, she sees the rainbow mittens. The frayed and unraveled places are mended with white thread. Look how pretty mama, she says as she slips the too big mittens on her hands. Yes, they're pretty like a rainbow I say.

My mother's ghost walks with us as we step out into the bright morning light.

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FICTION



L.L. BABB

L. L. Babb has been a teacher for the Writers Studio San Francisco and on-line since 2008. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming at the *West Marin Review*, *Cleaver*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Goldman Review*, *Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *the MacGuffin*, and elsewhere. She received a special mention in the 2022 Pushcart anthology for her short story, “Where Have You Been All Your Life.” Lorraine lives deep among the trees of Forestville, CA with her husband Cornbaby Johnson, her dog Smudge, and her cat Cosmo..

FUNNY

Kiki spent six years in prison learning how to shut down. When she was released to the halfway house, her counselor tried to help her open up, share, look at life on the bright side. The bright side was blinding to Kiki. Her personality felt overworked, as if she were practicing some form of extreme yoga, yoga where a coat hanger was hooked inside her lips to make her smile. Her face felt like the side of a cliff, her mouth a small hole—a breeze might blow past like breath across the top of a bottle, and only a hollow sound emerge. She tried cultivating a shy presence, hoping no one would expect much from her. The other Kiki, the sociable Kiki, was gone. She'd used up her lifetime allotment of sociability. She'd overdone it. And hadn't that been her problem her whole life? Overdoing it? Hence prison. Hence the halfway house. And really, if you thought about it, hence the children. Then, hence the absence of children. A whole life of hence, therefore, ergo.

Best not to speak. Who knew what calamitous sequence she might initiate?

"We won't get anywhere," her counselor said, "unless you start to talk to me," and Kiki stretched her lips into a smile that made her eyes water. "Do you want to get your children back or don't you?"

Kiki blinked to clear her vision. Thinking about her children stirred something inside her, a vague feeling in the pit of her stomach and a corresponding quickening of her pulse that could conceivably be interpreted as an emotion. Was that love? Her counselor waited, eyebrows up. Kiki opened her mouth to speak but that stiff smile wouldn't move over to let the words out. And all she was trying for was what was expected of her—a yes, a for sure, a you betcha. With a positive attitude.

"You need to focus," her counselor said.

At the halfway house, Kiki slept in a large room with seven other women, a cavernous and dark addition crammed with bunk beds tacked onto the back of a 1940's bungalow in a seedy part of town. The blinds were always closed so no one could look in. The parole board called the home a Residential Reentry Center, conjuring in Kiki's mind an industrial complex, a ward with rows of beds like an orphanage and steel reinforced windows. In fact, it was just a saggy house set back from the road and surrounded by overgrown juniper bushes. There was a mandatory recovery meeting every day at 6 pm before the women took turns making dinner. Men were the main topic of these recovery meetings—night after night the women said the same things, even as different women came and went. They spoke of absent fathers or fathers who wouldn't leave them alone, boyfriends the women would have done anything to hold onto or get rid of, creeps who stalked them, ex-husbands and one-night stands, the loves of their lives and men they boned to get meth, bosses and teachers and pastors and all those men who were in charge. Kiki listened without speaking. These were not her stories.

She got a job washing dogs at a shop called Hair of the Dog. "My ex came up with the name," the owner, Marcy, told her. "Lord, he was clever, that man." Marcy talked so much Kiki wondered if she liked, or maybe didn't even notice, her own silence. Marcy hadn't had a drink in eight years. Her husband, cleverness notwithstanding, split rather than deal with a sober wife. Before Marcy hit her bottom, she bred champion toy poodles. Pictures of Marcy and her dogs were all over the walls of the shop. Marcy appeared determined in the photos, her tiny dogs groomed to look both fierce and sil-

ly—bully chests like prizefighters with fluffy pom poms on their tails. Ribbons hung from the picture frames.

Three months after moving to the halfway house, Kiki was allowed a supervised visit with her children. A public place, lunch only, no physical contact. Her mother and her children sat huddled together at one side of the table while a single chair waited for Kiki on the other. No worries about who would have to sit next to her. The Denny's staff had probably been warned. Watch out—crazy, alcoholic, non-custodial felon coming.

“I purposefully didn't get a booth,” her mother said shrilly as Kiki approached the table. She half-expected a little nameplate in front of her chair. She hadn't had time to go home and shower so she smelled of flea dip and the front of her shirt was damp.

Kiki couldn't think of anything to say. She used to hold nothing back when talking to her mother. Miss Smart Mouth, her mother had called her. Sassy Pants. Now her mom was just a white-haired old lady in a pastel sweater set. Her face had gone soft with age, jowly. Kiki's daughter looked scared shitless, ten years old and developing that disapproving glare just like her grandma, her hair pulled back into a ponytail so tight it looked like it hurt. Her son, well, her son. Kiki felt something shift in her when she looked at him. Who had taught him to stand up when a lady approached the table, even if the lady was just his mother, an ex-con fuzzy with dog hair? He was what now, fifteen? Kiki, though out of touch with the world for so long, could see the nerdish boy he'd become, a bully's target with his belted jeans cinched too high, a home haircut, his hand outstretched for a shake like he was running for office, that terribly earnest smile.

Kiki didn't sit down. What was the point? They weren't her children anymore. Her children, the ones she would have raised, no longer existed. Feeling their eyes on her, waiting for her to say something, she suddenly turned and rushed away, like she was fleeing a net poised to drop over her. She imagined them whispering behind her as she walked out. What was she doing? Where was she going? Why didn't she say anything? Kiki had no answers.

Kiki didn't ask to see her children again.

The grooming shop's hours were ten to seven. Because she would miss the six o'clock meetings at the halfway house, Kiki received permission from her counselor to attend the lunchtime AA meetings in a church basement a short walk from the shop.

“Hello, I'm Kiki,” Kiki recited at the AA meetings. She said it, too, when she lifted each dog from its crate at work, “and I'm an alcoholic.”

“Let go and let God,” she whispered to a trembling Pekinese.

“Keep coming back, it works,” she cooed into the muddy ear of a German shepherd puppy.

“Sugar?” Marcy said, looking up from squeezing a Doberman's anal glands. “You don't want to keep your pretty face so close to the dogs like you're doing.”

At the halfway house and the AA meetings, Kiki avoided looking anyone in the eye. At work, she stared into the dogs' faces. Their eyes were so human, so expressive. “It's all right, it's all right,” Kiki reassured them, and she thought she could feel them relax into the sound of her voice. She loved their

warm, wet bodies, the feel of the angular jutting bones of the tiny dogs and masculine heft of muscle on the large ones. It was all she could do to keep from throwing her arms around them all and hugging them to her chest.

The shop was closed on the weekends. Kiki missed the dogs then. It wasn't one specific animal—she missed the idea of dogs. She found herself absentmindedly stroking the pilled comforter in the living room of the halfway house or sniffing her fingers in her sleep. Her hands always smelled like medicinal soap and the tips of her fingers stayed permanently puckered.

The noon AA meetings were attended by working people, mostly men, and most like the same type of men the women talked about at the halfway house. These men used two hands to drink their coffee from tiny paper cups, slouched in the chairs or hunched over the table. Then there was Standup Mike, a gentle-looking middle-aged man who used to be a school teacher—big glasses and sweaters and curly brown hair not so much shot with gray as bazooka'd. Cannonballed. His eyes were large and brown and compassionate, like a golden retriever's. He stood whenever he spoke, which was often. Had he spent so long in the classroom that he couldn't speak without standing and pacing, lecturing? Everyone loved his stories—failed marriages, an estranged son, lost jobs, mayhem galore. He had once left a note for an ex-wife secured to her front door with a meat cleaver. He didn't remember leaving the note or what it said but he also didn't remember running from the police that same afternoon or crashing his car into a ditch. His drinking, his mistakes, his crimes were fodder for a series of amusing anecdotes: the time his pants fell down to his ankles during a DUI arrest, the time he kicked down the

door of his neighbor's house thinking it was his own home and that his wife had changed the locks. Kiki admired someone so normal looking who could lose control of himself so thoroughly and then open himself up to a roomful of strangers. He had done these things and retained his dignity. He had come back from the abyss with flair and great material.

Kiki had been like him once. She was the life of every party. She'd had loads of friends, was voted class clown in high school, crossed her eyes for her yearbook picture. Now she couldn't remember the last time she'd made someone laugh, let alone the last time she had laughed herself.

She began to formulate the story of her drinking and her "crime" (Kiki always saw that word in quotes) as one of self-defense. Self-defense gone awry. The story needed some fleshing out, some interesting details, a tiny bit of pathos to contrast with the humor, a tad of back story. The self-defense idea was not a new concept; she had floated it past her attorney like a bobbing life preserver during the trial. Her attorney told her it was best if she let him speak for her.

She wanted to finally speak for herself, speak with the same kind of authority as Standup Mike, own her own life, albeit tweaked a little for entertainment purposes. It was a funny story, really, what had happened, why she ended up in prison. "It was him or me," she practiced saying to the dogs. "It was wrong, of course, but it's as simple as that. Justifiable." If he had lived, she would have died. Maybe. Probably, at some future point.

She started sitting directly across from Standup Mike at meetings, studying him, week after week, watching the way he leaned his head toward whoever was speak-

ing. She tipped her head forward too, leading with her forehead, not moving until she developed a crick in her neck and her pose felt awkward. How had she not noticed the way her head balanced on her neck before? Standup Mike pushed his glasses up on his nose using one finger on the bridge. He ran his hand through his hair and it settled right back where it had been. He steepled his big blunt fingers under his chin. When he said something kind to one of the few other women at the meetings, an old familiar feeling bubbled up in Kiki's chest. Was that jealousy? She couldn't be sure. When she mumbled the Lord's prayer at the end of each meeting, she watched him as he closed his eyes and hung his head. She wanted to hear his voice separate from the others. She started getting to the meetings a few minutes early, staying late, lingering near the coffee pot. This seemed to encourage several of the other men to approach her but not Standup Mike. Standup Mike was older, kind of overweight, not really all that good-looking. That wasn't important, though, because Kiki wasn't interested in him romantically. She wanted to be him.

"Start from the beginning," she told a lanky golden doodle. "Not too far back." The doodle rolled its eyes to gaze at her. "Start with the day it happened. The drinking, the fighting..." This was their weekend routine, but had they started drinking early or was it just her who had been drinking all morning? Beer, just beer at first. A hangover remedy for the night before, then a steady stream of cans, one after another. Losing a half-full beer somewhere and getting another from the fridge. He'd been fucking around again, seeing that friend of a friend of a girlfriend of someone on his softball team. Kiki could smell the funk of the woman on him. Plus, hadn't he given her some kind of infection? She thought so. He was disgusting, that

woman was disgusting. Bringing someone else's filth home.

"I can't really talk about things like vaginal infections at a coed AA meeting, can I?" A bulldog grunted as she rinsed the folds of his skin. She'd skip that part. They were just arguing. Why they were arguing wasn't important. Make it funny. Make it rueful. A shot or two of something harder, a brown burn, the last of a bottle, a flung glass. Her three-year-old daughter crying, "Stop it, stop it," and running from the room. Hilarious.

"Things just sneak up on you," she said to a sad and matted rescue pup. They needed more beer, more whiskey, more something. She was the one who drank everything, she should go. No, he should go. He threw the car keys at her, hitting her in the forehead. She felt the sting, the warmth of blood. He laughed. She hit his face with an open palm. He grabbed her hair at the base of her neck, snapped her head back, and threw her sideways. Something, some sharp corner of wood in the arm of the couch, bit her hip. Her son, distraught, appeared behind his father. Not in front of the kids, she thought. She was the one who had wanted everything to stop.

"Okay, okay, I'll go."

"Damn right, you'll go," her husband said.

She picked up the keys and walked out the door and got into their car parked in the driveway. Her husband followed her out, standing by the garage in front of her, arms crossed, as if daring her to come back into the house.

"I wasn't even angry anymore," she said in the AA meeting. Standup Mike tipped

his head in her direction as she spoke. He was listening. Everyone was listening. She looked around thoughtfully as if just remembering the whole thing as she spoke. Timing was everything. How she glanced at the rearview mirror and saw her face. A cut along her hairline! Blood! Goddammit! She paused for emphasis. “So, I just put the car in drive and hit the gas.”

She waited a beat, to provide a long suspenseful moment “I’ll never forget the look on his face,” Kiki said. “He was so surprised. The EMT’s said if he had been standing just a foot to the left, I would have pushed him through the garage door, which had more give. But that’s not what happened.”

Someone coughed.

“And then,” Kiki said, “wouldn’t you know it, I’m charged with manslaughter.” She laughed but it didn’t sound quite right. Perhaps she should have chuckled thoughtfully. She’d need to work on that.

“Jesus,” a woman said.

Kiki looked expectantly around the room. Standup Mike gazed down at his coffee cup. No one was smiling. No one had laughed, not once. No one would even look at her. The overhead lights gave off an insect-like buzz. In the quiet that went on and on, Kiki felt her mind break free, drifting up to the ceiling, hovering there, looking down. It was as if she could see herself clearly for the first time. So this was what everyone saw—the jury, her counselor, her mother, her kids. She was an aberration. A monster.

“Okay. Well,” the woman chairing the meeting said. “Thank you, Kiki.”

The room felt airless. Kiki opened her

mouth and closed it then stood and walked out without looking back.

“Done early, hon?” Marcy said. Kiki went to the back of the room and put on her damp apron. “Benny there is up next. The owners think he rolled in something dead. He stinks.”

She knew Benny. A fucking long-haired Chihuahua. The orange menace, his owners called him when they dropped him off. Kiki rolled up her sleeves and lifted a shaking Benny from his crate. His eyes bulged in terror like he knew all about her, like he knew she shouldn’t be allowed to touch another living creature, ever. When she tried to put him in the tub, he extended all four legs like an umbrella opening up. Kiki wrestled with him while Benny alternated between growling at her and licking her fingers. He wiped his smell onto her apron then tried to crawl out of the tub via her neck. She looped his head through the lead to hold him still and started spraying him down.

“But it *was* funny,” she hissed to Benny. He stopped struggling suddenly and listened, staring into her face. The EMTs had testified in court about how she had laughed when they got there. But he wasn’t dead then, not yet. He was still talking, still drunk. Hell, he was laughing too. The prosecuting attorney had called her a psychopath, but that simply wasn’t true.

Kiki bent close to Benny. “And he started it, for fuck’s sake.”

Benny turned and sank his four sharp canines into the apple of her cheek. Kiki reeled back, nearly lifting Benny out of the tub by his teeth. She grabbed her cheek with one hand and when she pulled it away, she saw blood on her fingers. Without thinking she

funny

snatched up the lead around his neck and lifted him up off his feet into the air.

It was so quick. Benny didn't make a sound, couldn't make a sound. She watched him as he hung suspended in the air in front of her, twisting, feet paddling, water dripping, a drowned rat on a fishing line. His eyes popped wider and rolled back, his tongue slipped out from between his lips, and his body convulsed. Kiki heard someone screaming her name, over and over, louder and louder, and still she held the dog up in the air. Because, really, the dog looked ridiculous jerking around like that. So funny.

*





CORTEZ

Cortez is a poet and short fiction writer in Brooklyn, New York. She is an MFA candidate at Stony Brook University and her work has appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail*.

BLUE LIGHT

blue light

My phone can hear all my thoughts and feel all my fears, and it has noticed that I haven't gotten my period this month. In response, it's feeding me videos and infographics germane to new mommies. I have been learning a lot. Newborns don't have kneecaps, for instance. It takes three weeks for infants to begin producing tears. Babies have no sense of their own identity until they are six months old. Before that, they think they are their mothers.

My roommate has been delivering me a lecture on ethical non-monogamy all morning. I offered that my boyfriend and I practice something more akin to un-ethical non-monogamy, in that it is quietly understood that we sleep with other people, but it isn't something we feel the need to parade in each other's faces. Our arrangement is simple and it works for both of us. We see each other on Thursdays. We have a sushi place and a cocktail bar. His apartment has a doorman and tiny jets in the walls that spit out air freshener, so the entire building shares a uniform lemon scent. I like that he never has anything in his refrigerator. I like that I get complimentary coffee in the lobby when I leave in the mornings, I like that he sends me a car. I do not like returning home to my nightmare roommate, who believes I am the enemy of all things progressive and ethical.

I work for a music discovery platform. I write blurbs for bad indie bands. Last week, I referred to an *electric baseline* in every single assignment of mine and nobody got mad at me. My roommate is a copy editor for an athleisure brand. We both work from home at our kitchen table. The flexibility in our schedules gives my roommate a plethora of daily opportunities to explain to me how her sexual exploits with men are actually *queer*,

and to tell me how I'm a bad person. This morning, she's fixated on the latter.

"I just don't think this is healthy or sustainable at all for you. It's important to be in dialogue with your metamours."

The term metamour, she informed me last week, refers to your partner's partners. This drawing up of contracts and memorization of vocabulary words represents, to me, the death of eroticism.

"They're all probably 18. We would have nothing in common."

My roommate has to log on to her morning meeting, so I am spared the sermon on the inherent power discrepancy of age gap relationships.

My favorite thing my phone has fed me has been the online account of a Brooklyn collective of hot, tattooed doulas. They all have multiple children, but manage to stay exceptionally thin. On top of motherhood and birthwork, many of them also nurture artistic practices like painting and embroidery. Between professional photographs of sandy-haired women giving birth in water, I can watch videos of the beautiful doulas offering encouraging mantras.

You are magic mama!

They say to me.

Your body makes miracles, mama!

My roommate is one of those ex-Christians who is now over-correcting. Immediately af-

blue light

ter her engagement to her college boyfriend dissolved, she started devouring thinkpieces and zines on polyamory. She has a rolodex of boyfriends now, various bartenders and line cooks who go home at the end of the night to their cool, open-minded live-in girlfriends. Together they use safe words, fill out consent checklists, attend ticketed sex parties in basements. Only someone with biblical training could manage a sexual awakening so oriented around rules and reading.

She reports that she's never felt more "held" or "in community." But every night, when one of her seven boyfriends leaves, she sleeps alone. Comforted, I assume, by her really good boundaries.

Tonight, in bed, I'm worried I can feel the muscles in my abdomen slackening and separating, making room for new life. I wonder if my boyfriend and I will adopt a similar policy on pregnancy as we do monogamy. My stomach will expand, and then it will deflate, and he will regard the change neutrally. If I'm lucky, perhaps our child's high school graduation will fall on a Thursday.

I fight the urge to inject some real truths into my morning talks with my roommate.

"I worry that my bisexual identity is erased by my hetero-presenting relationships," she says, too flippantly not to be rehearsed.

Most people, throughout the course of human history, have lived short, profoundly violent lives, I imagine saying back to her.

"You wouldn't know it by looking at them, but many of my male partners are extremely feminine in energy."

Everything outside will soon be on fire, but it is igniting so slowly that by the time we all catch on there will be nowhere to hide, I'd like to reply.

I actually had a girlfriend for all of high school. I'm waiting for a strategic time to deploy this fact on my roommate. The cognitive dissonance on her face will be delicious. *You are gay?? But being gay is good!! And you are evil!!*

I'm writing a review for an album I haven't listened to. I learned early on that I could get away with rephrasing the bands' press emails, listening to a single or two, and then plucking a few words from my word bank—ethereal, ambient, ultra-bright, unflinching— and scattering them at random.

I pass my laptop to my roommate for proof-reading. She is insufferable, but a highly skilled editor.

"I definitely like it, I just think it needs more in the middle."

She types furiously. I brainstorm events likelier than childproofing my boyfriend's luxury apartment, where everything is rigid and mirrored and steel. Christ's second coming. Universal healthcare. Robots taking our jobs. My roommate and I establishing a polyamorous homestead upstate. Me, her, the baby, and seven semi-present father figures in the Catskills chopping wood and picking berries and raising a child with big ideas on land stewardship and unconventional family structures. Acid begins to rise in my throat.

She passes me her edit.

blue light

This experimental Brooklyn duo is one to watch. In their new album, {x's} synth coexists with {x's} guitar— think analog vs. digital— past vs. present— folk meets trip-hop— to create the band's signature, atmospheric sound. A closer listen to {x's} dreamy vocals reveals a poignant narrative on the culture of isolation in the online age. The album is a love letter to nostalgia. Very thorough, for an album she also has not heard.

The rest of my duties won't resume until after lunch. I hover my mouse over the document intermittently, so I still show up as "active" on my boss's end.

I stare into the blue light. I think I really shouldn't be calling him my boyfriend. It's just been a little while since I've seen anyone else. The word keeps leaking out.

Across the table, my roommate is working on the subject line of her company's new size inclusive collection. She's debating between:

Made to move, for everyBODY

or every-body

or everybody,

or EVERYbody

"Two words: *every* body." I offer.

"You're a genius."

A beautiful doula on my feed, bloated with life, sits on an antique, velvet armchair. Light pools and snake plants dangle from loft windows behind her head. *Don't feel guilty for resting today. Whether or not*

you know it, you are working hard. You are doing the most important job in the world right now, mama.

I am in my bedroom. What is my mid-twenties wisdom? My girl self might like to know. What I'd tell her: it will always just be you in your bedroom, wondering how things will turn out.

Over Thai, I ask my roommate, innocuously, if she would ever consider having children. "I mean, I do think it's somewhat irresponsible, given the climate."

A pious, canned response I could've predicted.

"But also— I know this will sound silly— but, I've been doing so much work disentangling from how I was raised, and I feel like I'm mothering myself right now. Like, how am I supposed to guide anyone else in the world, when I feel like I've just been born?"

I begin to see clearly how it will all happen, everything staying the same. I will angle the bassinet in my room so that it doesn't bump up against the radiator. The neighbors will receive a nightly symphony— my roommate's adventurous roleplay scenes, my offspring's primal wail.

Across town, my boyfriend will sleep peacefully. Should he stir, he will take a few steps, appreciate his Manhattan view. So still in the middle of the night. He will see his reflection in the window, his image imposed over the landscape. He will consider jerking off. Spreading his seed across the skyline.

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JACOB ORLANDO

Jacob Orlando is a queer young man of letters from small town Texas. His debut piece 'Molten' won the New Millennium Writings 55th Annual Award for Flash Fiction. His work has also appeared or is forthcoming in *The Q&A Queerzine*, *After Happy Hour Review* and *Mania Magazine*. He works a day job and writes away his free time.

GRASSHOPPER GUT PUNCH

grasshopper gut punch

I didn't kill anyone. I've never wished death on a person, not even Cody Willis. Now he's gone. That's not on me. Him and four other classmates of mine, plus a teacher. They're dead, I'm not, and that sucks. I was deep in some popcorn chicken when they bit it. Sounds awful, but it's true. I have the Sonic receipt to prove it. And his truck — it couldn't have been me. Not grasshoppers. Always hated the damn things. Let me tell you about me, Cody Willis and grasshoppers.

Our elementary school didn't have a gym, so we had to walk half a mile to the middle school down the street for P.E. In September, the blacktop sizzled and the grasshoppers were damn near everywhere, crunching up every step, flying from nowhere right at your face.

One day, I was walking by a bank teeming with grasshoppers ahead of some classmates who I didn't care for, including regular jackass Cody Willis. He was walking with two brainless friends of his and two girls I knew but never talked to. I heard them laughing, and then someone whipping at the grass, riling up the grasshoppers so they tore through the air like missiles.

I started to turn around to see who had launched the attack, and boom — one of the freak things came right at me, all legs and wings and terror. I tried to swat it away, but it clung tight to my finger until finally, with a heaving shriek, I flung it off.

This sent Cody's crew into hysterics. They doubled over howling, slapping their knees. One of the girls was wiping away tears. Cody came at me all friendly, like, "Sorry, my bad." Then disgust warped his grin. He pointed down at my chest and yelled, "There's more on you!" Convulsing, I raked at my shirt —

and nothing. He was messing with me.

My face felt hot. I wanted to push him over, to make him cry in front of all his friends. But I knew better. You had to pick your battles with guys like Cody.

That day, we were playing parachute games, and Cody wanted to do a new one he called grasshopper gut punch. We all stood around the parachute shaking our corners. In the game, you had to go under and across to the other side without getting gut punched by a grasshopper on top. If you made it, you took someone's spot, and they were next. If you got gut punched, you joined the grasshoppers. Simple enough.

Cody started as a grasshopper and chose two of his meatheads to get gut punched. Then he picked one of the girls — Penny, I guess — promising to go gentle on her. She skittered under the parachute. Cody didn't move at first, listening for her steps. She came close. I thought she might choose me, but she stopped. Right then, I caught Cody's eye and shook hard. He seemed to get a signal and pounced, taking Penny as she giggled, smirking up at me as he held her.

He chose me next. I could hardly say no. I crouched and took off my shoes so my socks slid quiet on the slick gym floor. I was a phantom. I teased Cody, letting him think he had me, slipping out of reach. We played nice. Then he ended it, coming down on me hard. I tried to buck his gut punches. His fingers closed around my throat, and the parachute strangled off my breath.

When he let me go, I scrambled away, gasping for air and hollering for him to back off. Seeing stars and hearing static buzz, I realized I was tearing up, so I bombed it to the nearest exit and came out into the bright af-

grasshopper gut punch

ternoon. I breathed in deep, spinning in the sun.

I then became aware that I didn't have any shoes on. I had another pair in my cubby, but it was a long walk and the sidewalk was white hot on the soles of my feet.

Maybe I should have gone back in for my shoes. Maybe Cody would have apologized. Maybe. But I didn't want to go back to his game. So I started walking, gritting my teeth at the sting of hot tarmac. A grasshopper landed ahead. I crushed it smooth under my heel.

When I got back to my cubby, my socks were caked with brambles and grasshopper legs, and my feet hurt bad from all the pricks and scrapes, not to mention the heat.

The next day at recess, I had a golden opportunity to push Cody Willis off the slide. Didn't doubt myself a lick. I got suspended for a week. I also got to watch Cody Willis limp around on crutches for a month.

Okay, so I broke his ankle once seven years ago. That doesn't mean I wanted to kill him. Get this — he was my first kiss. Isn't that messed up?

We were sitting together in the back row of the school bus on the way back from a field trip to the natural history museum, having become friendly after sharing a desk in social studies. Our knees touched some. He was making fun of how the girls squealed at the butterfly exhibit. Nature's delicate beauties turned out to be evil little alien creeps — eeeeeuurghh!

He had me tickled. Then, with no warning, he popped me on the mouth. It happened so quick, all I could do was blink and ask what

the hell he was doing.

"A guy thing," he replied. When I told him that guys didn't normally do things like that, he rolled his eyes and said, "Chill out."

After that, we barely spoke. We pretended not to see each other in the halls, or our eyes met and moved on. It was easy for him. He was the golden boy. I was a loser.

Our eighth grade formal was in the gym. I caught him getting punch with Olivia Benson, the star girls soccer striker. They went to the dance floor. I watched from the edge of the crowd. He didn't see me. They moshed through a few pop songs, then swayed together during a slow, sopping ballad. I saw his hands slipping low down her back. Everything was right at his fingertips. But when the song ended, she broke from him and went to the lobby. He followed, and I couldn't stand to lose sight of him. She went into the ladies room, not looking back as he called after her. He glanced around, cheeks flush, then dove out the nearest exit door.

The night was muggy and crawling. Flies pooled beneath the streetlights and beetles littered the sidewalk. I was sweating in seconds, swatting mosquitoes off my neck. The parking lot was empty except for Cody, standing there by the curb. He heard the door and glanced back, met me with a hard stare and said, "What are you doing?"

I asked him the same question. He shook his head and said, heavily exasperated, "*Girls.*" I asked him if Olivia was okay. He grunted and said, "She's a tightwad." I told him to grow up. He glared at me and said, "Don't be a fag."

I didn't like that. Don't forget — he started our game. He expected me to follow his

grasshopper gut punch

rules. He kissed me because he wanted to, and he counted on me to just be okay with it.

So I told him, “You’re the fag.”

He didn’t give me time to regret it. He slugged me across the jaw, knocking me clear on my ass. I snatched his wrist as I went down, and we crashed to the grass in a tangle. He clawed at my face until I kneed his gut, scrambling up to straddle him, baring my teeth, a hand at his throat as he dug his fingernails into my forearm — and then I realized that he was smiling.

He was enjoying himself. We both were. Everything between us was simmering. We were back at it, playing our game, and we felt really alive.

Right then, a grasshopper plunked onto Cody’s face. He sputtered up in a belly scream, writhing under me to get a hand free so he could swipe it off. I let him go, wheezing, laughing. He staggered up, wiping at his face. When he looked at me, I caught his hurt, and for a moment, it seemed like he’d say something. Then, without another word, he went inside.

I didn’t follow him. Instead, I went to our elementary school. The walk seemed shorter. The warmth in the tarmac was almost nice, and the grasshoppers didn’t stir as I passed. I sat at the top of the slide on our old playground, looking up at the stars.

In high school, Cody was untouchable. He was in the running for homecoming king. Rumor was he’d scored a date with icy hot Rosa Benevides. He was always one slick asshole. But now he had prospects — career, family, life, all that. And me? I was already a hazy memory he could plausibly deny. He did his best to ignore me, avoid me, blot me

out. If he spoke to me, he was cold. To him, I was just a smear of grasshopper guts.

Now, I admit we met the night before he died and said some regretful things.

I was driving slow down the road to our old school, wrapped up in way back when. I pulled up by the curb, got out — and that’s when I saw him.

Cody sat at the top of the slide. Seemed like he was alone. He watched me walk up to the playground. I asked what he was doing. He said, “I could ask you the same question.”

I felt like we’d been there before, like we were destined to be locked in this tug of war. And I didn’t want that. So I said I was sorry for pushing him, and everything else.

He seemed surprised. He said, “Why do you care?” That didn’t feel exactly fair to me, but I replied that I shouldn’t have hurt him. He laughed and said, “You? Hurt me?”

Now, if I had wanted to, I could have taken him out clean right then and there. But seeing him again, I realized that I missed him. You can’t call it even with guys like Cody. Guys like me, I guess. We’re out to win. I’d almost forgotten the thrill of going up against him.

I shook my head, spat and said, “Eat my ass.”

As I turned back to my truck, he called, “You wish.” Then quieter, he added, “Fag.”

I stopped and looked back at him. He was watching me, waiting for me to make the leap. He wanted us to come together. But I was sick of him getting what he wanted.

grasshopper gut punch

Okay, so someone filled Cody's truck with grasshoppers during homecoming. A prank, right? Whoever did it clearly put in a lot of work and planned on Cody coming back in one piece, drunk on his own dreaminess, primed to have his night really spiced up. You'd have to know a lot of lonely roads where grasshoppers thrive on mile-long stretches of untouched turf. You'd have to spend hours stomping around swinging garbage bags to round them up. You'd have to get used to the sticky tickle of their legs, the flutter of their wings, the bombastic *thwack* as they kamikazed into you. You'd have to find Cody's truck in the parking lot and score a few minutes with no one around. You'd probably have to break in, but if you were really lucky, you'd notice that the back sliding window was open. You'd have to do it quick and get the hell out of there. You'd have to imagine Cody's face as he got the ultimate grasshopper gut punch.

Again, couldn't have been me. Always hated the damn things.

Instead, you get to imagine Cody's face as he sensed something awful in the crowd, heard gunshots, then felt that heat rip through him, spilling his blood, leaving his body.

I never wanted that for him. I would never want that for anyone.

And we lost the guy. The shooter. Unidentified and still at large. I don't know anything else about it. Names get around. Guys no one expected to see at homecoming. Guys like me, maybe. But this story isn't that. All said and done, we have to live without the ones we lost.

I liked Cody, liked him a lot. I liked him

alive. He grasshopper gut punched my heart. That's all we got.

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ARTWORK

ISSUE XV

ART

"Depths of the River" COVER by Tona Pearce Myers

Tona Pearce Myers is a fiber artist, painter, and author of two books including *The Soul of Creativity*. She likes experimenting with light, fluidity, and texture. Her artwork has appeared at The Healdsburg Center for the Arts in Healdsburg Ca, Main Street Arts in Clifton Springs Small Things exhibit, New York, and at the Sebastopol Center for the Arts upcoming Illuminating Perspectives exhibition.

"The Rigging" (pg. 3)
"Somewhere in the Night" (pg. 5)
"Marble" (pg. 25)
by Michael Kunzinger

Michael Kunzinger is a photographer from Tidewater Virginia, drawing inspiration from the waters of his home region as well as travels further afield. His work examines art as created by nature, and the intersection of what is abstract and what is real. He has been featured in numerous solo shows, publications, and exhibitions.

"Pandora's Box" (pg. 19) by Maria Christou

Maria is a multidisciplinary artist from Cyprus, working across oil painting, drawing, printmaking, video-art, art performances, sound manipulation, analogue photography, and experimental darkroom processes. Each medium shares the same theme, and explores the same ideas, yet differs in execution. There is a performative element to the production of her art that is consistent across media. Each process she employs is as much a performance as it is a practice undertaken in a studio or workshop. She is interested in the ritualistic process that the production of art elicits. She participated in group exhibitions in Greater Manchester and Cyprus.

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ART

"Symphonic Notes II" (pg. 29)

"Symphonic Notes I" (pg. 55)

by Devdatta Padekar

Devdatta Padekar studied at Sir J.J. School of Art, Mumbai where he graduated with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting in 1999, followed by a Master of Fine Arts in Portraiture in 2001. On both occasions, he stood first with distinction. He later won the British Chevening Scholarship and earned a Master of Art in Drawing in 2005 from Camberwell College of Arts in London. A full-time painter, Padekar gets his greatest inspiration from nature and his paintings highlight its beauty and sensitivity.

"Batik Branches" (pg. 37)
by Jules Ostara

Jules Ostara is an eclectic artist and writer who greets a blank canvas as both playground and temple. She's created two inspirational card decks and a book called Born to Bloom Bright that features an encouraging poem with paintings by many artists from all over the world. Jules also hosts creative courses and homeschooled her twin boys from K-12. She's lived in the Florida Keys and the Appalachian Mountains. Visit her at [instagram.com/julesostara](https://www.instagram.com/julesostara) or [ThriveTrue.com](https://www.thriveTrue.com).

"Image 10" (pg. 45)
by Li Ziyue

Li Ziyue graduated from Zhejiang University of Media and Communication in 2020. Since 2012, she has studied feng shui and modern abstract art, and created the original style of "AI mixed painting," to create the ultimate irregular combination in painting, the phenomenon of breaking through reality, as well as the sense of fragmentation and painting details.

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