



TGLR
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HONEYBEE PRIZE
Summer 2024
OMAHA, NE

the good life
review

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 lingers in the mind long after the last line.

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 SIXTEEN MASTHEAD

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TGLR in this issue

COVER

Cameron Shipley * [Haley and Celeste](#)



"In my studio practice you will find mostly portraits and figurative paintings. I explore emotional reactions to color while playing with a surreal pallet. I have always been fascinated by the way art has told the history of our world for millenniums, proving existence and ways of life throughout time. My body of work is a micro version of that; a proof of my life and the others that have existed around me. I paint modern-day humans while studying traditional oil painting techniques and styles."

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POETRY



GENEVIEVE N. WILLIAMS

Genevieve N. Williams holds an MFA from University of Nebraska at Omaha, where she received two Academy of American Poets Prizes. She is a queer poet whose poetry won an Edward Stanley Award from *Prairie Schooner*, has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, and has appeared in *Prairie Schooner*, *Nimrod*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *Mid-American Review*, and *Verse Daily*, among other journals and anthologies.

A BEGINNERS GUIDE TO YOGA

a beginners guide to yoga

Trauma stays tucked in ribcage and hip,
jolts you out of dreams you can almost see.
When you wake too quickly, the image slips

with the ancestral shadow in your pulse's grip.
You repeat, Nothing happened, at least to me.
It's your parents' trauma staying tucked in ribcage and hip,

and then you're bent and crying on the lip
of your yoga mat, and you don't know why. The key
to all this, you think, is lost when the image slips

and you wake too quickly. Flip
off the sweaty blanket, make some tea.
Trauma stays tucked in ribcage and hip.

Stretch it out of you, let your sweat drip,
release whatever dams your sea.
You wake too quickly, and the image slips

but you are stronger than whatever trips
through your dreams. Breathe...
even as trauma stays tucked in ribcage and hip,
even if you wake too quickly, and the image slips.

*

honeybee



**RANDY
BYNUM**

Randy Bynum's work appears in *Cirque* (contest winner), *Arboreal Literary Magazine*, *Metonym Journal*, *Atticus Review*, *New Plains Review*, *Cathexis Northwest Press*, and others. He explores people, places, social inequity (his mother was 1/2 Native American/Cherokee). He's seeking publication for his collections *Tulips Talking Behind My Back* and *Dragons Who Type: Poems of Whimsy and Wishes*. He's a former speech/theatre teacher, an award-winning playwright, ("The Convert", Kennedy Center/ACTF, Region IX), and believes KMHD Jazz Radio can help save the world. He lives in Portland, OR with wife Dani and rescue dog Cooper.

ELECTRIC ECLECTIC STRONG

2024 HoneyBee Poetry Prize Winner

electric eclectic strong

Today the air waves, and no I don't mean
a breathy metaphor raise of a hand or fist
or a live long and prosper Mr. Spock salute hello-
goodbye but the Morning Session jazz radio host
is laying down, segueing, spinning and pouring
out some liquid light—Afro-pop, Texas saxes,
a hypnotic brass band named well, Hypnotic,
with a tuba (are you kidding me),
and a grab bag burger bar full of blues,
with Mingus shakes—and for just a moment
or a couple starship dayshine hours or three,
the uglies known as autocrats, republic-bought-
fatcats, genocide, slavery denied, sexicide,
planetary homicide/cruelicide be momentarily
confined to back back background backbeat,
tossed out the backdoor to the dusty dirt floor.

Oh mamas of the world, (who rule? you rule!)

this is some sweet sweet jam on top of toast
and one way to get through the brain-cracking
soul-sucking fires and flames of a fall-apart
world frayed at seams, each step forward
a simultaneity of present/future madness,
cash-flush mcmansioneers, charioteers,
side by side the homeless, the helpless,
lands and lands of rubble-buried kids.
How to get through a day that involves
step step stepping the fray? Let those jazz
messengers and the jazz hosts play, channel
language universal, bathe and baptize me,
you, all in the bop diddy boom fresh air waves,

electric eclectic strong

wish upon a toe-tapped head-nod red native
star, there's get-it-done activism still to be made,
and now, yes now, these tunes will kick free,
happen it up higher, staying strong today.

Tomorrow will show its cheat cards soon enough.
For Now: Marvin Gaye, end of show, take it away..

*





JAMIE L. SMITH

Jamie L. Smith is the author of "The Flightless Years", forthcoming from Finishing Line Press (November 2024). Her chapbook "Mythology Lessons" was winner of Tusculum Review's 2020 Nonfiction Prize and is listed as notable in Best American Essays 2021. Her poetry, nonfiction, and hybrid works appear in publications including *Southern Humanities Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Red Noise Collective*, and anthologies by *Indi(e) Blue*, *Allegory Ridge*, and *Beyond Queer Words*. Please visit jlsmithwriter.com for more information.

BEACONS

A small cat curled in my friend's bathroom sink.
Half a glass of lemonade left to drink.

The urge to touch the rosewood floorboards
when the light slants just right. Waves

against breakwaters.
What saves us?

Everyone wants to know
if I'm suicidal,

my father had said,
from his nursing home bed,

As if that would be
such a bad thing.

Stacks of books I've yet to read, the needlepoint
I'll finish and need to redo. Unplanted seeds

in tiny jars on my windowsill. The meteor showers
I keep missing. Squirrels scrambling on powerlines.

Curiosity—that's
what keeps me here,

he said.

I'd still like to know
what will happen

with this next election
and with you,

beacons

what we'll do
when the water runs out

or the border walls
cage us in.

The woman I love who I haven't told.
My friends' not-yet-written poems.

Brass rabbit bookends whose noses I dust
with my thumb

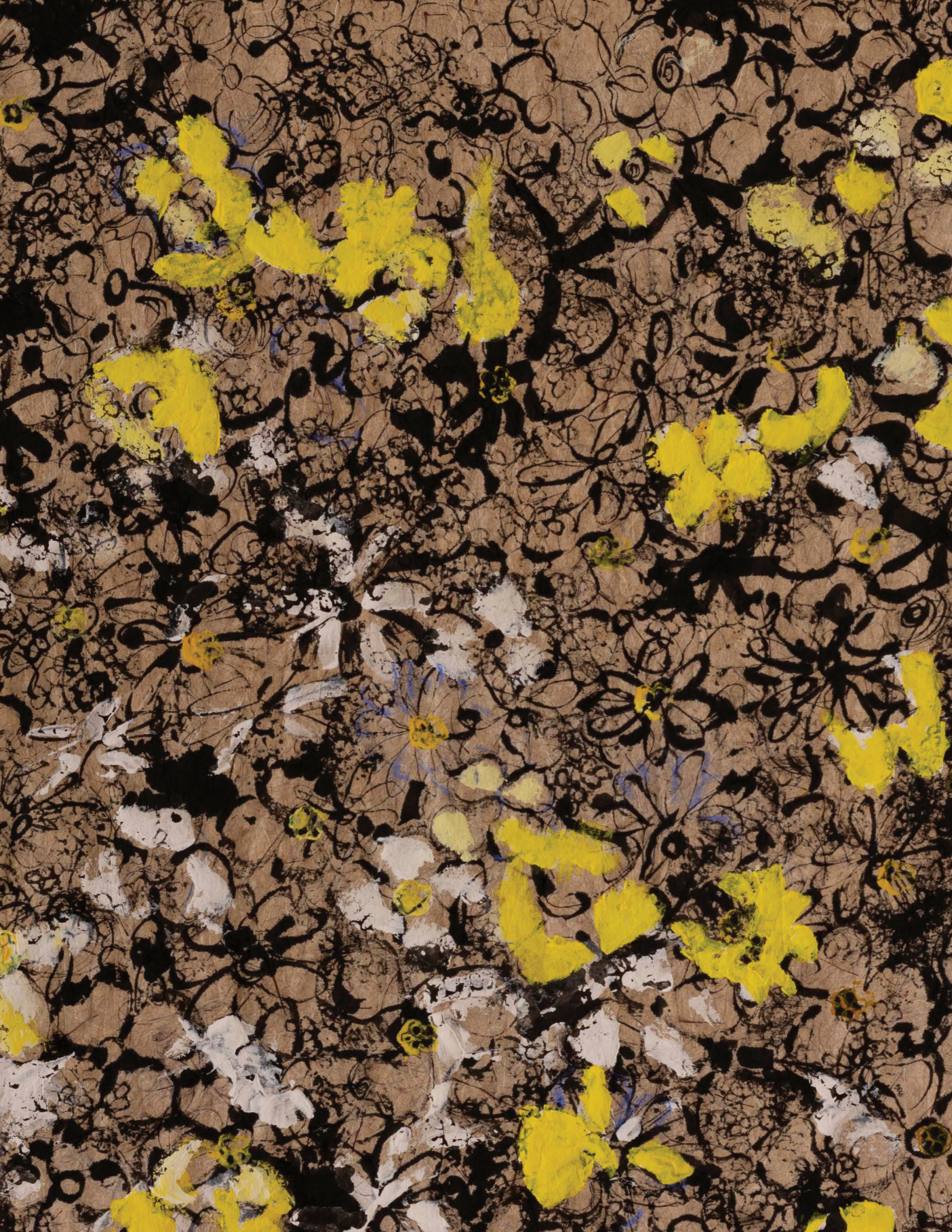
on my way out the door
most mornings. The tree that sways

by my friend's Brooklyn balcony.
The lanternflies:

whether they'll be back. The track
that skips on my father's worn record:

what a wonderfulwonderfulwonderful world.

*





MOLLY STURDEVANT

Molly Sturdevant's prose and poetry have appeared in *Orion Magazine*, *The Dark Mountain Project*, *Crab Creek Review*, *Poetry Northwest*, *About Place Journal*, and many other places. She is recognized as a WFM Union Scholar, and taught early modern philosophy for a decade before becoming a full-time writer and editor. She recently completed her first novel, which focuses on women in labor history, and is seeking representation.

NIGHT SWEATS

night sweats

A spoon scrapes a plate in my house, the oak in the floor a hundred years old a thousand planks and penny nails. Is this man made of rock who forgets to kiss on a bus I made a list of how my house sounds. Quiet – that’s the sound of his glass being emptied. Hiss – the expressway slithers. Silver – streetlamps slice my kitchen when I cannot sleep. I fascinate on the faucet – a long diamond. Ghost – it knows about the attic, the carpenter’s marks for apparent stairs, a doorknob lodged in the basement’s mortar. Summer is a flood, it takes out the washer, the water softener, it creeps at the cabinets and shelves. Normal is a sump pump and stink of mold. Debt is how we got here. A knife clinks the sink or am I too warm to sleep. Is high ground a place I can crawl to. How the night looks – vast.

*





NONFICTION

honeybee



FRANKIE CONCEPCION

Frankie Concepcion is a writer from the Philippines and Massachusetts. She is a graduate of the MFA at Arizona State University, and has received fellowships from Tin House, Sibling Rivalry Press and the Virginia G. Piper Center for Creative Writing. Her writing has been published in *Barzakh*, *StoryQuarterly*, *Joyland*, *HYPHEN*, and more. Her short story chapbook "Aftermath" is out now at Bottlecap Press.

ORIGIN STORIES

2024 HoneyBee Creative Nonfiction Prize Winner

origin stories

You imagine it like this:

You and your mother are standing in front of a mirror. You are both looking at your reflection as you brush your still-wet hair and as you push the bristles through your black curls, she counts out loud the number of strokes you have made: “One. Two. Three. All the way through. Four. Again. Again.”

You are wearing matching Tweety Bird nightshirts that both go down to your ankles. Or perhaps you are wearing the pink nightdress with the ruffled edges, and your mother, still dressed from the day, is waiting for you to finish getting ready for bed before she rejoins the rest of the adults downstairs. With each pass, your sleeve brushes against the raw skin of your upper arm, and you wince but do not dare stop. You do not want to anger your mother again. Instead, you splay your elbows wide so only the very tops of your shoulders prickle and burn.

Steam clouds the top of the mirror. Outside, you know the air is damp with the perspiration of pine and bamboo, and from this balcony at the top of the hill you are able to see the Manila skyline glimmering in the distance. You know that if you just open the window, you will be able to hear the sounds of crickets, frogs, and tuko: the speckled geckos that can often be heard singing their own name in the night.

But the window is closed, and the air conditioner hums loudly. Still, you can hear the voices of your new friends, Megan and Tony, in the other rooms. Earlier that evening, the three of you had made a game of seeing who could roll down a hill fastest: tucking your arms close to your bodies and letting gravity do its work, not knowing that each blade of grass was a sharp edge. When you stood, a thousand invisible cuts made themselves

known. Now your skin is still on fire, even after the hot shower your mother said would soothe it.

You picture them, your friends across the hall, laughing with their parents, wrapped in soft, warm towels. You imagine Megan’s mother rubbing lotion on her arms and legs, Tony playing with his Gameboy on the bed while his mother and father chat on the veranda.

“I just want you to learn how to take care of yourself,” your mother says. She is still counting. “Boys like your father can do whatever they want, look however they want. But not us girls. We have to be beautiful, always. Don’t you want to be beautiful?”

“I do,” you say. You will say anything, you think, to be forgiven.

Your parents met Megan and Tony’s parents at the Couples for Christ meetings your parish held every week in the church basement. Megan’s parents each worked at rival banks, while Tony’s parents were thinking of leaving their jobs to migrate to New Zealand in the coming year. Both Megan and Tony were close to your age, which is why today, at your mother’s invitation, they and their parents have all come to celebrate the Holy Week holiday at your father’s mountain estate: a sprawling landscape marked on all sides by a white picket fence, just a few hours drive from your home in Metro Manila. His family called it *La Veranda*. But you simply called it Antipolo, after the mountain city upon which it was built.

Your mother was always inviting strangers to your family vacations. Two years prior, you and your family had come to Antipolo with a handsome young neighbor and a woman your mother said had once repre-

origin stories

sented the Philippines in the Miss Earth pageant. The year after that, you celebrated with a couple and their two young sons, who had recently moved back to the Philippines after spending a decade in California. Always, within a year, your mother would lose interest in their company, or they would lose interest in your mother—you were never sure which. You taught yourself to enjoy their company while it lasted. You were still a child, but you were already learning not to get too attached to people.

Though it was your father's house, each time a new person came to visit, your mother would take them on a tour. Yesterday, when you'd arrived with Megan and Tony's parents, she'd gone through her usual routine: starting with a walk through the vast receiving area with its towering portraits of grandparents and great-grandparents, its walls of books and magazines lauding the business that your great-grandfather had built. She told them about the neighbors: one a former president, the other a businessman whose name could be found plastered all over the country. Finally, in front of your guests, she pointed you toward every picture that held your image. In most of them, you were small enough that you could not yet stand on your own two feet, young enough that you could not even remember where or when they had been taken.

"This is your inheritance," she'd said. You'd turned to your father to see if this was true, but by then he had disappeared into the kitchen or outside to sun himself in the grass, embarrassed by your mother's brazen display.

"Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two." Suddenly the bristles catch on a tangle of hair, and the wet handle pulls itself from your hands. With a clatter, it hits the edge of the

vanity and tumbles to the wooden floor. But before you can reach for it, you feel your mother's fingers dig into the flesh just above your elbow and, with her touch, the singing of the invisible cuts on your skin.

"Pick it up," she hisses, and though it would be easier to obey her if she let go, you say nothing. With one arm attached to your mother and the other reaching for the floor, you twist your body, catching the brush with your fingertips. Later, you will wonder if she had meant to hurt you on purpose, or if she'd forgotten your skin was still sensitive from that afternoon. After all, her grip is just tight enough to sting but not to leave a permanent mark others might see.

When you sit back down, brush in hand, she begins her counting anew. "Twenty-three. Twenty-four." You make sure to run the brush all the way from the roots to the damp ends of your hair, which fall down to your waist. You tell yourself that if you do this one thing well, then maybe she will forget you had made a mess of yourself earlier that day, maybe you can erase the image of your tangled hair and grass-stained clothes from her memory. "Twenty-five. Keep going, all the way to a hundred."

After a few brushes, her fingers eventually relax away from your arm. Now, in the mirror, you watch as she reaches for your face. You brace, but her knuckle only caresses your cheek, pushing a stray curl away from your nose. "You know who was beautiful? Julie Vega," she says. "She was my cousin, you know."

When you don't reply, she leans back in shock. She gasps. "You don't know Julie Vega? She was a famous actress in the eighties. A superstar. She must have been in dozens of movies and TV shows in her time. You

origin stories

have her nose. And her fair skin.”

As you continue brushing, your mother tells you how, at your age, Julie Vega had captivated the country with her talent. Not only could she act, winning multiple awards for her movie and TV roles at the age of ten but, by the time she was sixteen, she had also released her debut music album and was set to record a second. But Julie Vega, she said, had been a stage name. Born Julie Pearl Apostol Postigo, she had been your mother’s cousin on your grandmother’s side.

“Is she still an actress?” you ask. “Can I meet her?” You are happy to be compared to someone beautiful, but even happier that your mother seems to have forgotten that she is angry with you. You look in the mirror and try to separate your nose and skin from the rest of your face. As you try to transform your own reflection into that of a stranger, you wonder: who does your mother see? You, or someone else?

“No,” says your mother wistfully.

“Why not?”

“She died,” says your mother.

After your mother finished her tour and the guests had been allowed to settle into their rooms, you all reconvened at the kitchen for lunch, where the parents went over their plans for the weekend. You would all say the rosary every night, starting tonight—Maundy Thursday. Then, on both Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, you would drive into the city for Mass at the local parish church. After that, they had something special planned. There would be an egg hunt, your mother said, and some other games, and of course there would be chocolate.

But Easter Sunday was days away, and for now you three children would have to entertain yourselves. “Why don’t you show Megan and Tony the living room?” your mother had said. “You could put a movie on the big TV. You can turn on the aircon.”

You looked at your father, who had by then rejoined the group. He was sitting at the head of the table, and until then he had been chatting only with the adults, while you sat at the children’s table with your new friends. But when you locked eyes with him then, you knew that he was planning something mischievous.

“Why don’t we go on a tour?” he said.

“I’ve already taken them on a tour,” said your mother.

“I mean a real tour. There’s so much more beyond this house. We could go on a trek. I could show you the lake, the grotto. We could go exploring.”

“I’d like to see the lake,” said Tito Jim, Megan’s father.

“See,” said your father with a grin. “We’ll take the kids and be back by merienda.”

Led by your father, the pack of you walked away from the main house, off the brick driveway, and into the wilderness beyond. He walked you down to the man-made lake, where years earlier, he’d taught you how to fish for tilapia with rods made of bamboo. He showed you the pink eggs of the snails that clung to the carved rock edges of the lake and then took you all to the small, cave-like structure within which a statue of the Virgin Mary was supposedly nestled into the rock— but inside, when you raised your hands in front of your faces, darkness

origin stories

encased the outlines of your fingers like a glove.

“What was that?” Tito Jim said before the cave exploded with movement. Back out into the light you ran, as the air chittered and flapped around you. Mother Mary, you discovered, had been sharing her grotto with a family of bats.

You had seen most of this already, of course. But with your new friends, and your father as guide, the familiar landscape had taken on a new vibrance. Wherever you walked, there was a story to tell. Whatever you saw, there was a memory beneath, waiting to be unearthed.

After walking through a small vegetable garden and up a grassy, overgrown field, you skirted around the second house on the property, which was primarily used as a storage space, and which your father said was haunted.

“When you leave a house empty for too long,” he said, “things are bound to move in.”

Then you found a path that took you into the trees. From within the patch of pines, he pointed one out to you and said, “Look, there’s the one you planted.”

“I planted that?” You looked up. It seemed impossible that something so large could have been planted in your lifetime.

“Yes, don’t you remember? You and all your cousins planted one each.” But you didn’t remember your cousins, not well. They too had disappeared from your lives at that time, and over the years your relationship to your father’s family would continue to fluctuate, cousins and aunts and uncles and grandpar-

ents blinking in and out of your sphere.

“Is this really all going to be mine? Like mom says?” you said to your father.

“It’s ours. It belongs to our family,” he replied, and somehow even then you understood that he meant his family—his mother and father, his four siblings, and their children, who were your cousins. You did not yet know what this meant for you, a person who’s only tie to the family he described was standing in front of you. You did not yet have the language to describe what you knew intuitively was missing.

After a short rest in a small nipa hut that was built around an ancient mango tree (“Don’t forget to say tabi-tabi po,” said your father, as you entered one by one), it was almost time for merienda. The tree was at the top of a hill, from which you could see the main house below. Between the nipa hut and the house, the grass sloped at an angle sharp enough that should you walk down, you would have to lock your knees to avoid slipping all the way to the bottom.

“I wonder how fast you could make it down just on momentum,” your father said casually, but you knew him better than the others did. You knew it was a challenge.

By the time your father met you and your friends at the bottom of the hill, all three of you were covered in dirt, your tears carving pale streaks into your dust-brown faces. Searching for your mothers, you, Megan, and Tony flung yourselves into the house, where you found them in the dining room. But while the other mothers instantly began to coo and caress, wiping away their children’s tears with gentle hands, your own mother tugged at your collar, the knots in your hair and when she spoke, she did so

origin stories

through lips pulled thinly over teeth.

“Look at your *clothes*,” she hissed. “Look at your *hair*.” The words were for you, but between tears you saw that she was looking at your father. “You should have stayed inside like I told you to. Is this how you’re going to behave all weekend? How am I supposed to trust you? Or would you prefer to spend Easter Sunday in your room?”

But you could not answer her. You could only think of your burning arms, feel only the sting of each movement. It felt as if a colony of hungry ants had grown beneath your skin; when you scratched, they bit down harder.

Hearing your mother’s words, Tito Jim bent down and patted you awkwardly on the head. “It’s just some grass,” he said weakly. He told you not to worry, that it would wash off, that the fire in your skin was temporary. “I used to play in the grass all the time. Nothing some baby powder won’t fix.” But seeing your mother’s expression, he quickly backed away again. You looked around for your father to see if he would come and comfort you, but he was already gone.

Finally, as your mothers herded you into your rooms, your cries echoing off the walls of the house, you wondered if this was the last time you would see your new friends. You had accepted that, as your mother had decreed, you might spend the rest of the day in your room, alone. You only wished you knew why they were deserving of comfort and you were not, if only so you could avoid being punished again.

“This is what you get,” she said, as she walked you up the stairs. “This is what you get for not listening to me.”

You have just passed fifty strokes when your mother takes the brush from your hands. “You’re going too slow,” she says. “Here, let me do it.” With each swift stroke, you can feel her impatience building, the bristles digging harder and harder into your scalp.

“How did Julie Vega die?” you ask her. At this, the brush softens. You lean back and close your eyes. Now the repetitive motion feels almost loving, and you want to enjoy it while it lasts.

“Well,” says your mother, “She was beautiful, you see. And young. She was only sixteen when she died.”

Then your mother tells you about Julie Vega’s final role. For a movie anthology, Julie had been asked to play a possessed child, for a segment that later would be likened to *The Exorcist*. One day, as the film was wrapping up, Julie collapsed on set and had to be rushed to the hospital. She died days later. After her death, rumors began to spread that the house they’d been filming in had been haunted all along, home to an *engkanto*: an ancient and powerful forest spirit who could sometimes be seen in wild or abandoned places but primarily lived in a spirit realm, a realm just beyond the senses.

Insulted by the chanting of Latin prayers and the mockery they had made of the spirits, your mother said that the *engkanto* must have already been angry at the people who had invaded their space. So when they saw Julie —talented, beloved, charismatic Julie— it only made sense that they would want her for themselves.

“Sure,” she continues, “some people say she died of an auto-immune disease. Some say it was pneumonia. But me? I know the truth. Julie Vega died because she was beautiful.

origin stories

So beautiful that she was whisked away to live in the spirit realm forever.” After Julie’s death, she says, people even began to tell stories of a young, beautiful girl who would appear in the forest near the house, asking for help finding her way home. But as soon as the apparition reached the tree line, she would disappear.

“There,” says your mother, putting the brush down. You are certain she hasn’t reached a hundred strokes but you know better than to point that out. You wait until she places the brush on the vanity and steps away before standing from your chair.

Stepping away from the mirror, you turn to face your mother. “You could be like her, you know,” she says, touching your cheek once more. “You could look just like her, if you just take care of yourself. Will you promise?”

You pause, confused. You know your mother is telling you that Julie’s fate is something you should admire, and yet you don’t want to be like Julie. You don’t want to die, nor do you want to be kidnapped by a strange creature, forced to live in a strange land.

But you do want to please your mother. You want to prove to her that you can be good, good enough to spend the weekend with your new friends. So when she asks again, you look at her and you say, “I promise.”

You lie awake for the rest of the night thinking of Julie Vega and her fate. You think of the grotto, and the family of bats you had disturbed, unaware that they had made the cave their home. You think of the house at the top of the hill, empty and abandoned, except for the spirits that had crept inside. So many invisible dangers, so many rules you could break without even knowing it.

You touch your nose, your chin, and when you hear a creaking on the veranda outside, you wait for hours, watching the window, waiting to see if something will try to make its way inside, fear and desire swirling in you until you cannot tell them apart.

Later, you will think of Julie Vega each time your mother pulls you away from the playground to powder your nose, each time she books a hair appointment to iron your curls into submission. On your first visit to the dermatologist, as the doctor brings her hands to your face and your eyes fill with anticipatory tears, you will think of the steady rhythm of your mother’s brush in your hair, the sting of her touch above your elbow. And over a decade later, when your father dies and leaves you unmoored, uncertain of where to call home, you will think once again of your inheritance.

After his death, you will return to this day again and again. But memories, you will soon find, are not pristine recordings of events exactly as they happened. In the coming years, remembering will feel more like playing a game of telephone with a chain of unreliable narrators: each one with their own voice, all of them whispering in each other’s ears. And as these moments are told, forgotten, remembered, and retold again, you will begin to question the truth of these stories you have been telling yourself.

Eventually, you will recall the story of Julie Vega but not how or when it was told. You will remember the feeling of your mother’s hands in your hair, and then you will wonder if they were her hands at all, or if they were someone else’s and she was simply a figure in the room, a reflection in the mirror. And you will try, over and over, to recall Tito Jim’s exact words, but in the end, you will remember only that he had offered a softer,

origin stories

kinder voice.

*



KELSEY FERRELL

Kelsey Ferrell is a multi-medium creative from California. She holds a B.A. from UC Berkeley and is a second year MFA Candidate at UC Riverside. She has written and released a punk album, Trauma Portfolio, and four singles, under her artist name, Feral. Kelsey directed a tragicomic film about the feral Inland Empire donkey herds titled Donkumentary as recipient of the 2023 Gluck Fellowship for the Arts. She is the winner of UC Riverside's 2024 L.M. and Marcia McQuern Endowed Graduate Award in Nonfiction Writing. Kelsey performs stand up comedy and dreams of owning a cat one day. This is her first publication.

ELOISE

Waiting for the guy to arrive was always my least favorite part. I was leaning on the edge of a concrete wall in front of a coffee shop, one of the new ones in town. Ben was coming from “over the hill,” which is what we said about anyone who drove into Santa Cruz via Highway 17.

The last text had said: *I’m on my way now! Looks like it’ll be 45 minutes.* Now at minute 41, I felt self conscious with every car that drove past, knowing that any figure gazing through the windshield could be Ben. It had been many years since I’d enjoyed a date, so I felt that statistically, chances were this one with Ben would go well.

When we first started talking on Tinder, I’d been the one to turn the conversation suggestive, but it had been Ben who had asked me what special things turned me on.

Like a kink? I replied.

Yes, he messaged, *what could I add that would make this better for you?*

I kind of think I might have an impregnation kink, I responded.

I’m actually really into that too, he said.

He said he’d never told anyone about it before; I hadn’t either.

It’s a tough one to backpedal from if not taken well, he wrote during one of our late night conversations.

Haha, I know right? I replied.

To be clear, I absolutely do not want a kid, he texted.

Me neither, I said. And it was true, kind of.

There was only one person I’d wanted kids with: my first boyfriend, the only boyfriend I’d ever had, Theo.

“Do you want to have kids with me?” I had asked him repeatedly. “Someday,” he had always replied. This was maybe a lie, maybe not. It felt true, but with a fancy East Coast college picked out, he was already planning his future without me.

“Imagine seeing me holding a baby, and it’s ours,” I said to him. The way he looked at me was a little nervous, but he seemed to care about me enough to play along. “Would you help me take care of it?” I asked.

“Of course I would,” he said, “what do you think I’d do, leave you on your own?”

“I hope one day we live in a house together, and you come home and see me sitting in a rocking chair with my shirt undone feeding a little baby we made together,” I said. The house was already built in my mind, painted yellow.

“What do you think when you close your eyes and imagine that?” I said, gazing up at him from his mattress, my head propped against my arm.

“I’d be happy to see your boobs,” he said, turning away from his computer screen to smile at me.

“I could show you those now,” I said, “What about the rest of it?”

He looked off into the distance thoughtfully. “I guess the words I would use to describe that would be that it seems emotionally attractive.”

After our breakup, he came back to town in

the summer. We made plans to get lunch at the diner we had been regulars at back when we were together in high school, perhaps both under the delusion that we could be friends.

“You know how I was never certain about wanting to have kids?” he said to me.

“Yeah,” I remembered, stirring a cup of tomato soup.

“Well, I figured it out. I really, really want kids.”

I have no doubts that the love Theo and I shared was so deep it changed me on a chemical level; the oxytocin we cultivated together steadied my nervous system in a way that no amount of yoga or xanax ever could. Of course, I lost this when he left. And I wondered, later, if his admission that he wanted children now that he no longer had to picture me as their mother was the moment testosterone and cortisol began to overload every single cell in my body. It struck me as a kind of Shakespearean irony that after this conversation I developed polycystic ovarian syndrome, otherwise known as PCOS, otherwise known as the leading cause of infertility.

When the doctor said, “you’ll have to work with us closely when you decide you want to get pregnant,” I didn’t react. No one was in the waiting room to join me when I exited. I walked to the parking lot alone. I drove home alone. When I opened my front door, no one else was there. I laid in bed by myself and thought of the name I carried in the back of my head for a future daughter. *Eloise*.

I shifted my weight against the concrete wall and glanced at the coffee shop behind me, then at my phone.

Let me know when you park, I typed, *I’m wearing a blue skirt*. Ben replied moments later. *I just did! I’m wearing salmon colored pants*. I suppressed the cringe that *salmon colored pants* brought forth. He rounded the corner moments later and we hugged. I realized it had been months since anyone had hugged me.

“I thought you might not recognize me with a shirt on,” I joked.

“I can still tell your boobs are nice even when they’re covered,” he laughed.

I was grateful for a compliment on my appearance. The telltale signs of PCOS were acne, hair loss from the scalp, facial hair growth, and weight gain—50 pounds, in my case. “In case you’re wondering why I’m so pretty,” I used to say when explaining it to people.

Ben had seen my naked photos though—recent ones too, not just *Kelsey’s Greatest Hits*—so I knew he knew what I looked like, and he wanted to fuck me. That’s why he was there.

“How’s packing going?” I asked. “Are you bringing fly fishing gear?”

We were both on the precipice of moving out of our parents’ houses. We shared the shame of lingering in our childhood bedrooms for an intolerably long period after getting our degrees. I was going to Los Angeles, and he was going to Alaska.

“I’m not homesteading,” he laughed.

He bought a sandwich and I bought a salad; I nearly always did that, because when I was younger I read *The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants*, wherein a character mentioned that a salad was the best meal to order on a first date.

“Do you want to eat at the beach?” I suggested. Though as a local I didn’t go there too often, I knew people from over the hill loved the beach. “Natural Bridges is really close.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’ll drive. I know that beach.”

It was a quick drive; we could see the glimmering ocean from where we were before he even started the car. The road took us past my old school and I gazed at its empty front lawn.

There was a group of seniors that had always eaten lunch at the edge of that lawn. When I was 13 I wanted nothing more than to be like them; they had a celebrity status earned by their car keys and ability to kiss each other without blushing. The biggest event of eighth grade had nothing to do with any of us eighth graders: two of the seniors had an unexpected pregnancy that provided endless struggle for the two of them and endless entertainment for my friends and me. Lunchtimes were spent watching Hailey and John eat together on the grass or fight in the parking lot. At the end of the first semester, right before the baby was born, I watched across the lawn as John rubbed Hailey’s stomach for a while. At some point he slid his hand up and started rubbing her boobs instead. Hailey laughed, John smiled just for her, and across the lawn my heart ached in a way I’d never felt before. Of course, now, staring at the lawn, the memory was replaced by the knowledge that Hailey and John weren’t together anymore; they hadn’t been in years.

“There’s usually parking down this street,” I said, pointing Ben away from West Cliff Drive and down Swanton Boulevard. “Don’t enter the gate or you’ll have to pay.”

He parallel parked without difficulty and we exited the vehicle to walk to the gate, where the cement turned to sand.

“Look at the bridges; did you know there used to be three?” I asked.

We looked out at the ocean where the lone stone arch stood, a result of millions of years of geology, the only one still standing after storms collapsed the others.

Ben was charming and our banter flowed as easily in person as it had over text. He had been my favorite recent Tinder match; he wrote the longest paragraphs and talked the most about going down on me.

Theo was the only reason I even knew there was such a thing as women receiving oral sex. When my high school friends talked about sex, they’d usually whine that they had given some guy a blowjob, and now some other girl was giving him blowjobs, and now they felt sad. I knew more girls who had had abortions than girls who had experienced cunnilingus. But the day I agreed to try it, Theo passionately dedicated himself to the task for an hour, and at the end I shrieked in newfound ecstasy. I spent the rest of high school walking around feeling very sophisticated knowing my boyfriend was better than everyone else’s.

When I got to college, I was certain that when I slept with someone new, they could make me feel the same way. But each guy I slept with at best left me baffled as to how such similar mechanics could be so unsatisfying. At worst, they left me downright

traumatized. Theo had always paused and asked, “Are you ready?” before he entered me. Everyone else just assumed I was ready. Slowly my dating life turned into sleeping with people on the off chance it might be fun, as a way to mimic something I’d once loved. Like a chess master who had retired, I still played an occasional game with someone I knew was no match for me.

The wind on the beach had picked up, and I had finished my salad.

I stared at Ben’s mouth while he chewed.

“I’m having a great time,” I said to Ben, “and I think we could have an even better time in the hotel room you booked.”

He grinned immediately.

“Let’s go,” he said.

In the car ride, Ben mentioned again that he was tested a week ago. He texted this the night before, but I thought it was hot that he was extra conscientious.

“Everything was fine, I’m clean,” he said.

“Me too,” I said.

“So, do you want to use a condom today or do you want to go without?” he asked. “I mean, it turns me on to actually cum inside you, of course. But I brought some and understand if you want to use one. We can just pretend.”

“I think we’ll be fine without one,” I said, surprising myself. “The IUD is super effective. They say it’s more effective than getting your tubes tied.” *Besides, I’m probably in-*

fertile.

I’d gotten the IUD after being with Theo for five months. I was still a virgin when I went to the clinic— the speculum did the honors of popping my cherry. Because Theo had flown to Istanbul for vacation, I went to the clinic with a friend.

The pain when my cervix opened was so immense that I fainted, woke up, threw up violently, and then lost consciousness again. When I woke up the second time, my friend told me I’d been out for 45 minutes.

When I left the clinic I video chatted with Theo.

“The doctor said that the only other time a cervix dilates is during childbirth,” I explained to him. “That’s why it’s so painful.”

I waited for his response, but he had fallen asleep on-screen. There’s a ten-hour time difference between California and Turkey. It was late. He was tired.

The queen-sized bed at the Ramada Inn had a sizable stack of pillows atop it, and the fabric of the duvet had a luxurious sheen under the soft lamplight. The room faintly smelled of lemon and the floors were so unscuffed they had to have been recently installed.

I took a seat on the bed and cocked my head at Ben, who was still standing. “Did you think I looked hot when you first saw me today?”

“Yes, I was hoping you wouldn’t notice how hard I was staring,” he said.

“Do you want to come kiss me?” I asked.

He was a good kisser, which surprised me. Usually I hated kissing the guys I slept with. I'd only ever liked kissing Theo. It just felt wrong with everyone else. But Ben felt the closest to right. With other guys, I usually stopped the kissing after a few seconds and asked them to do something else—anything else—as long as it wasn't kissing. But I let Ben kiss me for a really long time.

"Can I kiss you somewhere else?" he asked.

He was really good at kissing somewhere else. He was so good at it that I remembered how much I missed it the past six years. I wondered if this was going to be the pattern of rarity for the rest of my life: getting eaten out by someone who actually knows how only once a decade.

"That was so fucking hot," he said 45 minutes later. "Can I do it again?"

Okay, *twice* a decade.

When I finished he raised his head and told me how good I tasted. He kissed me. He asked me if I could taste it on him. We both smiled when I said yes.

"I can't wait any longer," he said. "I want to be inside you. Do you want me to get a condom or are you still okay with not using one?"

"We don't need to use one," I said, laying back with my legs closed.

He leaned forward towards my body.

"Tell me what you want," I said to Ben.

"I want to be the one you let finish inside you."

"Tell me it has to be me," I demanded.

"It has to be you," he affirmed, pressing his skin to mine.

"I'm ready," I said quickly, as he leaned in.

"God, you feel good," he said. "I'm going to fuck you so hard that there's no way you don't get pregnant."

"You want to be the one to do that to me?" I asked.

"I'll feel so powerful knowing that I did that to you," he said.

"Then fucking do it to me," I said.

His breath went heavy as he came, and he stayed inside me until I told him my hips hurt.

"I'm cold," I told him as he finally pulled out and laid next to me.

"Come here, I'll hold you," he said, opening his arms. I ducked into his embrace and felt the warmth of his bare skin. He pulled up the blanket and ran his warm hands against my back. He was a lot taller than me, and I felt comforted and protected leaning my head against his chest. I used to ask guys to tell me I was safe when they were inside me.

"Just tell me I'm safe with you," I'd say.

"Um, you're safe?" they'd say.

"With you," I'd add.

They didn't like telling me that. I was pretty sure it made me look really pathetic so I stopped asking.

Ben reached over me with one arm to check his phone.

“Dude, we’ve been here six hours,” he said.

“I can’t believe you spent half of it eating me out,” I said.

“Of course I did, that’s the best part,” he said.

“It is?” I asked. It was fun to make him say it over and over. Besides, I didn’t know how many years would pass before I’d get to hear it again.

“It’s seriously my favorite,” he said.

He started putting his clothes on.

“Is it getting dark outside?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “I gotta get back home. But don’t worry, I’ll drop you off at your car.”

He drove me back to where I was parked by the coffee shop. It was now closed, dark with chairs overturned on the tables. He was nice enough to get out of his car and walk a few yards to mine to say goodbye.

“That was really fun,” he said.

“Tell me if you’re ever in LA,” I said.

“I will,” he said.

“I hope you mean it,” I said.

“I would never pass up the chance to taste you again,” he said, and he kissed me goodbye, leaving a hint of just that to linger on my lips.

The sky got darker and darker as I traveled

down the highway. When I reached my parent’s driveway, I looked up at the stars as I slowly exited my car, comforted that they’d been blinking down at me my whole life and sad that I was going to lose them in the light pollution of Los Angeles.

When I opened the front door, the dog barked and my parents glanced up from the television. As usual, my dad sat on the couch and my mom sat on the floor. I never saw them both on the couch at the same time, not even at opposite ends.

“You’ve been gone all day,” my dad said.

“Yeah, I was hanging out with friends,” I lied.

I reheated leftovers and ate them in the kitchen. There in the dark, I tried to think about whether a life with Ben seemed desirable, if I could slip into that fantasy. I wanted to want him more than Theo, to become enamored with a different impossibility. But my visions of him were strangely ersatz, the difference between the two of them troublesome rather than refreshing.

“But wouldn’t it be possible to love someone else, even if it were different?” said my therapist. Judy, the one I had in college.

“If it’s different, then it’s no longer love. Being different makes it something else.”

Judy looked a little disappointed. We’d been having this conversation twice a week for three years and she’d never been able to make me feel any hope.

“Being without him feels like when you have a really long day and you just want to go home,” I said. “You know how that feels?”

“Yes,” said Judy.

“I have that day everyday,” I said. “But I can never go home.”

In the dark kitchen, I pressed my fork against a piece of pasta. In my mind, I’d already opened the door to the yellow house in my head. I went there often, knew it well. I saw Theo in the kitchen, making us dinner. I raised more pasta to my mouth and imagined it fresher and hotter, made by him. My mom walked into the kitchen.

“Are you really going to eat all of that?” she said.

“I had salad for lunch,” I said truthfully.

I watched her walk back to the living room to sit on the carpet again, where she did sit-ups as the TV flickered.

I drove down to Los Angeles at the end of May.

Moving south was supposed to mean finally feeling fulfilled: my first grown up job, a place where I could pursue my dreams, a queen-sized bed. But I got fired from my job as a legal assistant after a few months. My blood work got worse; I was at risk for diabetes. “50 percent of women with PCOS get diabetes by the time they’re 40,” said the doctor. My skin erupted in eczema. I didn’t look anything like my dating app photos.

I got hired at a cat cafe in West Hollywood. When someone came by to collect a cat they had adopted, I always picked up the cat and held them to my face. “You’ve had a very long day, and it’s time to go home,” I’d whisper.

My time in the city was punctuated by doctor’s appointments. I was touched often, but only by latex gloves. The little black dots on my ovaries frightened me when I saw them on the ultrasound. They looked like boba pearls spilled inside my body. Every single one was an egg that would never mature. As I counted past twelve on the screen, I realized I had lost more than a full year’s worth of fertility.

My shifts at the cat cafe got harder to bear as I grew attached to an orange and white cat named Poppies whom I could not afford to adopt on my minimum wage salary. I wasn’t working the day he got adopted. I’d whittled my dreams of companionship all the way down to delivering a whisper, and even that was out of reach.

I left Los Angeles after exactly one year to go to graduate school, landing in yet another new city for yet another fresh start. Two weeks in, I lay sweating under my ceiling fan in the desert heat, too hot to do anything but look at my phone. When I scrolled past a meme about hotel sex, I decided to send it to Ben. He replied right away. The haha reaction. *Good memories*, he said. *How are you?*

Good, I said. *I got into my first choice grad school, the first quarter just started.*

What! That’s awesome! I’m so excited for you.

How’s Alaska?

It’s beautiful. He sent some photos of the Northern Lights. There was a girl in one of them, under the arm of a guy. The lighting on the back of their heads was dim but he looked tall like Ben. I was pretty sure this was sent to gently inform me he was seeing

eloise

someone. I was glad I could see so little of her in the image that I couldn't compare our bodies.

I stared at the green beams in the sky of his photo, thinking about how our night together was just as evanescent. *I hope you like it up there. Enjoy the last of the sunlight!*

Let me know if you want to text at night sometime ;), he said.

I pressed the question mark reaction for the photo with the couple in it.

Those are my friends!!! I'm not in that photo! he said.

Hahaha, okay! Yeah I'd love to text you at night. I still think about that day in the hotel, I confessed.

I still look at our old messages sometimes and touch myself to the memory, he said. *I've never had the guts to bring up that kink with any other girl.*

You should have texted me for new messages, I responded.

When do you ovulate? he said.

I hesitated for a moment.

Send me a screenshot of the app that tracks it. I wanna know what date.

Haha are you serious? A screenshot? I typed back.

That or a photo of your beautiful body. Either one would be hot.

I scrolled through *Kelsey's Greatest Hits* and sent him a photo.

He heart reacted.

October 15th, I added.

I'll remember.

When the night came, I looked up the local animal shelter website while I waited, gazing at pictures of cats. I paused at each one: fat, orange, fluffy, gray. With each one I looked at, I wondered if the name *Eloise* fit. The sky continued to darken. There was only a one-hour time difference between California and Alaska. But it was getting late. I was getting tired. I stared at the time right up until 11:59 pm. But I never heard from Ben again, and *Eloise* just doesn't seem to work for a cat.

*



FLASH NONFICTION



ANNE FALKOWSKI

Anne Falkowski's work is upcoming or has been published in *Hippocampus*, *Pithead Chapel*, *The Rumpus*, *Solstice Review*, *Hunger Magazine*, *The Coachella Review*, *Change Seven*, and others. She has been nominated multiple times for Best of the Net. In 2023, her writing placed in Solstice Fiction Literary Prize, Frank Demott Literary Prize., and Writers Digest Personal Essay Contest. In 2024, she placed first in the Oxford Flash Fiction Prize. website AnneFalkowski.net.

HOW TO BE MADE BY MEN, 1981

how to be made by men, 1981

Become a teenage girl. Date a boy, too old for you, with a lion painted on the side of his van. Make sure the boy sells weed and is stoned all the time. Kneel in your denim mini skirt in the back of his van. Let the brown shag carpet snag your nylon-covered knees. In the haze of cigarette smoke and blunts, listen to Frank Zappa and pretend to like it. Really like it. *Dinah Moe Hum. I don't mind that she called me a bum, but I knew right away she was really gonna cum (so I got down to it).* Have no preference for your own music. When asked what you want to listen to, say you don't know. Keep it to yourself that you suspect the lyrics to Dinah Mo Hum are fake, nothing more than Frank's fantasy. Know your preference for getting fucked up. Prefer booze. One hundred proof anything. The boy with the van has the same golden eyes and curly mane as the lion. Focus on the smoothness of the bottle in your hands, the warmth as Smirn-off glides down your throat and laps your belly. Feel the softening of your brain. Notice how weed makes your synapses think they're fucking. Forget it's cold outside and you should have worn a coat like your mother said. Convince yourself that Frank Zappa is a musical god. Music made for men by men. When the boy in the van with the lion painted on it gets on top, make sure to move in ways and make sounds in ways so he knows he did that thing, made you hum. When you get home, let yourself secretly in the door and sit in front of your mirror. The Bible says Eve was made from Adam's rib. You don't believe in God. You do believe in lions. They don't chase their prey but wait for them. You wonder if they discard the weaker ones, the ones that stink like rotten meat, the ones that don't make them hum. Now all your efforts will go into not being discarded. Sit in front of your mirror, glide a cotton ball soaked in baby oil over and under your eyelids. Watch the dark smudges

come off. Accept you want to be made by men. Be pleased with what you see.

*



FICTION

honeybee



**JAIME
GILL**

Jaime Gill is a British exile living and working in Cambodia. His short stories have been published by *Litro*, *The Phare*, *Fiction Attic*, *Exposition Review*, *Literally Stories*, *Voidspace*, and more. Several have won or been finalists for awards including the Bridport Prize, The Masters Review Prize, the Exeter Short Story Competition, Flash405, The Bath Short Story Award and Plaza Prizes. He consults for non-profits across South East Asia while working haphazardly on a novel, script, and far too many stories.

He can be found at jaimegill.com, twitter.com/jaimegill, or instagram.com/mr-jaimegill.

THINGS TO TALK TO JIM ABOUT

2024 HoneyBee Fiction Prize Winner

things to talk to jim about

"I hate you most of the time," my dying mother says, sitting stiffly upright in her hospital bed.

Well, there it is. Said out loud at last.

"I know, Mam."

She looks disappointed. Perhaps she'd expected that to be a stab to the heart, but she's never been as good at hiding her feelings as she thinks.

"And don't go thinking this is the morphine talking; it isn't. This is me."

"I know, Mam."

When I've held her gaze long enough for her to know I heard and understood, I check the clock behind her.

Thirty-eight minutes left.

"You know, sometimes I think it might have been kinder if you'd killed me too."

That one does hurt. Not quite a stab to the heart but a solid punch to the chest. But I don't let the pain show, an old boxing trick. I've spent weeks working out what she might say today and how I'd reply, even wondered if she might say something like this. I've never quite believed her all these years when she's tried to make her little life sound happy. She chattered perkily about monthly Sunday roasts with her co-workers and babysitting for her niece's kids, the grandchildren she'd never have. But her eyes never came alive.

Might it have been better if she'd died? Could that be true? I file that under *things to talk to Jim about*.

"I suppose you want to go now."

"Do you want me to go?"

"No," she says, bravado draining away. "You're still my son, I can't change that. There's other stuff I want to talk about. And I worry about you. Isn't that strange? I don't like thinking of you all alone when I'm gone."

I could tell her she needn't worry, I won't be alone. It's true that when she dies, I'll have no living relatives, or none who'll speak to me. But there are other families than the ones we're born into. I have a prison family and a sobriety family now. Not the kind of families who sit down to have portraits taken together, but still real.

But I don't say any of this. She probably doesn't think I deserve people who care about me. She's probably right.

Our eyes meet across three meters of air that might as well be a universe. An old, sleeping memory stirs. When we were still a family, we'd sometimes hold staring contests over dinner. Kelly was the champion, which annoyed me, given I was seven years older. Kelly had the willpower of a mule, until she was broken. But we'd abandoned the staring game years before that.

This isn't a game, though. Nobody can win here.

I break the silence with a joke, veering off my own script. "So, no small talk today, then?"

"Small talk can bugger off. We've been doing that for thirteen years. Let's talk properly. It's probably our last chance."

I look across at Shaun, improbably huge on

things to talk to jim about

his tiny stool by the door. He's scrolling his phone or pretending to, as if he can't hear us or we're boring him. He's one of the better screws – it was good of the Governor to make him my guard today. There are perks to being a model prisoner, even if the other cons give me shit. The hospital's been good, too, sorting out this private room for the visit. Did Mam tell them what she wanted to talk about?

"Okay, Mam. Ask anything you like. But I don't think I have the answers you want." That's from the script.

She hesitates. I think she's also rehearsed this conversation, but expected me to play a different part. Perhaps she thought I'd get angry. Understandable. I used to be combustible as spilt petrol, any careless word a match that might set me alight. It's taken years to learn self-control, and my grip's still shaky.

"You know, now I'm on morphine, I think I understand drugs better. They're better than I'd imagined. When they dose me up, it's not just about stopping the pain. It's more than that. Even stuck in this bed, I feel more...powerful. Like the outside world doesn't matter that much. Is that how it felt for you when you did those things?"

I nearly say I haven't touched drugs in ten years and don't really remember, but I test that thought. That's another thing I've learned. I am not to be trusted, least of all by myself. My brain is a cowardly creature and will contort itself into any shape to make life less painful. If that means lying to me, it won't hesitate. That's why Jim says I need to examine my thoughts, pick them up like stones to check they're solid and not hollow. Doing this now, I realize I don't want to remember – but that doesn't mean I can't.

I imagine myself young again. I've spent a third of my life in prison, almost all the years I can really remember. My memories of the world without walls are thin and unreal, like trying to recall a recurring dream I haven't had in a long time. I picture the Bigg Market in Newcastle, that intoxicating, poisonous oasis of neon and noise in the heart of the old city. I remember prowling those streets with the boys on Friday nights, blood full of stimulants and heart full of appetite, always looking for a fuck, fight, or both.

"Well, they weren't the same kind of drugs, Mam, but yeah, I know what you mean. I felt stronger when I was off my head."

"So we've finally got something in common. Maybe I should have taken up drugs years ago." Mam's laugh is brittle and bitter.

Have I met this woman before? This isn't the mother who brought me up, that busy blur of sweet fuss and worry. And she isn't the fidgety, artificially cheerful woman who has visited me inside every month, chattering about exactly nothing and visibly relieved when the hour was up. This woman is harder and sharper-edged. Has she always been there, underneath? When I took her call three weeks ago, I heard it in her voice – the cancer had changed something in her, at a deeper level than mutating cells.

"But this is the thing," Mam says, proceeding to her point like a prosecutor. "I'm still me, even when I'm full of morphine. It doesn't change who I am inside."

I know where she's going but wait. It's important she says it.

"I always tried to believe it wasn't you who did it. I told myself there was a demon inside you. But that's not true, is it? It was you,

things to talk to jim about

wasn't it?"

We've never talked about this since I got clean. Years and years of talking about anything but this. "Yes, Mam. It was me. It was my fault."

"Oh, bugger off. You always want so much credit for confessing, but I don't care about that anymore. I want to know *why*. And I don't believe you don't remember anything, I just don't. You must have some clue." Her eyes gleam. Don't cry, Mam, please don't cry. "I deserve to know."

"I can't help you, Mam." Probably true. "I don't remember." Total lie.

The twelve steps tell us addicts we have to be truthful, and that secrets are our worst enemies. We must especially be honest with those we've harmed and make amends to them. God knows I've harmed Mam; it's hard to imagine how I could possibly have harmed anyone more. But there is an exception to the obligatory truth-telling. Isn't there always? *Except when to do so would injure them or others.*

And the truth would injure Mam. If cancer wasn't already killing her, the truth would.

But yes, Mam, I do remember.

#

It was late, after the pubs shut. I didn't live at home anymore; I'd left that shithole town for a well-paid job in real estate in Newcastle. But I sometimes went back to get pissed with old boxing buddies and often passed out on the family sofa rather than catch an expensive taxi back to the city.

Mam was working the late shift that night.

As I let myself in and slung up my jacket in the hallway, Dad crept down the stairs behind my back. He forgot the mirror. I could see his reflection – half-unbuttoned shirt, frightened rabbit expression.

For a moment I stood paralyzed, as if lightning had struck me. Then I bounded up the stairs to Kelly's room, threw her door open, and saw. She didn't say a word, didn't have to.

Yes, I was drunk and on speed. Yes, I was in a hurricane of red-roaring rage as I ran back down. But there was also a part of me that kept a strange, cool clarity. Like an inner me watching from the eye of the storm.

Dad was pouring himself a whisky in the kitchen, but jerked round when I stormed through.

"She's lying." He didn't even wait to hear what Kelly might have said before denying it.

I ran at him and threw a hard right into his face. I'd been boxing since I was a scrawny 13-year-old desperate to know how to defend myself. By 15, I'd realized fighting made me feel better – then others needed to defend themselves from me. So when I threw that punch, put all my shoulder and weight into it, I knew what damage it would do. My fist smashed Dad's nose flat like it was plasticine, cracking his glasses back onto his face hard enough to shatter a lens and gash a cheek.

He crumpled to the floor and spluttered through blood. Maybe that could have been the end, but he looked up with big pleading eyes and said it again: "She's lying."

And that was that.

things to talk to jim about

That inner me sat in the eye of the storm, observing myself slamming fist after fist into his face. I remember thinking I could kill him. I knew that would break our family, but wasn't that already true and wasn't that his fault? Everything had to end that night, one way or another. It had all gone on too long.

I was dimly aware of Kelly coming down, dressed now, crying and grabbing my shoulder. I shrugged her off, sent her flying against the fridge. I heard her call the police, but it was just lawn furniture blowing around – nothing to a hurricane.

Dad was still alive when two officers dragged me off him, blood bubbles blowing between his shattered teeth.

The ambulance arrived five minutes later – too late.

#

“You *must* have some idea why.”

Mam's really crying now. I've retreated into that calm place inside the eye of the storm. I won't cry. I won't make today about me. That's the promise I've made to myself ever since this visit was authorized. Today's just for her.

“I'm sorry, Mam. I really want to help. I just don't remember.”

Which is what I told the police, and the lawyers and the judge. Medical experts backed me up, saying the alcohol and amphetamines in my blood were more than enough to have pushed me into blackout. The prosecutor countered that I'd been drinking and drugging for years, and my tolerance would be higher. “And look at the size of him,” he

said to the jury, and they did.

Given previous assault charges, it wasn't surprising I got close to the maximum sentence. I didn't care. The only reason I'd pleaded diminished responsibility was because Mam begged me to. I wanted to disappear, and death wasn't an option, so prison seemed the next best bet.

I've only ever told two people the truth about that night: Jim and Kelly.

I felt like I was betraying Kelly, shaming her, when I told Jim. But I knew he'd never tell a soul. That was one of the first promises he made to me, as long as I promised to tell him everything.

Kelly won't tell, either. I talked to her at night sometimes, in those first years inside. Only in my head, though. She'd lived one day longer than Dad. The next day, while Mam was at the police station finding out what was happening to me, Kelly found the pills Mam kept for when her shifts swapped and her sleep got scrambled. Kelly took the lot. Fourteen years old.

I didn't see that coming. I'd thought I was protecting her.

When a cellmate offered me smack later that week, I said yes. I'd always looked down on smackheads as losers with a death wish. That seemed laughable now. I was a loser and I did wish for death. If it hadn't been for Mam, I'd have made it happen. But I couldn't after Kelly.

The next few years and all the savings I'd been so proud of were swallowed in a heroin haze. The trial, the sentencing, the transfer to maximum security – I don't remember much. The only lucky thing that happened

things to talk to jim about

to me in my whole life was being put in a cell with Jim three years later. Jim had found sobriety, the twelve steps, and God in prison, and was determined to recruit me for all three. He succeeded with the first two, eventually.

Mam's pushed herself upright, no more tears. Her mouth opens but stays stuck, like we're in some shitty soap opera and someone hit pause.

"What, Mam?"

She chokes the words out.

"Did he do something to you? Something you're not telling?"

I stay as still as I can, try not to let one muscle in my face move.

The one question I didn't think she'd ask. She did ask it once, long ago, and I said no. In all these years since, she's never expressed a word of doubt about him. She'd worshiped Dad. That's what my aunts always said. "She worships that man."

"I dunno what you mean, Mam."

She stares into my eyes as if she might find truth in there. It's such a lie, that the eyes are the windows to the soul. Dad had lovely eyes. Big and brown, like a Labrador. And he was famously kind. Always had time for us kids, never pissed away his weekends watching football in pubs. We were a good family, that's what people said: well-raised, well-educated.

"It might help me to know it wasn't all your fault," Mam says quietly. "I don't want to hate you when I die. I want to understand."

I don't fucking know what to do. I am not fucking prepared for this.

"Mam, I'm sorry, but I really need the loo. I can't think properly. Shaun, can you take me?"

He rises so quickly, I know he's listened to every word.

In the bathroom, I slump against the wall and stare at scarred, trembling knuckles. I want to call Jim but even Shaun would never let me use his phone in private. A hurricane of fear roars around me.

"Okay in there?" Shaun calls.

"Sorry, just finishing."

I splash my face with cold water and look up into a mirror that's just like the one in my cellblock: same oblong shape, same cracked edges, same weirdly grey reflection. Does the Government order these things in bulk? I imagine thousands of them across Britain, making everyone who already feels like shit – the dying, the addicts, the disabled – feel one shade of shit worse.

I see eyes that are the spitting image of Dad's. I've had them all my life. I had them that first night Dad came to my room while I was still loose-limbed with sleep, when he slid my boxer shorts down while whispering "Be quiet, you're just dreaming." But you don't hurt like that in dreams.

I never told Jim about that, only about Kelly.

I'd never thought Dad would do it to her. I'd got this idea that if it was little boys he was really into, a girl would be safe. I've read enough books since to know how stupid that

things to talk to jim about

was. Or maybe I'd got myself out and didn't want to think about the people I'd left behind. Maybe. My brain, the liar.

I turn from my reflection. Mam might hate me, but I hated me first.

When I first pretended not to remember that night, I told myself I was protecting Kelly. After Kelly died, I told myself I was protecting Mam. How could the truth help her, with Kelly and Dad dead and me in prison? Why destroy all her memories of our family and make her think she'd failed me and Kelly? Better that I be the monster.

But Mam just said she wants the truth. She probably can't imagine what that means, but she said it.

Shaun assesses me warily when I step out, then escorts me back. Mam watches me suspiciously as I sit.

"I'm sorry." I had something else to say but it dies in my mouth.

"Well? Did he do something?"

"No, Mam. I don't remember. I just know it was my fault."

She sags. I can't read the expression on this stranger's face. Doubt? Relief? Disappointment? Maybe she's accepting she really will die hating me. But whatever that expression means, it's better than the one she'd wear if I told her the truth.

I'm doing the right thing for her.

During the silence that follows, I examine that thought. I pick it up like a stone, then look underneath. There are dark wriggling things there because, yes, it's true, but it's

hiding other truths.

I've always told myself I kept these secrets to protect Kelly and Mam. But if that were really true, then I'd start telling people everything that happened as soon as Mam's dead. Starting with Jim.

But I know I won't.

I still can't bear the shame of anyone seeing that puny, crying little boy I used to be.

It's me I'm protecting. It's always been me.

*





OLIVIA TORRES

Olivia Torres (she/her) is a queer, ex-fundamentalist, biracial fangirl who hails from a small town in western Massachusetts where the potholes in the roads are so large they have now developed sentience. She received her bachelor's in English from and works at Westfield State University as the Marketing Copywriter. Her work has appeared in journals such as the *Merrimack Review*, *Lucky Jefferson*, *Dandelion Review*, *Apricity Press*, and *SWIMM*, among others. In her spare time, she enjoys gaming, avoiding vegetables, and playing eye-tag with the moon.

ECHOCARDIOGRAM

echocardiogram

By now, a bitch was used to hospital gowns, spending many a night cloaked inside their pastel-blue arms. The gowns weren't exceptional huggers, always leaving my ass cold and exposed to the sterile hallway air. By now, a bitch knew to double up and wear two of them, forwards and backward, because the ties—the rough, little strings, protected my honor better than the gown in its entirety. A bitch also knew that a zipper would make more sense.

The cardiac wing was an infinitely more peaceful place than The Ward, a modern ghost town decorated with old magazines and machinery bigger than John Cena. My mother and I shuffled into a dark antechamber where the technician was going to link my heart to their echocardiogram monitor. While I have historically had a fast heart rate, recent excursions to the gym always ended with me kneeling on the ground, two fingers pressed against my carotid as I watched the numbers sprint past 200. I told my mother that my heart was broken despite not really believing that I had one.

“How do we really know?” I had once asked her, clocking the expression on her face. *Shock. Recognition. Acceptance.*

Her response was a simple ribbon dancing in the air between us. “Because, Liv,” she’d said. “You very clearly have a body, therefore you must have a heart. Right?”

I had proceeded to gaze down at my navel, where I imagined... nothing. Nothing inside the empty cavity beneath my belly button, because how was I supposed to believe that fifteen feet of intestines just hang out inside my stomach when I had never seen them? How could anyone be stuffed with any amount of organs when there was a vibrating, crushing *emptiness* where our science

books said blood and flesh and tissue should be?

Mom, knowingly, had dropped the subject.

The technician, a forty-something, mousy-haired woman, attached the electrodes to my chest with a polite apathy I was intimately familiar with. I sat, unmoving, exchanging her apathy with my own while intermittently making eye contact with my mother.

“Are you doing all right?” the technician asked, eyes directed away from my face.

I nodded. The testing room was dark and comfortable, the outline of the John Cena-big machines looming next to where I perched on the crinkly-papered table. The sound of that paper was a song on the CD soundtrack of the past few years of my life.

“Okay,” the technician said, stirring me out of my thoughts. “You’ll need to take off the gowns so I can reach the lower part of your chest.”

Instead of the crinkle paper, I heard the sound of the Earth splitting itself wide open. Then I heard myself fall into its maw, the screams reverberating all the way up against the sides of my skull.

The technician, I soon realized, didn’t hear shit. Instead, she simply stared, both eyebrows wordlessly sailing to the top of her forehead.

When the Earth also began to scream, I turned to my mom, wondering if the terror would begin to drip out of my widened eyelids. “I... can’t,” I said, quite pathetically.

The technician eyed me further. “Why not?”

echocardiogram

I wanted my mom to yank the words out of my throat, to fist them together and pitch them directly against the face of the woman hovering in front of me. But she was not a mind reader, and despite my certainty that this test would reveal nothing but an empty chest cavity, I was not one either.

I didn't know the words which would save me from this. "I... have trauma," I mumbled, feeling my gaze blur. Her profile in the dark ambiance was soon obliterated, leaving only its shell behind. "I don't like to be exposed. It's in my medical file."

I then spontaneously combusted, bursting into flames at my own words, though no one else could see. There was only an uncomfortable silence, and I thought that maybe it was because everyone else was listening to the Earth crack open and weep too.

"Well, I need to be able to attach all the electrodes so the reading is accurate." A thread of frustration entered her voice, causing the flames to flick higher towards the dark ceiling.

For what? I wanted to ask. For a make-believe heart that wasn't there?

I could tell Mom didn't know what to say. I could tell because she shrugged when I looked at her. "Is there a way to do that while keeping her gowns on?" Mom suggested.

"If we untie the gown, we can try to keep your breasts partly covered," the technician replied. "But I still need access to that area."

The Earth continued to scream. I began to cry.

A fistfight broke out beneath our feet, and I recognized the disturbance right away. The

tectonic plates were colliding again, grappling for a proverbial control of territory. Laying my spine against the dense, unforgiving table, I shook and shook and still, the house did not blow down, not even as the ground rumbled. Not even as I became a bonfire.

I squeezed my eyes shut, not wanting to see the technician push the double-gowned robe away from my shoulders. Her gloved fingers brushed against my sternum, and one tectonic plate proceeded to curb-stomp its opponent. Only I could feel its motion, and my breaths grew shallow and rapid.

Something inside of me was surely broken, that we knew, and as the gown tripped over itself and stumbled, more of me was revealed to the unbearably empty air before the technician dabbed a glob of gel on my chest. The transducer, which is supposed to send sound waves to my heart, followed, although I don't know how my supposed heart could hear anything through the tribulation of the planet wrenching it apart.

My mom scooted a little closer to me as I choked back tears to the best of my ability. The technician didn't know that frustration also is a sound wave, one I was able to hear very clearly. My crying inconvenienced her, and I understood. Overworked, underpaid... of course I understood. Hell, my crying inconvenienced my own damn self. But really, to not even scan the *novel* that was my medical file...

"And... there's your heart," the technician suddenly said.

My eyes flew open, and I searched the Cena machine's monitor for the truth. For my... heart. When she moved the screen so I could see, my tunnel vision suddenly fanned out to

echocardiogram

encompass the fuzzy image of several valves galloping in strange unison. For a moment, the Earth ceased its movement. Then the technician said, “It looks good, but we’ll keep an eye on it for a while to see if there’s any irregular movement,” and I felt a wordless knuckle sandwich pummel through my abdomen.

“Good,” the technician had said. My heart... my heart was good.

My heart, my... h e a r t.

The bonfire dimmed then, snuffing itself out. The Earth stopped its wailing and instead decided to hum a lullaby, yanking new tears to my eyes. The tectonic plates cut their bullshit out and hugged like real women do, and I felt all the world’s breath whoosh *into* me as I scrutinized the grainy monitor.

I was still bare – far, far too bare – and while this should have diminished me, killed me even, I shakily turned to my mom, a soft emotion swallowing me and the ashes of my bonfire whole.

“I have a heart,” I whispered to her, a fresh torrent of tears soaking my face.

My mom smiled. “So, you’ll finally believe it now?”

I couldn’t keep my gaze off the monitor for too long, not wanting to leave my new friend alone in this cavern of darkness for even a moment. The – my – heart thrummed, its motion and song carrying over the Cena machine’s speakers. I wanted to dive into the video and fall to my knees weeping, asking where it had been all this time and why it had left me in the first place.

I didn’t need to see the technician to feel the

ocean of confusion washing from her body across mine, but I didn’t look at her again. Neither did I mind the reverent, almost sacred, lack of sound perforating the womb-like space. While tears still snaked down my face, pooling in the cool hollow of my sternum, I kept my gaze wholly dedicated to the pumping, thrumming, totally *alive* organ working so hard in front of me.

For me.

“So... is there anything wrong with it?” I asked the technician, still not looking at her. “Is it beating too quickly?”

Did I ruin it? I wanted to add. *Did my anxiousness about the world taint its efficacy or scar its surface the way the world had scarred me? Did I truly break it on my own? Does it hate me for being so weak?*

A pause, and then the technician’s voice, abruptly warmer and full-bodied like the first blossom of spring. Even the tectonics cease their mumbling, desperate to hear the answer.

“Nope,” she said, a chirp in the womb’s low-light. The sound was an angel pressing medicine to a mad woman’s lips.

“Looks perfect.”

Perfect. *Perfect*. PERFECT. I had a heart, and it was perfect, and I hadn’t destroyed it after all. Somewhere in my body, a pearl of icy warmth began to unfurl. Patient, giving... hopeful.

We stayed like this - observing - for a while longer. I knew that the technician and my mother saw its shape, the valves, all of the minuscule little chambers clambering together, but I —

echocardiogram

I watched my heart upon the screen and let
its dark belly tell me of life.

*



MEGAN MONFORTE

Megan has been a working writer since high school, when she freelanced for her town's newspaper. She has since used her word-smithing skills as a columnist, editor, copywriter, speech-crafter, blogger, and fiction writer. Previously, her work has been published in *The Write Launch* and she's twice been a winner of the Bucks County Short Fiction Contest. She lives in Doylestown, PA, with her family. When she's not working on her novel, she can be found volunteering at her kids' school or polishing her time step in tap class.

STRAWBERRY MOON

strawberry moon

Without her shoes, and without a word to her husband, Amy Carr opened her front door, walked through the yard and into the middle of the street. It was nearly 10 o'clock on a Monday night halfway through June and she could hear nothing except the occasional trill of a frog. No garbage cans being dragged to the curb, no dog collars jingling on a last walk of the day, no kids shrieking with delirium in backyards. School had let out on Friday, so bedtimes had expired. And yet, silence. She kept looking over her shoulder, expecting a car to turn onto her block—too fast, as always—but none came. She was alone.

She had to walk four houses down before the moon appeared. She'd known it was there because the sky was telltale-luminous, but the lushness of early summer in her own front yard obscured the view. As it was, she could only see a quarter of it now, from where she stood in the middle of the street. It hovered in the treetops, enormous and golden, and Amy had the absurd sensation that she had stepped into another world. How else to explain this moment? She kept waiting to step on a rock or a stick or some piece of errant litter, but the street was smooth and cool beneath her feet. The air was still and sweet.

"Dad," Amy whispered, gazing at the sky with wonder, certain her dead father had something to do with it, and also aware of how idiotic it all was.

With a prickle of guilt, she turned back and craned her neck to look at the house where her two girls were in their beds. She thought about the last full moon and how after dinner one night, she'd coaxed Ellie and June from the couch out onto the patio to watch it rise through the trees.

"Sit," she'd said when her daughters had emerged from the house, grumbling. They were eight and eleven but often seemed more like moody teenagers. Amy lined up the chairs from their wicker dining set, as if the eastern sky were a movie screen. "C'mon. Sit, girls. Watch this with me."

They'd ignored her and run into the grass to turn cartwheels. Amy had sat down with a sigh, ashamed by the tightness in her throat. She'd always prided herself on her awareness and okayness with letting her girls grow and pull away, but too many things were changing at once. Even the slightest snub unraveled her now. She watched through blurry eyes as the oversized moon rose above the branches like a magic trick. The sky was a faded denim shade of blue, and the remaining wisps of clouds, so faint you thought it might just be your eyes, blushed pink. Ellie and June ran and giggled but eventually looked up and grew quiet, made their way to the patio, and sat with Amy until the night grew inky and the moon became a flashlight in the dark.

Now, Amy thought for a moment about waking them up to see this moon, but their first day of summer break had been long and full and they'd been exhausted. Besides, it would require Amy going back to the house.

"Dad," she whispered again, and walked toward the moon in her bare feet.

Amy's husband, Nate, had arrived home from work that night just after dinner when she was busy in the kitchen with the dishes. The girls had jumped on him, squealing. Amy had barely looked up. She'd taken his foil-covered plate out of the oven and left it on the counter, then gone upstairs to do

strawberry moon

what had become her nightly routine: straighten up, turn on bedside lamps and fans, set out clothes for the next day. These were all things the girls could easily do themselves, but after dinner was when thoughts tended to catch up with her, and Amy preferred to have something else to do.

“You disappeared on me,” Nate said from the doorway of June’s room, startling her as she rearranged the menagerie of stuffed animals on their youngest daughter’s bed. Amy disappeared on him every night now. It didn’t usually register. “Just trying to get the girls ready,” she said, without looking at him.

“For camp tomorrow?”

“For bed,” she said, irritation flickering at her temples. “They’re not *in* camp this week.” All day she had felt calm—well, calmish—and in control of her emotions. She was a pleasant, good-natured, even laughing kind of person. But then Nate came home and she wasn’t anymore. She was the sun, clouded over. This happened most days now.

“What can I do to help?”

She turned to look at him, hard as it was, and saw his eyes. Reddish, glassy, sad. “You’re stoned.”

He looked sheepish. “Yeah. How’d you know?”

“Well, for starters, you asked how you could help. There’s a red flag.”

He laughed.

“Did you drive home from work like this?”

He thought for a moment. “No.”

“What’d you take?”

“Frank gave me one of his things.” She waited. “A cookie.”

Amy sighed, picturing Nate pulling into their driveway, taking a bite of god knows what before coming into the house. Just last week he’d told her he was done with all of that, the baked goods and candies, whatever he hid in his work bag, on closet shelves, and in the very back of the freezer. “I don’t like how it makes me feel,” he’d said. “I can solve this on my own.” Amy had been relieved, not because she cared so much about the substance—was her nightly pour of Pinot noir really any different than his occasional dalliance with enhanced goodies?—but because it wasn’t an actual solution for anything. It was just a temporary escape, and she never had that option.

“Are you mad?”

Amy pulled June’s dresser drawer open so hard it nearly came off its rollers. She grabbed shorts and a T-shirt and tossed them on the floor. June was almost nine, but still liked it when Amy picked out her clothes.

“I don’t know, Nate,” Amy said. “Do you think I should be?”

He followed her as she moved into Ellie’s room across the hall. Ellie had autonomy over what she wore. It was one of the few things she took full responsibility for, even if she tended to wear the same few things over and over. Amy bypassed the dresser and instead turned on Ellie’s bedside lamp, picked some discarded socks off the floor, and threw them in the hamper.

strawberry moon

"It's just that I don't know how to talk to you anymore," Nate said, sitting down at Ellie's desk, which was strewn with markers and paper and library books. Amy took in her husband's tall frame hunched over in a kid's pink desk chair. His black hair had gone silver at the temples and was thinning at the crown of his head. Was the depression aging him, she wondered, or their marriage?

"And you feel more able to, now that you've eaten Frank's cookie?"

"Kind of." Nate didn't look up when he said this. Amy had no idea what to feel—pity? rage? remorse? It's why she preferred the hours when he was at work. She could turn off that part of her brain for a while.

"Well, this really isn't the time or place to talk," Amy said, gesturing around Ellie's room. "When is the time?" Nate asked, glancing up at her, and she saw the tears welled up in his eyes. A surge of tenderness was stemmed quickly by annoyance. Nate's vulnerability used to be a lure for her. He had a depth and a sensitivity that seemed rare in men. But now her days were spent navigating the increasingly complex minefield of her daughters' emotions. And since her father died, she had her own grief to wade through—and she hadn't even started trying to deal with her mother yet. Amy couldn't worry about Nate's feelings too, and this midlife crisis he claimed to be experiencing. She thought maybe it wasn't fair of her—hadn't she promised *in sickness and in health*?—but of all the people she worried about on a daily basis, Nate was the one she felt should be able to take care of himself.

"You're always busy," he was saying. "You barely look at me. I have no idea how to read you—"

"Well, yes, Nate, I am always busy. Thank you for noticing." She straightened a pile of hardcover books on Ellie's nightstand and resisted the urge to throw one of them against the wall. The fact was, Amy did not want to talk to her husband anymore when he was stoned or sober or anywhere in between. It was a realization she'd been ashamed to admit, but there it was. And there was nothing to do about it. She couldn't leave. This was her job now, unpaid work that sucked the life out of her even as she was grateful for it, for the sense of purpose and the all-encompassing nature of it. Taking care of the girls and the house and the everything-else fulfilled her in a way her fleeting public relations career never had, and these days it kept her mind from wandering too far into the weeds. But she and the girls were reliant on Nate's salary from the insurance sales job he loathed, which kept them afloat, if not often flush. It couldn't pay for their current home and a sad apartment, which is sometimes what Amy imagined him living in if they split up. And then she imagined her girls spending half their time there and felt nauseous.

"I left your dinner plate on the counter," she said into Ellie's closet as she pretended to look for something. "Did you even see it? It's probably cold now."

Nate said nothing. She looked over her shoulder, met his gaze for a moment, and then went back to the closet. She'd never been mean before. It still took her by surprise, how easily it came to her now. And there was something about it that felt good, righteous even, as if she'd earned the opportunity to be cold.

"You know," Nate said, his voice tremulous. "I miss George, too—"

strawberry moon

She sucked in a sharp breath. “Don’t.”

With a sigh, her husband stood up.

“Whatever,” she heard him mutter.

Amy stared into their daughter’s closet until she was sure he’d left the room.

Seven or eight doors down from her house, Amy finally encountered another human. It was a woman she didn’t recognize, walking an old dog with dingy fur and short legs. Amy knew the daytime walkers by sight, but the before-bed walkers were a different lot. The woman gave her a tight smile as they passed on the sidewalk and Amy said, “Oh hello,” too loudly. She imagined the dog walker texting her husband, *Call the police. There’s a crazy barefoot woman on our street.* Then she felt the back pocket of her shorts and realized she’d left her own phone at home.

Nate was right; she was never available to him anymore. She often agreed to read an extra chapter to the girls at bedtime, simply to avoid being alone with him. The longer she stayed upstairs, the likelier it was that he’d fall asleep on the couch, and then she could tiptoe to bed herself, no awkward conversations, no pressure to pretend to want sex. None of it sat *well* with Amy. She would have preferred a happier marriage, an easier marriage, but these were the things someone in their twenties didn’t consider. Back then, her relationship with Nate had been exciting and unpredictable and passionate. Loving him, keeping up with him, worrying about him—it had filled in all her empty places. She’d had no idea she would need those places for other things someday.

June got on the school bus, unsure where to go next. The moon was higher now, fully above the tree line, just a little less remarkable. *I’m chasing it away*, Amy thought and sat down on the curb.

She thought again—as she had so often lately—of a conversation she’d had with her dad the previous September, a few months before he died. It was a Sunday late in the month and the girls were spending the afternoon with their cousin, Cam, at an apple farm. Her sister-in-law, Laurie, knew Nate wasn’t doing well, and offered to give her a break. Amy appreciated the gesture, but couldn’t explain that it was worse when the girls were gone. They were her buffer. They were what she focused on when she couldn’t help her husband.

Nate was on the couch, flipping from baseball to football to some black-and-white war movie. The windows were open in the house, and a crisp, clean breeze blew through the screens, occasionally slamming a door upstairs. Amy loved this time of year, when the slant of the sun was gentler in the afternoon, unfurling through the trees into lattice-work shadows on the lawn. It made her wistful for the days when Ellie and June were small and Nate was content more often than he wasn’t. She’d spent many autumn afternoons on an old chaise lounge in their backyard while the girls napped, her eyes closed against the warm sun, listening to the chirping of whatever insects were hiding in the woods. She’d been exhausted then, and worried about a litany of things that seemed ridiculous to her now, but she’d also felt a deep sense of peace. Or maybe it was just in retrospect. Maybe she only realized now how precious those days were, that simple, placid time in her life.

After Laurie left with the girls, Amy dumped

Amy stopped at the corner where Ellie and

strawberry moon

the ingredients for beef stew into the slow cooker. For a few minutes, she stood in the kitchen with her eyes closed, willing her brain to focus. Then she dug her car keys out of her purse and called to Nate, “I’m going out,” unsure if she wanted him to protest, to ask her to stay.

“Got it,” he said, without looking away from the television.

She wound up at her parents’ house, nearly an hour’s drive south. She’d contemplated calling Laurie and meeting up with her and the kids at the farm, but the girls would want to know where Daddy was, and she was out of energy for that question. So Amy had stayed on the highway, as if in a trance. Five minutes before she pulled into the gravel driveway of her childhood home, she’d been filled with regret. There were so many other ways she could spend this time. But then she saw her father in the garage, bent over a piece of wood he was staining, Patriots game blaring from the radio on the workbench. Something really good or really bad had just happened, judging from the crowd’s ruckus and the sportscasters’ yelling, which made Amy wince after the peace of her car.

“Hey, Dad,” she said from the garage door. It took a few moments before George Stover glanced up and noticed his daughter because his hearing wasn’t what it used to be. She watched as his startled expression bloomed into a smile, and her arms tingled the way they had when she was a kid. In one clumsy motion, George put down his paintbrush and reached for the radio to lower the volume.

“Ames!” he said, wiping his hands on his jeans. “Kiddo! How long have you been there?”

She smiled. “Only 20 minutes.”

He chuckled as he put his flannelled arms around her and kissed the top of her head, the way he always had. He smelled of sawdust and musty wool and Wint-o-Green lifesavers. He almost always had one in his mouth while he worked.

“I’m just finishing a bookshelf for the living room. Did you say you were coming by?”

“Nope,” she had said, in as steady a voice as she could manage. “Just wanted to say hello.”

“How nice,” he murmured, though a puzzled look crossed his face. “Where are the girls? Your mother’s next door, let me get—”

“No,” Amy said too quickly and reached for his arm before he could step away. “Can I talk to you first?”

“You got it, kiddo,” George said, after a beat. “Everything okay?”

Amy shrugged, feeling her throat tighten. She swallowed and said, “The girls are with Laurie and Cam.”

“Ah,” he said. “And Nate?”

“Home,” she said, and her father nodded once. He gestured to two weathered Adirondack chairs next to the garage, which had been fixtures in the front yard when Amy was growing up, then held up a finger. She watched as he went to the refrigerator in the garage—her mother hated that they had a refrigerator in the garage when they had a perfectly good one in the house; it offended her frugal philosophy—and took two bottles of Budweiser from the door. He twisted off both caps and handed one to her.

strawberry moon

"That's better," he said and nodded his head toward the chairs. "How are the girls liking school?"

Amy sat down, letting herself slump deep into the Adirondack, and took a sip from her bottle. "They seem happy."

"That's good," George Stover said. He slid into his seat and crossed his legs at the ankle. "How come you don't?"

Amy meant to laugh but a sob came out instead, a strange, strangled sound that made George sit up and place a steadying hand on her back. She felt so foolish. At thirty-seven years old, shouldn't she have a better grip? It's not like Nate's depression had come out of nowhere. It was a condition, a chronic illness with no cure, like arthritis or diabetes. But that was what she struggled with the most: if he could not fix it, then *she* could not fix it. And if she could not fix it, would this be their entire life forever and ever? It had been so far, off and on, as long as she'd known him, nearly twelve years now. But he'd been better at hiding it in the early days. And she'd been better at handling it. She'd had the capacity for the weight of caring for him.

Now, she was often restless and panicky, wishing she'd done it all differently—that she'd resisted Nate's charm when they first met, slowly backed away the first time she found him on his couch under a blanket in the middle of the day when he should have been at work. What would her life be like now if she'd wished him well then and moved on?

When the regret and despair rose in her chest like bile, she looked at their girls. Temperamental, yes, and what mouths on them sometimes. But good god they were sweet,

and funny, and just lovely. Amy stared at them and told herself it was all worth it. Ellie and June were meant to be, and this is what it cost.

George Stover kept a hand on her back as she cried, and she watched as tears dropped from her chin onto the side of her beer bottle. She was embarrassed and relieved. "It's just been hard, Dad," she said eventually, straightening up, wiping her face, avoiding her father's eyes. "I just—I don't always know if I can handle it. Sometimes I just... don't want to." She swallowed and added, "I don't know if I love him enough."

It was quiet for a while, and Amy could see George peeling at the corner of the label on his beer bottle. "You know," he finally said in a quiet voice, staring ahead, "you are a lot like me. More than your brother is."

Amy turned to look at him.

"Your mother isn't the easiest person to deal with," George went on. "I don't know if it's always been like this and I'm just noticing now, or if we've just been together for too long—" He stopped, shook his head quickly, then looked at his daughter. "What can I say? Marriage isn't easy, Ames. You know that. Hell, you know that just from growing up here." He chuckled and Amy rolled her eyes and tried to smile.

"But—" George took a long swallow of beer and then pointed the bottle at his daughter. "You're not responsible for anyone's happiness besides your own." He nodded resolutely. "Wasted effort. Remember that. I wish I'd known it sooner."

Amy waited a few long moments. "Where's Mom, Dad?"

strawberry moon

“Nancy’s,” he sighed, nodding in the direction of their neighbor’s house, “playing Cribbage. They’re the only people on earth who still play Cribbage.” He reached over and ruffled Amy’s hair like she was ten. “Gonna be okay, kiddo?” Before she could answer he said, “Course you are. You’re Amy. ‘Nother beer?”

Amy drove home at dusk that night, wondering why she hadn’t married a man more like her father. He wasn’t perfect, and possibly not even a good husband. But with her, he had always been steadfast, gentle, unconditional in his love. Even when she was a teenager and stumbled many times in her pursuit of independence, he’d never judged her or punished her. He’d never overreacted the way her mother had. He expressed his disappointment in a measured way, and made sure she knew he would always be there.

Nate, on the other hand, had won her over with his humor, his gregariousness, his gift for telling funny stories. The outwardness of his personality was so novel to her. He was everything she was not and, at twenty-four, she desperately wanted to be around everything she was not. She could never quite sort out if she was in love with him or just wished she was more like him. But he loved her, with a feverishness she’d never experienced before.

“Don’t ever leave me,” he would say, as they lay in bed, with enough lightness in his voice to make her think he was teasing. And she’d say, smiling, “I probably won’t.” Then he’d nuzzle her neck and say, “I don’t know what I’d do without you,” with a shade of intensity that made her uneasy to think about now, but back then she believed it was all love. Surely, being needed this way by Nate mattered more than whether he had a stable job or predictable emotions.

When she got home from her parents’ that night, just before dinnertime, the girls were already there. She could hear them in the basement, playing a made-up game with silly voices. Laurie had left a note on the kitchen counter next to a brown paper shopping bag full of apples: *Fun day. CALL ME.* The family room glowed a flickering blue. Nate was asleep on the couch, a different football game on the television. Amy looked at the crock pot, its glass lid fogged with steam, then at the unset dining table. The crisp breeze from the afternoon had turned cold, so she began to close the windows. As she did, she thought of her dad, in his garage, staining another shelf, and wondered if her mother had come home yet.

Amy had no idea what time it was, but she knew her rear end had gone numb from sitting on the curb. The moon was high overhead now, still lighting up the neighborhood, but in a less ethereal way. It was just standard moonglow, the kind that shone every twenty-nine-and-a-half days. The real magic had been in its climb.

“Well, thanks, Dad,” Amy murmured, pushing herself up. She brushed off her hands and stepped onto the grass of the treebelt. Without warning, she doubled over with what felt like a punch to her gut. The grief swept in this way sometimes, like a rogue wave, sparked by nothing, or nothing she understood. She crouched on her haunches, trying to keep her breath steady, the wails at bay. It was an acute loneliness, she’d realized, the second or third time it happened. An overwhelming sense that she was alone in the world. She had a few friends, she had Ellie and June, and, even, in some tangential way, her mother. But no one who knew more than she did. Not anymore. George

strawberry moon

Stover didn't know everything, she realized that—and he knew less than he gave himself credit for—but he played the part. He understood a girl needed her dad to have the answers, to offer wisdom without judgment, a steady hand, a corny joke. She hadn't known how much comfort she'd taken in just knowing he was there.

She pressed her palms into her eye sockets, took a few deep breaths, and straightened up. "Are you running away?"

Amy yelped at the sound of a voice close behind her. It took her a moment to realize it was Nate's. She spun around and looked at her husband. He'd changed out of his work clothes into shorts and a Red Sox t-shirt he'd had since college. The neckline was stretched beyond hope and the hem was ratty. Amy hated it.

"I thought you were still upstairs reading to the girls," he said. "I went to say goodnight and they were already asleep and you were gone."

Amy swallowed. She felt both sheepish and furious that he had found her. "I wanted to... see the moon." She gestured limply behind her.

Nate nodded, looking upward. "Strawberry moon tonight," he said, and Amy stared at him.

"A what?"

"Strawberry moon. It's what the Native Americans called a full moon this time of year. Strawberry harvest season."

Amy continued to stare. "I didn't know that."

"I heard about it on NPR on the way to

work." Nate looked at her and shrugged one shoulder.

"I'm not running away," she said.

"I wouldn't blame you if you did," he said, and Amy wondered if Frank's cookie was still working its magic.

"Sometimes I want to." Her throat ached. She closed her eyes tight to fend off the tears and opened them to find Nate staring at the moon. "Sometimes I need to fall apart, you know." The words came before she could consider them, or stop them. "Like, every day I want to fall apart. Every day I want to scream, or stay in bed, or walk out of the house and not come back for hours. But I can never do that, because I am holding up the dam myself."

Nate kept his gaze on the moon. "I know you are." Then he looked up the street, toward their home, and started to walk. Amy watched his back for a moment, then started to walk, too. "Where are your shoes?" he asked.

She didn't answer. Four times between the corner and home, she stepped on small rocks. A baby's cry pierced the night air and a car passed by, going at least 10 miles over the speed limit. The spell had been broken.

*



FLASH FICTION



RYAN MATTERN

Ryan Mattern holds an MA in Creative Writing from UC Davis and a BA in Creative Writing from CSUSB. He is the recipient of the Felix Valdez Award for Undergraduate Fiction. His work has appeared in *Crazyhorse*, *The Santa Clara Review*, and *Westerly Magazine*. He lives in Big Sur, CA.

VEER

On another of these compulsive drives, she is thinking of his teeth. They were by far his most prominent feature. So big they made the letter *B* sound like *F*. She had never had that thought before. But now every fleeting thing was fair game for investigation. The air trapped between his teeth and upper lip when he said *bright* or *Bellevue*, every word a smile. She had the time now and so chose to reconstruct him completely, believing it her duty, an arena in which she felt she had been floundering. Hindu women, she read, threw themselves on a pyre when their husbands died. The first thing she had done was buy an ounce of pot, for the first time since college.

There's the sign. The Sheriff's Department had adopted the highway in his name. Some restitution. They had also sent her a neatly folded flag which apparently the Governor had saluted on the day following the accident. She put it in the hall closet next to the guest towels and the old Wi-Fi router they couldn't figure out how to properly return. She didn't know the Governor. Certainly, she hadn't voted for him. His salute felt the same as everyone's condolences. Ornaments hung on a tree watered with her grief. But it was the expectation of her service—to weep, to join support groups, to pin a ribbon to her shirt, to start a foundation—that made her dream of exile.

"They'll fry me for this," she says, buttoning her jeans on the edge of some other man's bed.

"No one's asking anything," he says.

"I'm supposed to be grieving."

"Maybe you are. A bereaved one-night

stand."

"You never know," she says. "I might require the full protocol."

"I'll keep my phone on me."

A calico cat slinks into the bedroom and butts its head against her ankle bone. She hadn't noticed it last night.

"My roommate," he says. "A rescue."

"Aren't you a good Christian."

"No, I wouldn't say that," he says. "Just wanted a partner."

She falls back onto the bed and taps her fingers on her thigh, beckoning the cat.

"Can I hide out here today?"

"You can stay as long as you want. Take a shower maybe. Let's go see about breakfast," he says and makes a clicking noise. She doesn't know if he means her or the cat.

She lies there and pets it for a moment, careful not to ask for its name.

The house is littered with every animation of dying flowers, the dead earth stink of them. It amazed her the things for which she was instantly off the hook. The high school had given her the rest of the year off with pay. She could eat ice cream for breakfast and drink black coffee while watching the evening news. Ignore phone calls for days, make them at odd hours.

She missed the way things were but ached for something else to change. Perhaps she

would give credence to every inane idea that came to be. She thought maybe she would like to be a sommelier, hauling home two boxes of buy-six-bottles-get-six-free from the Safeway. She spent a few weeks lost in her study of wine, the days long but somehow occurring mostly irrespective of her. She kept a log, the Pinot Noirs with a nose of wet manure, the Muscadets like licking a seashell.

If she bathed or if she brushed her hair were of no consequence to anyone who might have an opinion on the matter. The freedom was almost as astonishing as the lump sum life insurance. She wondered if she should buy a parcel of land to rehabilitate spent racehorses or maybe learn what cryptocurrency was. She could download a dating app and witness with amazement the circus of mostly nice men appearing at her doorstep willing to indulge in the abatement of her loneliness or boredom. She could play at being a wife when the old fancy struck, cooking eggplant parmesan, which had always been a *knockout*, or waking hours before her sex-stunned guest to run his jeans through the wash. She watched a tutorial on how to deepthroat and bought a yoga mat on Amazon.

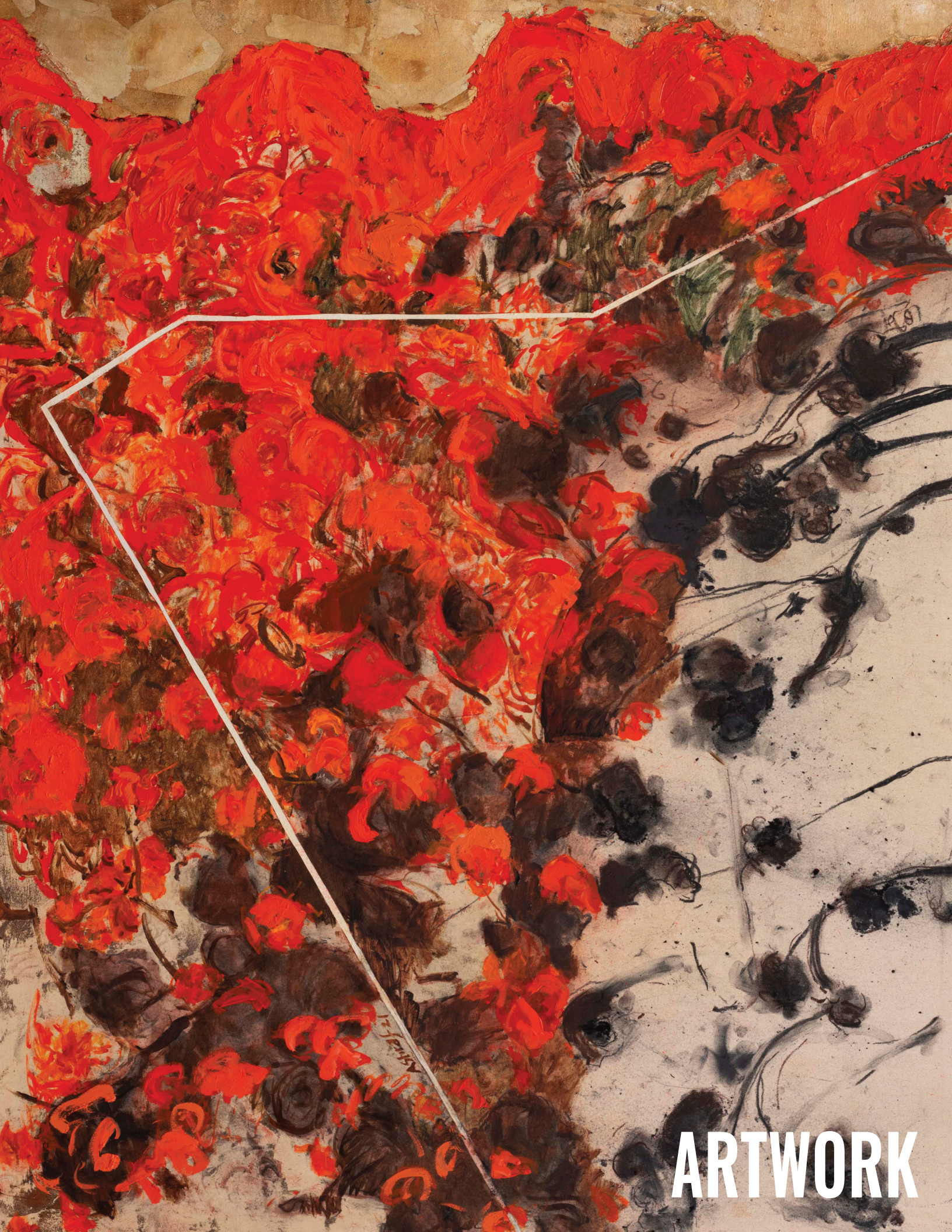
She found she could say whatever she wanted to now and it was a realization that was as liberating as it was terrifying. A widow is supposed to have some insight, but she rarely knew what she was supposed to be saying. A coterie of dead men's left-behinds assaulted her phone with texts and emails and voice messages about what she should be doing to claw through the funk of the day or, worse, asking for advice on what they ought to do themselves. All the hearts going out to her, being entangled in so many

thoughts and prayers. It made her feel like a fraud. Is life supposed to end when the one you're doing it with bows out early? It was a yes/no question and the act of carrying on felt like a declination.

It takes her months to get to the cemetery. The finality of his name in stone, the book-ending numbers. End of Watch. A fraying pinwheel someone left on the Fourth of July. A few challenge coins from the fire department and neighboring police departments. An unopened can of Grizzly Wintergreen.

She sits Indian-style right on top of him and waits for something to happen. She thinks a breeze might give her the chills, a bird could caw something familiar. What if a stranger emerged from the Quonset hut turned flower shop and relayed a story about him, one she had never heard before? Or what if it was she who had passed on and gone to hell and this was her punishment, a rush of chatter and concern and then, in keeping with everyone else's tragedies and attention spans, aloneness without end? But it's none of that. No flood of memories. No shafts of light banding through the springtime clouds. Not even a roly-poly climbing up her leg. Nothing out of place or even happenstance. No evidence of anything beyond the evident. Her broken heart, which is just something we say and mostly feel well below, and the apprehension she feels about walking back to the car.

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ARTWORK

ISSUE XVI

ART

COVER: "Haley and Celeste" **by Cameron Shipley**

"Painting has been something of a life raft for me, offering purpose and peace. I want to share the therapeutic benefits of painting with Tulsa while acting as a mirror for the LGBTQIA+ community. I want to show how having a positive outlet for self-expression with representation can be life changing. I want people to feel seen, safe, and a sense of belonging when they see my work." More at: camshipleyart.bigcartel.com -or- [instagram.com/camshipley](https://www.instagram.com/camshipley)

"Dawn Awakening" (pg. 3) **by Sharon Reeber**

"My practice moves between painting, printmaking, and mixed media sculpture. I am interested in circles as organizing principle, metaphor, and visual structure, which has led me to study the use of this form in spiritual art of many cultures, including mandalas. This work is from the Cosmic/Meditations series which explores the metaphor of outer space conveying inner space through images suggesting skies and galaxies, and hinting at the flexible perception experienced in meditative states. Nature imagery, especially birds and plants, commonly appear in my work, arranged to express an ideal harmony. I am also intrigued by implying temporal progression in a static image by juxtaposing haziness with solidity, letting the wind blow through the clouds of thought and feeling."

"Untitled" (pg. 13) **"Untitled" (pg. 16-17)** **"Untitled" (pg. 65)** **by Muhammad Ashraf**

"MALLEABILITY is a thematic extension of the subjects that cultivate my creative practice: sublime and melancholy. The subject of this project about two flowers "Sumbal – red flower" a tree that matches its name in beauty, and "Amaltas – yellow flower", which is also called "umeed ka phool": flower of hope. Lahore, the city of gardens, appears mind-blowing at the time of bloom of these trees and the project attempts to articulate awe and admiration for this bloom. I have nostalgic relation with Lahore's landscape painting. My initial training in art – drawing – ensued with Khalid Iqbal, who is a Pakistani maestro of landscape painting and painted Lahore's landscape throughout his life. I paint mundane objects and the happenings in everyday life, from the pleasure that natural beauty yields to an effrontery of socio-political systems."

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ART

"Timeless Grief" (pg. 9) **by Olude Peter Sunday**

Olude Peter Sunday is a Writer, an Artist and Poet from Ogun State, Nigeria. His work is featured in Hayden's Ferry Review, The Prose Poem, Non Binary Review, Lighthouse Magazine, Shallow Tales Review, Paper Lantern, Typehouse lit mag, Blue Marble, Flash Frog, Last Girls Club, Native Skin literary magazine and others. When he isn't writing, he is painting in the Corner of his room or permutating Rubik's cube. He tweets @peterolude.

"San Diego" (pg. 36) **"Influence" (pg. 61)** **by Emily Rankin**

"These pieces, from the series Verstehen, seek to capture the ways in which synesthesia works in the mind. They were created in front of a live audience with incorporated sound and electronics. Emily Rankin attended university in Texas, where she received a BFA in 2011. Her body of work deals with intuitive messages of dreaming and subconscious exploration, and has appeared in publications such as *Gasher*, *Metonym*, *Alien Magazine*, and *Rattle*. She's currently based in New Mexico."

"Hanging On For Dear Life" (pg. 38) **by Matthew Fertel**

Matthew Fertel is an abstract photographer who seeks out beauty in the mundane. Passing by the same locations over days, months and years allows him to photograph his subjects under different lighting and weather conditions, and to observe the changes in these objects as the environment interacts with them over time. Small details get framed in ways that draw attention away from the actual object and focus on the shapes, textures, and colors, transforming them into landscapes, figures, and faces. His goal is to use these out-of-context images to create compositions that encourage an implied narrative that is easily influenced by the viewer and is open to multiple interpretations. More of Matthew's work can be seen on his website and Instagram: <https://mfertel.wixsite.com/matthewfertelphoto>
<https://www.instagram.com/digprod4/>

"An Extractive" (pg. 46) **by Beth Horton**

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