

the good life review



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

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

COVER

Hiokit Lao * [Kunik](#)



"A "Kunik," also called an Eskimo kiss, nose kiss, or nose rub, is the act of pressing one's nose against another. In various Indigenous cultures, it is usually interpreted as a form of greeting and affection.

This piece showcases two Inuit women sharing a 'Kunik', symbolizing profound love and strength. Like mountains, they stand resilient, their nurturing spirits akin to the enduring peaks—steadfast, forgiving, and strong, embracing unwavering love and fortitude.."

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POETRY



CAREY SALERNO

Carey Salerno is the executive director and publisher of Alice James Books. She is the author of *Shelter* (2009), *Tributary* (2021), and the forthcoming *The Hungriest Stars* (fall 2025, Persea Books). Her poems, essays, and articles about her work as a publisher can be found in places like *American Poetry Review*, *Poets & Writers*, *NPR*, and *The New York Times*. She serves as the co-chair for LitNet: The Literary Network and occasionally teaches poetry and publishing arts at the University of Maine at Farmington. In 2021, she received the Golden Colophon Award for Independent Paradigm Publishing from CLMP for the leadership and contributions of Alice James Books. careysalerno.com

LITTLE SPARROW, BABY MOLE (THE
MOMO TWINS)

little sparrow, baby mole (the momo twins)

Don't come to me
little sparrow baby
mole blunted blue
to the black morning road
anymore don't come
to me as the sour dream
seeking algal
velvet anchoring
seeking quell
the place I desired you
you dwell whirring our
shared burrow
all that throaty swell, the way
the organ mud
clears from the inmost well
what I buried.
Beyond any sallow
soil inhospitable
where I might rest
with you beyond the
quiet
chorion
where I instead deliver us
forcing this gruff purple sleep
our jellyleg
acquiescence a moving
apparition moving
right through me.
I watch it move through me.

We can't keep here
not one moment longer.
Catch chill
tip of my headheart
tip of my twintongue
notch where what umbilici
implanted come undone
they warn
I can't keep
you
catch chill ever-
long what I'd want stay
let root their entire colony
transfusing the garden of tarry fountain
ivy cord, rose vessels vermicular in
mobbed amnion
complications list unabbreviated
I can't even say how long
to get there from here
don't ask directions
discordance
sudden despair-
catch chill
if what the mole, what the sparrow
perhaps is nothing
came to be nothing
is just me
is just the dead
me
lost under my clumsy leap
and ever and ever.

little sparrow, baby mole (the momo twins)

I hope you will forgive my fluster
my crushing your forms
which are also my forms.
But if not, what can I do?
There's so much nothing
so much I hoped
to control over nothing
for nothing
with nothing as much
as empty in my hand.
To the many acts
of desire, to duplicity
a feeling I'm in love with
so much so I wish I could—
would we have survived
for instance— a little more, baby mole.
Our future cold—your fine gray fur
your curled pink toe, your body
hunched, belly tucked away
from greedy crow.
I know, you know, me too
how vulnerable
near losing all self-control.
See, even here in this poem.
Impossible.
Inside us the birds slip
into, yes, the second us sleeping
under the wide open
if the meadow is wide—
our lethal anomaly
our unhardened unstarred
our broken barrel—
let it be wide.

Yet are we too minor for vultures?
If we are not, then we are not.
Or, if the cat carries us away
to the end of its master's bed
sets us upon the duvet
triumphant
what can she even dream comes after?
Baby sparrow,
but is she dreaming?
Is it me
bestowing you
wings tucked, dewed
cinched as if dropped undisturbed—
the flimsy branch wracked
biting needle of the wind
I heard it—
caught you forgetting what's flight
what's feud.
How tired we were then.
It's okay to give up.
That ring of blue
that catbird in the dogwood
raring to argue
I'm not mad at anyone
take her within me too
so many dead, dear catbird
someday catbird someday
the wouldhavebeen
wouldhavebeen young.
Little sparrow, baby mole, frozen blue
to the black mourning road
within your frost
placenta of white lattice
know I wanted you.
I need...I know I wanted you
to keep my wanting pinned to you
to me
to let everything asleep stay sleep.





MARINA COOPER

Marina Cooper is an Asian American poet and fiction writer based in the D.C. area. Though she wrote “Uncountable” as a high school teacher, she is now pursuing an MA in English at Georgetown University. She also holds a BA in English from Princeton University. Her writing has previously appeared in *Apparition Lit* and *Hey Alma*.

UNCOUNTABLE

uncountable

twenty-one desks, three windows, one flag,
you call down the roster, stumbling,
slaughtering syllables and wincing in shame, you
count the children: they chorus present.

a student holds her soul up to the window then stuffs it
back in the heel of her shoe. she approaches your desk
to throw out her gum, and asks,
why are you even here?

the children are monstrous, their dreams spilling forth
like wounds, bubbling, too big for their chairs.
you recheck your roster, then check it again:
all boys in the class are named Jake.

a trio of wraiths congregates by the pencil sharpener,
tendrils curling towards the hallway light.
they reminisce about the days of duck and cover;
you wonder if you should call the office.

count the children – someone's missing.
(are you sure?)
count again.

one of the Jakes, in a basketball hoodie, is sitting on the ceiling.
come down, you say, but he pulls the drawstrings tight until
the hood closes over his face, faceless
he scuttles into the corner.

you would not begrudge him his freedom, except,
in case of emergency you better know
where all the kids went. and yet! he's reached heights
that his parents could never have dreamed.

uncountable

a Jake with the tail of a fox asks if he can roam the hall.
you tell him to fill out a pass, but as his fingers
reach for his phone, he blinks and it falls
right
through.

you shrug, and check the wall clock which is tick-ticking
backwards. the wraiths in the corner giggle while a girl
whose name you think starts with a k asks if 47
(the president) will be on the test.

foxtail Jake is missing.
you go to the door but the shade is pulled, handle stuck,
all locked down like a ballpoint pen at the bank teller's window.
the PA system yells, be very afraid.

Jake with the roses sprouting out of his ears
asks how much longer you all have to stand
in silence while waiting for the all clear and you say,
what? and check your phone, but the battery's dead.

the Jake you recognize from sixth period english,
(the class you used to teach last year)
begins to cry, silently, over the wet lump of clay on the table
that he's shaped into a prayer.

he tells you he wants to go home.

you tell him it's just 90 more minutes
but he's already down on the floor,
digging at the tiles, hands sinking through linoleum
as soft as fresh dirt, and he

digs and digs until there's a hole,
yawning, open, and he crawls inside
and lies down,
eyes closed.

uncountable

the clay on the table gets up and walks away.

you call the main office for help, and they tell you
the Jake you know isn't on your roster;
the secretary says to count the children, then offers a list
of names but it's long – greater than all the kids in your room,
so long that she's going and going, she'll name every ghost
since Jefferson County but then you hang up.
still, her voice echoes. you
count the children
and turn on the lights
and see them massed beneath the evil eye
(read: small paper stop-sign)
and Jake in the basketball hoodie has come down from the ceiling,
standing solemn with the rest of his class,
and your voice shakes as you
count the children
and the lights flicker and then
the bell
finally
rings.

*



CHASE DIMOCK

Chase Dimock teaches literature and writing in Los Angeles. He is the author of *Sentinel Species* (Stubborn Mule Press 2020) and the Managing Editor of *As It Ought To Be Magazine*. He holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Illinois and his scholarship and reviews in World Literature and LGBT Studies have appeared in *College Literature*, *Western American Literature*, *Modern American Poetry*, *The Lambda Literary Review*, and several academic anthologies.

A CONVALESCENT HOME FOR RETIRED
PROPHETS

a convalescent home for retired prophets

As he parcels out his cocktail
of weekly pills, he says
he doesn't resent the youth sitting
in the shade of trees he planted.
The bridge of his back was built
for footprints. There is satisfaction
in arthritis if you cherished
what you held on to for so long.

But he can't help remembering
he once lived in a time when
desire could only travel as far
as a Burt Reynolds photo torn
from the TV Guide cover.

And he can't help feeling
that he walks this bored utopia
like the doomed time traveler
whose machine can only go
forward and never back home
to tell his childhood self
where the yellow brick road ends.
Miracles of the future
are always prosaic
in another person's present.

*



KARISSA HO

Karissa is a writer and artist from Los Angeles. Her poems and paintings appear in *JMWW*, *Red Ogre Review*, *Radar Poetry*, and *Sundog Lit*. She studies English literature and economics at the University of California, Berkeley, and she is a very fast walker.

ASSET MANAGEMENT

asset management

So I was never naive enough—
On floor 11 clouds smeared
by, chalky, loomed—I watched
pale men move through glass
walls from a block away—It was
so cold I got hungry, then sick—
Copper phlegm—A building
reflected in another, resembling
mud—Improbably, trees ruffed
out under Whole Foods and up
from the roof of a gym—People
walked without anger or deceit
or perception of my own regret—
Crusting brick towers stacked
closely—Later, offices and more
offices hid, insubstantial, thinly
and unknowing—I only wished
to sleep, to lock the computer
and never open it again—Never
counting myself so lucky as to
want to know what comes next
—It tastes of pennies, and the
empire they built, from losing
and finding and—Losing again.

*

WILLIAM BONFIGLIO

William Bonfiglio's poetry has been awarded a Pearl Hogrefe Grant in Creative Writing Recognition Award, the Julia Fonville Smithson Memorial Prize, and has appeared in *Gulf Coast*, *New Letters*, *PRISM international*, and elsewhere.

IN MEMORY OF BIRDPRESON

in memory of birdperson

Fucking Tammy, I write her

because this is what friends do:
they leave messages without
subject or context, assured their
meaning will be derived despite
time and distance. They
anticipate recognition,
approval, and agreement.

But she writes, *I'm sorry, what?*

It's nothing, really – a reference to
a show we watched as friends,
delighted by the boy's every
hapless stammer, the grandfather's
every belch, their madcap
adventures attended by a charming
cast of aliens and mutants.

What has changed: We're older. I
don't know who Michael is. She
doesn't know Harry was put down.
I don't know if she went home to
Arkansas this summer. She doesn't
know I applied there today.

But we both remember – I'm sure, I'm
certain – the mutant we loved most:
the wise, inexpressive friend whose
brow lifted only as he reached for her,

in memory of birdperson

as her weapon carved through and
pushed him over the woven wicker
sides of his nest to the ground where

he lay cawing, twitching. I mourn him.

*



NWODO CHUKWU DIVINE

Nwodo Divine obtained his Bachelor's degree in English and Literature from the University of Benin, Nigeria. He is the chief editor of *Akpata Magazine* and also evaluates submissions for the *Word's Faire*. Nwodo's works have been published or are forthcoming on *Poetrycolumn*, *Heavy Feather Review*, *Bacopa Literary Review*, and others. He tweets @chukwudivine_ and is on Facebook @nwodochukwudivine.

TRAUMA IS A LULLABY IN IGBO

trauma is a lullaby in igbo

~ Between 1967 and 1970, over 2 million Igbos were killed in the Nigeria civil war

The bombs tore through *nnem oche*
leaving her son, daughters scattered
one, my mother,
who lingers near me now
like the murmur of the forest
Igbo spirits come like afterlife ebony
i feel them watch me by the fire
singing to my ears in the voice of *nkita*
reminding me of the stories
of how to mend a tear in my wrapper
of the brutality
of lost memories
stories fit for honoring the fallen

nnem oche stays with us

War's refugees sing only of hunger in a minor key,
they search for solace in the ruins of dreams
Fragments of lives shattered,
Yearning for a rest swallowed by bombs

nne nnem oche shielded us with her weathered hands

gave my uncle a smile stretched thin
saved my mother from the vultures circling
taught her the igbo way. the way etched in the map of starvation
though stories are all i have inherited,
never felt the sun on ancestral soil,
only the sting of displacement.
Yet, survival is the greatest birthright,
passed down like heirlooms bought with blood.
And i know i'm theirs for in my blood,
the current of their relentless river runs deep.

trauma is a lullaby in igbo

In *nnā*'s diary,
Aunty Nneamaka hides in the bushes
escaping soldiers searching for young girls
finding refugees
Aunty Adaora, a scar on the right side of her face,
grieves for a life stolen for a table adorned with sorrow
though gone, we gather each evening,
seeking rest in the charred remains
I see Uncle Chigozie, the cracks in his smiles,
there are others whose names rustle in the woods,
some woven in the smoke
Chioma, Uzoama, Ebele, and Nkiru,
their brother, Chibuzo,
Ogochukwu, Nneka, Ndidi, and Kelechi,
spirits watchful upon my sleep,
Shards of a shattered whole,
before the exodus, before the silence.
papa tells me trauma is a lullaby in igbo
i braid palm fronds singing this lullaby
of a people who loved their land
And fought for their people.

*

Words in italics are in the Igbo language.

* *nne nnem oche* – Great Grandmother

* *nnem oche* – Grandmother

* *nnā* – father

*



CREATIVE FLASH NONFICTION



MICHAELA EVANOW

Michaela Evanow lives, writes and gardens by the sea in British Columbia with her husband and three small kids. Life makes sense in the garden, so on a spacious day, her fingers are covered in dirt and she's collecting things to dry and hang in a dark corner. Her work has appeared in *Hippocampus Magazine*, *Five Minutes* and elsewhere. You can find her on Instagram at: [@michaela.evanow](https://www.instagram.com/michaela.evanow) and on her Substack, Tender Realm.

THE CRUSH OF DUSK

the crush of dusk

It's nearly dinnertime. The dusk begins its quiet descent. I'm not ready for my crying household so I walk further into the seaside graveyard, hoping to spot the new nests of buttery daffodils, hoping to sit with you.

We both emerged from the orb of pregnancy; you, sucking earth for the first time; me, undone. Two and a half months of unhampered pleasure. Then, the crude arrival of pain. Your fat newborn legs paused their kicks. I drew my pinkie nail across your soles, hoping for the reflex, the spring upward. Your body stilled, dangled, drooped. The ripple effect of time and disease progression even took your cries. It took too much energy to cry. Just small mewls that my husband and I recorded on our phones while we squeezed each other's thighs, hands, wrists. Whatever was within reach. *What a good girl. She's so well behaved*, the grocery store clerks would say. Then, even the cat cries left, until it was just frothy bubbles at the corners of your lips and those strawberry splotches appearing on your damp body. Then, the rumble of a machine sucking you back to life.

I picture your soft, scared face as I look down at my ungloved hands mottled with white and purple from the cold. They worked so hard to save you, again and again. I wanted you to age. I wanted the patina of five years, twelve years, thirty-three years.

But you'll always be her mother, they say.

I don't want to be that kind of mother, I reply.

I'm startled back by the crunching of leaves. The deer notice me noticing them. Their rumps twitch as I walk toward them. They are banal in these parts, swallowing every tender bloom except the daffodils scattered generously through the graveyard.

Stop being so alive in this dead place, I want to yell. My lips purse with the words. *Stop eating all the flowers, stop breeding*

so carelessly. They spread to the edges, ravishing seedlings and lopping heads off memorial carnations until all that's left are the faded, nylon flowers in gaudy carnival pinks and greens, until all that's left is ugliness. They watch me, ears fluttering. I am the threat, and though I want to be gentle with all living things, I pick up a stick as they resume eating. They are not afraid. I'm enraged at their invasiveness. Their wet noses tilt back to the earth. I throw it, just to see them scatter.

Stop being here, I whisper angrily. It's quiet again and I hear the whooshing of blood in my ears, a constant companion since I birthed my last baby. Past threats that have not yet been quelled linger in the canals of my body. This pulsing never leaves; a diagnosable, benign reminder of my aliveness and alertness.

Nature has yet again unearthed the roots of me. She is keen to repot. I find a damp, green bench and sit heavily on a piece of cardboard someone left behind. It's never about the deer. I cannot control their raz-ing. My shoulders drop into the sweet pit of grief. I came here to cry, after all.

It is good that you are here. You are allowed to be alive in this dead place. I tap on my chest bones, slowly and steadily, until I'm able to walk again.

An arc of purple dusk thickens above the house. A window is cracked open, and the house reveals what's inside: the cries and laughter of small children, the hoots of my husband as he chases them. I hang up my coat in the mudroom, leave the memory of you curled in the pocket. I ease my stiff hands under hot water, warming to the noise in the house. My smallest daughter comes to me crying. I cup her cheeks with blanched hands, press my lips to taste the miraculous brine. She slips between the gap of my knees as I salt and boil water. I have three small mouths to feed, after all.

KIANA GOVONI

Kiana is a black graduate of UNC Greensboro, where she received her MFA in fiction. Her work has been featured in or is forthcoming in *The Broken Plate*, *Witness*, *Cardinal Sins*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Rappahannock Review*, *The Bridge*, and elsewhere.

MY MOTHER, THE STORY-WEAVER

my mother, the story-weaver

My father is a dirty whore. Or so my mother tells me. My father sleeps with invisible women: sleeps with, not fucks.

Every night three to four women sleep in bed with my father, the king of elder kings. And my mother struggles at the abyss of her life, her sanity, and the sagging bed—the invisible women jammed tight between her and her husband of over fifty years.

My mother is not a liar. She tells the truth of her stories in this new life of hers. She is not reincarnated; don't misunderstand. She is Alzheimer's latest murder, and she's got a lot to tell.

Every day my mother weaves me stories. My father has brazen audacity, a traitor body, and ugly greed. I'm enraptured by this new storytelling voice of my mother's. I want clarification. Like what do these invisible women smell like? Like what does the weight of their weightlessness feel like next to you? And mostly simply: how?

There are rules when caring for loved ones with Alzheimer's. Most are common sense but still difficult to maintain and remember for always: don't tell them something they believe is wrong. Don't argue. Don't ask if they remember something from the past.

The rules tell me to agree or to change the subject when my mother tells me my father whores around in their bedroom. But a woman's words and convictions lie in the crevices of her heart. My mother believes what she says and what she sees in the dark. How do I distract from that? How does anyone?

My mother will eventually forgive my father for his transgressions, but he will suffer all the same. And then my mother will forget

and grab another line of storytelling thread.

Every day my mother weaves me stories. Our family home of over twenty years is a fake. If she knew the technology, my mother would declare the heart of our home a deep-fake. Nothing is right and she needs to leave it immediately.

In another tale a family member is like a bounty hunter, in cahoots with nursing home staff. My mother distrusts them to her death.

Alzheimer's is a serial killer, a destabilizer. But it can deliver its funnies, like when my mother once tried to walk out of her bedroom unclothed and my father told her, "you're naked," and she said, "no I'm not," and he stressed, "*you are naked.*"

But she laughed and my father laughed, and my mother's life was still in there. She was funny. She was her, and I saw her, and then—

My mother wasn't a storyteller in her past life. She was a yard sale connoisseur, a country decor gal, a lover of TV dramas, and a sneaker of night-time sweets. She liked to watch stories on the screen, not read or tell them. But now she is saturated with a tongue of song—and of story.

Every day my mother weaves me stories, new accusations against other family, more sightings of the impossible, more communications with dead voices. She bores cavities into my eyes with her sincerity, and I breathe in her stories like we are both girls of childhood—like she is my older sister telling me bedtime stories or like I am her mother listening as she tries to grow her world through the body of fiction.

my mother, the story-weaver

I want to wrap my mother in the cotton of warm blankets and soothe her back into reality under a fort tent. But I am not her mother. I cannot elderspeak or infantilize her like the rules and common sense tell me.

I am human. At times I break the rules on purpose because I want to believe in legends and myths, as they are forever but can be ever changing—their origins and endings not the same in every iteration.

Everyday my mother weaves me stories. And with prickled blood I wait for my turn, for my story, like with my father's and how she accused him of infidelity to his face and to the world.

To her I must be her nurse or a caretaker—a stranger in the home she cannot always recognize as her own. I wait for my mother to tell me I am not her daughter because our skin doesn't match.

Don't be upset if they don't remember you. There's a preparation for that in the rules. But what if they don't just forget you? What if they can't even believe in the idea of you?

Thankfully my mother never disbelieves me. I am lucky. But until she takes the last of her earthly breaths, I will always wonder if she will question the existence of my black near her white.

My mother is now a story-weaver. I eat every one of her stories like starbursts. I want to ask her if I can be a story-weaver just like her, entwining my stories with hers.

To start my weaving, I'll tell a story of an old woman with bubble cheeks and a sweet gummy smile who has a home and a family she will never lose. My mother will listen, stitch in her own details, and together we'll

sit on a queen bed if I can assume this new title. My mother will braid my hair and then I'll rest my head above the beating of her heart, TV singing in our background.

We'll triumph together on a queen bed, guzzling chocolate, and crafting legends for the eternities. But only those of adventure. Of healthy minds and strength of bones, the defeat of the dark and human disintegration.

We'll triumph together on a queen bed, and as story-weavers my mother and I will tell legends of indestructibility and immortal women—of bodies and minds that can never die.

*



SHORT FICTION



CORRINA CHAN

Corrina graduated from Lewis & Clark College in Oregon, where she majored in psychology and later English literature with a focus on creative writing. While attending Lewis & Clark, she wrote for and edited the student journal, *The Mossy Log*, founded the Prose Club, a creative writing group, and was the fiction editor for the youth-run literary magazine, *Diamond Gazette*. She was also an editorial intern at *Future House Publishing*. Combining her curiosity about all things literary and a willingness to take on new challenges, she hopes to continue to write and publish more of her work.

BEFORE THE WATERS

before the waters

Time doesn't flow right on the river Acheron. Several days on Earth could be a mere moment here, a grandmother could pass through long after her granddaughter, a single trip across could take years. Despite this, the river represents order, represents change and justice for all the lives on Earth—a passing from one state of existence to another, from one life to another. I serve as caretaker of their souls. I do my duty, what I was created for, and I do it well. I deliver them to their fates, but only for a certain price.

A Silver Dollar, 1935

Pass.

A Peso, 1840

Pass.

A Bànliǎng, 378 BCE

Pass.

A Honey Cake

I stared down blankly at the older woman. She held the plate up in her hands, the little honey cake, golden and perfect, glistening in the low light of the Underworld. It smelled divine—slightly fruity, with a caramelized glaze.

I lifted my eyes from the pastry back to her. “Step out of line.”

She looked like she was going to say something, but I interrupted her, already knowing the question. “No coin, no access.”

She looked down, despair running over her face like I'd seen billions of times before. I sent her back to the water's edge.

A Roman Gold Coin, 309

Pass.

A Mink Fur Coat

Step out of line.

Two Two-pound Coins, 2048 and 2060, and an Urn Containing the Ashes of a Husband

“No bodies in Hades,” I declared.

“But I was buried with this! You cannot take him away from me! Not again!” “Leave the urn here or step out of line.”

“But I brought enough for both of us! I made sure he would be able to come with me.” “You are permitted to board. It,” I gestured to the plain metal vase with the engraving of a name and a date and nothing more, “is not.”

The woman hugged her possession tighter and stepped away.

A Burmese Ruby Necklace

Step out of line.

“Wait! Do you know what this—”

Step. Out. Of. Line.

A Rupee, 2013

Pass.

A Scythe, a Black Cloak, and a Quarter Dollar, 2003

Pass – “Oh, hello again.”

before the waters

“Charon.” Death tossed the coin to me and it evaporated instantly.

“What do you want this time?”

“One report per century, Charon. You know the rules.”

“Has it really been that long?”

“No.”

I looked at him quizzically.

“I am told that millions of souls are being held up somewhere. I came to check-in. I knew it would happen here.”

“People aren’t being buried with as much wealth as they used to be. I cannot accept their non-payment.”

“You cannot discriminate against the poor and forgotten. They are being buried with wealth. Just no longer of the monetary kind.”

“I cannot accept these treasures,” I replied, shaking my head.

I took a look behind the old man, two figures shrinking away behind the ruffles of his cloak. I looked back into Death’s decayed face.

“They cannot enter.”

“They can and they will. They are under my protection. I have supplemented this woman’s non-payment.” He retrieved a golden Drachma from his sleeve and patted the woman’s head. “And I will argue on behalf of this woman’s husband,” he gestured to the second figure behind his coat, “and ask that Hades allow a mortal body, though no

longer a *body*, into his realm.”

He tossed me the coins and they vanished less than a foot away from my face. I didn’t blink, but I stood still as they climbed into my boat. We rode across the river in silence, the two women holding their treasures close, and holding themselves even closer to Death.

A small, bright honey cake sat on the seat of my boat as I departed back to the other side. I dissolved it, accepting the non-monetary gift. I flinched at the new sensation. It wasn’t overly sweet, and I realized that the fruity scent I had noticed earlier was from the cherries. I looked up and its maker nodded back at me as I sailed away, satisfied.

“Good, Charon.” Death’s voice echoed in my head. I rolled my eyes, the honeyed taste still lingering.

An Heirloom Scarf and a Bundle of Rosemary

Step out of line.

A Blindfold and Pieces of Rope

Step out of line...

An Umbilical Cord

Please step out of line...

Nothing at All

I’m sorry.

A Five-Yen Coin, 1960

Pass.

The others watched as she stepped into my

before the waters

boat and we sailed away.

A Love Token

Step out of line please.

“Wait, what do you mean?”

“I will accept this token, though it holds no monetary value, for one person and one person only. Your partner will have to wait.”

“No, no, no,” one of the men shook his head. “We need to go together. We promised. Together in death. We couldn’t be together in life. You have to give us this. Please.” I stared at them for a moment. I stared at the coin in his outstretched hand. I stared at them again, their pleading eyes boring into mine. Damn it. I sighed and dissolved the coin.

Pass.

A Javanese Gold Ingot Coin, 732

Pass.

A Sumatran Electrum Coin, 1077

Pass.

A Forget-Me-Not, Wilted and Twisted at The Stem

I twitched, deciding. The little girl looked up and handed me the little flower. I paused for a moment, considering the implications of a broken rule. All the while, she waited, still holding the tiny offering up to me. I took it carefully and put it back into her hair. She giggled as I helped her into my boat.

Pass.

One Hundred and Twenty Eight Thou-

sand and Forty One Reales, 1499-1515, a Rapier, and a Dagger

“Where the Hell am I? Who the Hell are you?”

Pass.

I didn’t respond other than that. I was used to the occasional dictator, conqueror, emperor, or even “Karens”, as they used to say, so I really didn’t care to deal with the abuse. “I’m not getting on that Godforsaken dingy. I commanded thousands of ships—my own fleet! I require something much more suited to my standing. I am offering you more than any other man could give. I deserve lateral compensation.”

Pass.

“How dare you insult me in such a manner! I should have you flogged just for speaking to me as such.”

“Do you want on the ‘Godforsaken dingy’ or do you want to step out of line and wait a century?” I responded curtly.

The man pulled the rapier from his belt and aimed the tip towards my chest. I gave him an indifferent look and tossed his “offerings” into the river. He screamed as they sank below the surface and lunged towards me attempting to pierce where a heart should have been. It passed right through like the wisp of a long-forgotten ghost. I grabbed the hilt and twisted it from his grip, tossing it, as well, into the Acheron with the rest of his wealth. He pulled the dagger from the scabbard attached to his thigh.

“I am Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán. You *will* obey me. I will *never* bow to lesser men!”

before the waters

"Step out of line."

With that, he grabbed the little girl with the forget-me-not in her hair from her seat on the boat and slashed her throat, shattering her soul into nothing but dust and a memory. I grabbed him by his throat, crushing it, spitting in his face, "I am no man." I released him into the river. He can burn and drown with all that he ever cared about. Humans.

A Golden Dollar Coin, 2420

Pass.

A Silver coin of Aphilas, 680

Pass.

An Alexandrite Ring

So close. Step out of line.

A Scythe, a Black Cloak, and Another Drachma, 514 BCE

"Charon." Death was the only being I allowed back over the river once across, save for Hades, but he doesn't get out much.

"What." I didn't take my eyes off of the infinite line of souls to meet his. I was getting tired of these interruptions.

"Be nice."

"Why do you care so much about these people? Why would you go out of your way to fill up my boat for two humans who couldn't even pay the proper fare?" I asked him as we rode alone.

Death considered this for a moment. "I see them on Earth. I see them as human and not just passengers, as you do."

I scoffed at this.

"But it's true," he went on. "What do you see when a child gives you a smooth rock as a gift? Or a woman gives you a honey cake as an offering?"

"They're just *things*."

"And why do you say that?"

"Because they are. They just *are*."

"You see, I don't see things that way. I get to be with the humans up close. I get to see the moment a mother's face lights up when she scoops the stone out of the river and hands it to her child because it is just as small and round as he is. I get to see the years and years it took for that older woman to perfect that honey cake recipe with her husband and continue to make it for him long after his death. I see the history in the scarf that was passed down for generations from mother to daughter, the one that was hand-stitched by her great-great-grandmother and gifted to her on her wedding day.

"Humans are strange and I will never truly understand them, and that might just be because I am not human," Death said to me, "but what I see in these offerings is their entire lives. Their love and their souls. I see everyone that has ever loved them, and I see everyone they have ever loved. It never truly goes away. I see their passions and their hopes and every experience that has ever led them to the edge of your river."

I stared at him, just then realizing that I hadn't been rowing in a long time. "So what am I to do then?"

Death shrugged as he stepped out of the

before the waters

boat and onto the bank. “That is up to you, but remember that they had lives before you and, soon, they will be lost to time. They are humans, not just another passenger in your boat. Are we clear?”

I watched as he disappeared into Earth’s light, then turned back to the infinite line of souls before me. The memory of the tangy cherries and the sweetness of the honey danced on my tongue.

A Love Letter, 2013

...

Pass..

*

DEIDRE JAYE BYRNE

Deidre is a retired teacher and recovering Long Islander happily living and writing in the Hudson Valley. Her previous work has appeared in *The Bellevue Literary Review*, *The Avalon Literary Review*, *Cafe Lit*, *Literally Stories*, and other online and print publications.

PUPPY

puppy

She wants a puppy. The desire permeates her like smoke from a wood fire, clinging to her hair, her skin, her heart. She doesn't know when it started, exactly, but one day she joked to her friends, "If that s.o.b. gets elected, I'm going to need a therapy dog," and let the joke lie. Sit. Stay.

Wednesday mornings at the diner, while Dina waits for her poached eggs on dry toast to arrive, she watches. She watches mothers and fathers walk their children to school, carrying their children's too-heavy backpacks, believing they can shoulder their children's burdens. She watches ancient seniors toddle from their 55 and over apartment complex across the street, up the ramp to the diner, slowly filling the booths, grateful she hasn't yet joined their ranks. And she watches all the people walking their dogs.

The big ones she's pretty sure are mostly rescues, the ones she sees at shelters. Large muscular dogs with square heads, broad chests, pit bull silhouettes, dogs she could never own herself, never really love. But she is happy to see them out in the world, knowing someone loves them, gives them homes. A mastiff goes by, pulling hard at the leash, its owner following like an awkward marionette, and Dina thinks, *poor training there*, then relents, reminds herself dog and owner are doing the best they can.

The cute little dogs, with their jackets and smart outfits, are the ones Dina waits for. She loves to see their short legs moving them along with brisk, crisp contentment. Some, she knows, are just puppies on their way to becoming larger dogs. *Small dogs are just cuter, she thinks, easier to keep. Who knows.* Everyone, it seems, has a dog these days; Dina feels conspicuous for what she lacks. She wants a puppy.

Sitting on the sofa alongside Hal one evening, dinners on their snack trays, watching the nightly news, she'd tried to tell him about the puppy thing.

"Why would you want a dog? A puppy of all things?" Genuinely curious, he sounded surprised rather than accusatory, yet she felt suddenly embarrassed for her need, her inability to articulate her yearning. It wasn't Hal's fault; he was a good man, a kind man. For thirty-five years now he'd been pushing a broom at the school, worked a second job nights and weekends to pay off the bills from their daughter Erika's rehabs and hospital stays.

"And what about vacations?" he asked, and she wanted to say, "As if."

She'd laid her hand gently on his arm. She wanted to sound reasonable, or at least not desperate. "When would we have time for that, Hal?"

But Hal was scrolling through the channels, looking for "Nature" on PBS. He loved documentaries about animals in the wild.

Most weeks, after she leaves the diner, she drives to the Petco across town where she watches the puppy kindergarten classes. From behind a towering cat condo—she tries to be inconspicuous—she watches as people work to bond with their playful, unruly pups. Sometimes she paws through the accessories aisle, imagining how a cable knit sweater or rain slicker (with matching boots!) would look on a small puppy of her own. She studies food and water bowls, thinks about where she'd put them in her kitchen, what brush or leash might be best, what toys her imagined pup might like. Back at home, she opens her laptop and watches YouTube videos while folding laundry:

puppy

Mackay's First Day Home, Maltipoos From Birth to Ten Weeks, Eight Great Dogs/No Shed Dogs/Easy to Train Dogs for Seniors. Usually.

But today is different, *today is THE day*, she thinks, as she scoops up her rain jacket, pays the check, leaves a bigger tip than usual because she is feeling excited and expansive. She'd torn the ad from the community board at the supermarket yesterday: "Puppies for sale, small mixed breed. Males and females." She held the paper tightly in her hand, the address scrawled in the margin.

When they'd first brought Erika home, their sweet baby girl a prize after years of infertility and indecision, Dina couldn't relax for days, unwilling to trust the adoption could last. Maybe Erika had picked up on that uncertainty; *had that been the thing that inhibited their bonding?* She'd never been an easy baby, never a cuddly toddler. When Erika was in middle school, running track, Dina and Hal were forbidden to attend her meets. She didn't like being watched, she said. Being watched by *them* was what she meant. It disrupted her focus; she meant *it was none of their business*. She never noticed her parents sitting at the edge of the parking lot, sharing a pair of binoculars, watching her blow past the others on the track. She was small, but fleet.

Dina wishes she could adopt a dog; she's been to several adoption events. "Rescue dogs are no different than a used car, just passing on someone else's problem," Hal had warned her. It had taken some persuading, but when he finally relented on the dog question, that was his only condition. The thing Dina loved was the dogs' excitement, tails wagging, on their best behavior, orphans in search of some perfect future. But when she asks about the puppies, she wants

puppy, the staff tell her there's no way to know how big the pups will be. She ends up leaving, relieving her disappointment with justification. *The questions*, she thinks, so *invasive*. How many hours will she be away from home? Own or rent? Where will the dog sleep? Is the yard fenced in? List three references, two of whom are current dog owners.

The second time Erika was arrested, Hal's patience had been stretched to the breaking point. Her failing grades, repeated suspensions, an attitude toward her parents that was both manipulative and dismissive, had left him exhausted, his love frustrated. He wanted to send her to a therapeutic boarding school. *How would that help?* Dina saw the problems, felt every insult, every lie from her daughter a betrayal, but still, *how could they let her go?*

"Sure, she's a little wild," she'd said to Hal, downplaying, again, their daughter's transgressions. "Aren't all teens?"

"Maybe she got that from her birth mother," he'd said. "It's that school or rehab. I'm sorry but the kid's got to be brought to heel."

It's an hour's drive to Calville, a place she's never heard of. Dina is tense but excited, her skin tingling with anticipation. She imagines how sweet the puppy, her puppy, will be. How nice to come home from errands greeted by an excited, joyful pup, tail wagging, bursting with enthusiasm and affection. She pictures the first few nights at home, comforting her pup, assuring it of her love, promising security. Vivid images light up her mind: the puppy snoozing on her lap as she reads through winter afternoons, the praise she and her baby dog will receive in the puppy kindergarten classes. She'll finally make use of the stack of books on her

puppy

nightstand— *Pup to Perfect in Ten Days, No Bad Dogs, Decoding Your Puppy*. She keeps a tiny notebook in her nightstand drawer with lists of puppy names.

Dina is wrenched from her fantasies when a police cruiser races up behind her, flashing lights and sirens raging. She pulls over, heart pounding in her ears, a flush of panic overcoming her like a wave, undertow pulling her back in time: Erika on a stretcher, one arm awkwardly twisted, moaning as they pull her from the wreckage, car and tree married in a gruesome embrace, right there on the front lawn. EMT's working to stabilize her, IV glinting off the light in the ambulance cab. It's harder these days to push those memories away. Dina signals and pulls back onto the highway. *Puppy, puppy, I want a puppy.*

The road is pot-holed; gravel pops against the underside of her car. Dina crawls along, looking for the right number. To the left and right, mobile homes reveal a community's exhausted aspirations. Suddenly, children are bicycling toward her, one girl with wild brown hair riding so close Dina stops her slow rolling car. The children surround her, their thin arms flapping a semaphore of excitement. "You here for the puppies?" Dina nods, feels set upon, though it's not exactly an ambush. The girl and her companions lead her forward, and she is unsure whether she is captive or hero, led on by this juvenile motorcade.

They come to a stop in front of a yellowing, rippled fiberglass awning propped up with uneven two-by-fours, an imitation of a porch. "For Sale" signs seem to be attached to everything. On a rusted truck, a flapping sign: "Parts only." Dina peers into the shaded dark, sees a woman whose girth spills from her sleeveless blouse and her denim ca-

pris; she fills the plastic yard chair. Without rising, the woman smiles, brushes back her untidy hair, apparently unselfconscious of the fading bruise under one eye, the blooming purple splotches on her arms and legs. Dina keeps her focus on the woman's eyes as she introduces herself, does not want to judge. And, she realizes quickly, she doesn't want to stay, either. *It's too awkward to turn away now, she thinks, especially after such a long ride.* But this is not how she's pictured getting her puppy.

In her fantasy, the puppy comes to her in a basket just outside her front door. Maybe it's a cold, snowy night and the basket has been dropped off by a stranger, the tiny puppy abandoned and alone. She is the hero, taking in this pup, loving it, raising it, giving it a good home. Dina's seen sites online that promise almost that. She's made deep dives into the world of online puppy sales, places promising no puppy mills, proffering corporatized photos of angelic puppies, every breed and size. She finds herself willing to accept the disingenuousness of their adoption fees, grateful for permission to pretend she's not part of the "puppy industrial complex," as Hal calls it. She's tempted every time, a one click solution to her unending ache, but dreads her friends' righteousness: Why didn't you get a rescue dog? What about those poor abandoned dogs? And she wishes she had the strength to ask them *What about the puppy mill dogs? Why is it wrong to care about them? Aren't those puppies also victims?*

Dina follows the woman, Annie, into the double wide trailer. The children try to tag along, complain when she denies them: "Don't you sass Mama Annie now. Go around back till I call you in."

Inside, Annie turns to her, "Them kids!

puppy

Three are mine, the other two, fosters. Gotta love ‘em!” She laughs as the dogs, maybe eight or ten, Dina can’t tell, fill the room. Hefty pugs, corgi-like dogs, and combinations of the two, come rushing toward the women. None of them are puppies, Dina sees. One barks, setting off a chorus. Annie shouts, waves her arms, “That’s enough, get out of here,” and herds them out the back door leading to, Dina supposes, a yard.

The women navigate a labyrinth of over-filled rooms, rooms packed with the accumulations of people trying to feel like they have enough. On the kitchen table several large bags of dog food take up all the surface, a plastic window box liner serves as a water trough on the floor. Along one wall a cracked fish tank, a screen and a rock on top, hosts a large snake. Chewed rawhide bones and dog toys lie scattered across the floor. The woman explains, “Didn’t expect to have more puppies.” Dina thinks about the two other obviously pregnant dogs she’d just seen, decides not to challenge the story.

They enter a smaller bedroom with two unmade beds, a TV running cartoons, and a wide cardboard box in the middle of the floor. In it, puppies clumsily clamor over one another toward their mother, lying on her side. Exhausted or resigned, Dina can’t tell.

“Here she is, proud mama. Dad’s one of those noisy coots I shushed outside.” *The pugs or the corgis or what*, Dina wants to ask, then realizes it doesn’t matter, reminds herself she’s not getting her dog here. Annie reaches down, grabs two pups, intercepting them before they reach their mother.

“Boy or girl, which one d’you like?” Dina hesitates, unsure how to extract herself from a situation that feels wrong to her. “Oh here,

just take them both.”

The woman’s acrid scent mixes with the sweet smell of the pups as she pushes them into Dina’s arms, and she begins to feel at risk in a way she can’t name.

The warm, sweet-smelling pups squirm; Dina holds them close. A low insistent chorus of warning voices fills her head. She remembers the first time she held Erika, the way excitement and fear made her tremble. Hal had put his arms around them and she had choked down her fear that this was a mistake.

“I guess I should have asked before I came here.” Dina avoids the woman’s eyes, nuzzles the puppies close. Lying, she says, “My husband has allergies. I was hoping for a hypoallergenic dog.” Inwardly she cringes; this is not a woman concerned with allergies.

“Well, why don’t you take one home for a day or so, see how your husband does.”

Dina looked at her and felt a thin thread of panic. “Oh, I couldn’t...”

“Don’t worry. It’s fine; I trust you.” The woman’s too easy familiarity, her constrained desperation reaches Dina, ripples through her. She wants to run. She wants a puppy.

The puppies wriggle in her arms, squeaking, deprived of the mother and the nourishment they need. Memory intrudes and Dina thinks about Erika, just three days old, the mother already on her way home. So much promise in such a small bundle. *No one warns you*, Dina thought.

“It’s okay, I know you’d come back. Just take one home and try her out.”

puppy

Dina leans down, lets the puppies slip from her arms, watches them eagerly return to their mother and worries they are too young to be separated.

The room feels small, alarmingly close. Dina wants to leave. She wants a puppy, and here are puppies, and yet...*what if this is the wrong dog? Should have asked more questions before driving all this way. Hal doesn't even know about this trip.* Hesitation hangs over her like a cloud.

"You know, if you think a puppy is too much work, I can let you have one of these other dogs. Half price. I got to clear them all out asap. I just figured people would come to see the puppies. Everyone loves puppies."

Back on the main road, checking her rear-view mirror, Dina's perspiring and her heart thumps urgently, irregularly. Her hands tight on the wheel, her insides feel like soft serve ice cream, vanilla and chocolate twisted together, relief and sadness, yearning and doubt. Once again she has failed to bring home a puppy, choosing the companionship of an unanswered question and the shallow comfort of not yet. Still, the need runs inside her like a crawler at the bottom of the TV screen. *Puppy, puppy...*

Dina pulls into her garage as the sun fades; a storm threatens, but has yet to arrive. She can't stop thinking about Annie, the bruises, the covered-up desperation. And the children, the fostering. She pushes herself from the car and into the empty house. On the hall table she sees another postcard has arrived addressed in Erika's spiky handwriting, the only proof of life. No message – there never is one, leaving Dina to wonder again whether these irregular mailings are intended as bare reassurance or a taunt. She will put this postcard with the others she keeps tied in a

bundle under the book with puppy names. She walks up the stairs, tries not to look at the photos that line the wall, the pictures of her once precious Erika, whose every captured smile feels to Dina like a lie.

She slips off her shoes, lays on the bed watching the sun sink below the horizon. *Puppy, puppy, puppy...*

*



MYCHAL HOPE

Mychal Hope is a writer from a small-ish town in California. Her work has been featured in the *San Joaquin Review*. Most of her free time is devoted to creating stories she rarely finishes.

BABYGIRL

babygirl

Mama had my brother first; he came out with his hands folded and his head down. My parents used to say that he hardly made a peep, even when he was hungry. If he did cry it was gentle and sounded like *please*. I made Mama get a C-section. She blamed me for her body when she got angry. Lifted her shirt up and pointed at the ragged line that runs across her stomach where they cut her open, laid her guts out, and gave me life. Mama would look at me with fire in her eyes and despise me for what I did before I was born. When I was hungry I'd roll over, pull a boob free, and feed myself. Mama said that's how she knew we wouldn't get along. What kind of lady takes without asking first?

I was fourteen when I told everyone at the school lunch table that I hit my mama back. I was bored, breaking carrots in half and tossing them at the sixth graders as they walked by to grab their milk. My statement garnered attention. All of their eyes widened and they leaned forward like I was someone to listen to. I never hit Mama back; she wasn't much of a hitter anyway, words were her weapons. There were times I'd have rather been slapped in the face than hear the things Mama had to say. Mostly, I just wanted people to like me and I didn't know how to be nice yet. The people at my table ate it up, all except for Rosie who sat opposite of me, staring at me with my mother's eyes, cold and prickly.

My town was semi-small; everybody knew someone's cousin and mine went to school with me. Rosie's something special. God stamped a smile on her face in the womb, sent her into the world with the whitest teeth anyone's ever seen, hair long and blonde. She held herself like royalty and everyone treated her as such. She was golden and I was rotted, curdled like my mother. A daughter's burden.

Rosie brought a lunch pail filled with little triangle sandwiches and strawberries cut into hearts. What a bitch. She whispered to her friends, her long hair creating a curtain that divided them from me. The gleaming barrier couldn't block out their vicious humming. I sat quietly as the gaggle of girls giggled and looked away when they saw me watching. I felt like prey. It's said hyenas can kill a lion if the group is big enough. They run in circles around it, isolating the kitty cat and taunting it with their jeers. I sat straighter, wiped my hand on my dress, crossed my legs, and waited for them.

She saw me twiddling my thumbs and sat up, sparkly hair falling back into place, shoulders poised, sandwiches untouched. She smiled, white teeth and pink gums. I didn't; there's a gap between my two front teeth and Mama said I needed to start grinning with my mouth closed. I placed my hands on the table and grabbed another carrot. I couldn't sit still. Rosie watched the movement with a hunter's eye. I cracked the stick in two and her gaze jerked back towards my face. Then she laughed and shook her head, like I was really funny. "You're something else, Baby-girl." She said like she meant it, like it could be a compliment if I was stupid.

"Oh, yeah?" I replied, playing the game. "Why's that, Rosie?"

It's an old game; it came before our mothers and will remain after we're gone. We held eye contact as she took a teensy bite of her sandwich, putting her finger in the air, asking for *just a second, please*. I broke another carrot in half. She swallowed.

"My daddy says you drive your mama up the wall. She called last week asking for us to take you in, but he said no." Her smile grew bigger, a winner's triumph. Embarrassed

babygirl

and angry, my vision went hazy, blurring around the edges. I could feel the blood rush to my cheeks as people started to glance my way. Everyone had been pretending not to hear, but who could fake civility when good ammunition was brought forward? Encouraged by the audience, Rosie made sure to finish well. “You ain’t hittin’ your mama, Babygirl. She won’t even let you get that close.”

She was goddamn glowing. Victory tasted as sweet as her stupidass love-shaped strawberries. Fucking skank. I didn’t know my cousin well enough to call her a liar, but I know my mama well enough to believe that what Rosie said was probably the truth. Everyone was silent, trying their best to breathe through the thickness in the air. Rosie was grinning and her cackle huddled close and hissed to one another. The game was won and congratulations were in order. I chucked a carrot at another passerby and smiled, gapped teeth and all.

“You wanna know something funny, Rosie girl?” I asked, chewing on the tension in the cafeteria. She looked at me, cold eyes contrasting her warm radiance.

“Sure,” she said with a shrug, taking another teeny tiny bite from her pretty little sandwich with the crusts cut off.

“My mama said that there’s a reason your baby sister looks like your neighbor and it ain’t cause he’s a cousin three times removed. You catchin’ what I’m sayin’?”

Usually, the hyenas don’t win, surrounded by many, the lion only needs to kill one of them to scare the others off. Her smile faded, slowly pulling from the corners first and then gone were her pearly whites. I snapped another carrot in half, refusing to break my

gaze. I have my mother’s eyes, too. Unmovable and harsh, born frozen. I leaned forward, dark hair mingling with my broken carrots as it brushed over my plate on the table.

“I’m sayin’ your mother’s a *whore*, Rosie.” I felt it, the heinous slash that comes with hurting someone guiltless. Rosie’s mother was kind and good, heart as golden as her daughter’s hair. Nobody actually believed her mother slept with their neighbor, but putting it out there scrapes a smooth reputation. My mama never said anything about my aunt, but it hurt my feelings to think of her calling around begging for people to take me away. It was my father that spat this lie when he was drinking, *haha*-ing with his big boys, and now I had, too. My victory felt sour and decayed.

Rosie sat there, staring at me, half-eaten triangle and little hearts. I don’t think I had ever seen her frown before, she looked so completely normal. Her glow turned red, reflecting in blotchy patches across her face. Humiliation rattling her bones, anger making her hands shake. I could see it in her eyes, the bitter sharpness, the similarity. As if someone had put a mirror between us. We were the same. I wanted to apologize, could feel it on the tip of my tongue, so acidic in its unfamiliarity. I opened my mouth, trying to force it out, but nothing came. We sat there until the bell rang and then I got up and left. That’s what happens when daughters act like their fathers, they never learn how to say sorry.

Daddy left us a couple weeks later, four days before Mama’s birthday. We all watched him leave from the kitchen table, eating our mashed potatoes as he clip-clopped in his fancy man boots out the door. We finished dinner, washed the dishes and went to bed.

babygirl

Mama didn't tell anyone, shame keeping her mouth shut. When someone leaves they act like somehow it's your fault. Maybe if you kept your house cleaner, or made your food tastier, or raised your children better, your husband would stay. Maybe if you were a completely different person than the one that you are, your husband would stay. Maybe if you ripped your heart out of its chest and cut it up into small pieces and put it on a nice plate, your husband would stay.

For her birthday, Mama asked us not to say anything. Our grandparents were throwing a party at a snazzy restaurant. Mama laid out a dress she wanted me to wear, pink and pretty, with flower shaped pockets. It was itchy, the tulle on the inside stuck to my skin. I told Mama I loved it, just like she'd tell her parents that Daddy was busy tonight.

The restaurant was nice, it had trees outside wrapped in glittery lights and windows covered in thick shiny curtains. The carpet inside was plush and green, mishmashed with sporadic clusters of tansies. A room in the back was rented for the evening, spacious and dazzlingly decorated. There were two tables, one in the center, big and round. The second one, pushed to the corner, just wood and paper plates. The motherfucking kids table.

Hyenas are a matriarchal led species. Most often, the ladies lead the clan, holding a higher and more complex social role than the males. They become alphas because they form dependable groups. The family was whispering when we walked in, the main event of the evening and you wouldn't even know it. The air tasted different, heavy and gummy. My uncle and aunt sat close to my grandparents. Rosie leaned against the back of my grandfather's chair, arms looped loosely around his chest as she rest-

ed their heads together. My grandmother held Rosie's sister, Kitty, in her lap. What a pretty picture it would make if we weren't in it, standing awkwardly in the background waiting to be acknowledged.

They had to know we were here, felt our eyes locked on their faces and our ears clinging to their conversations. It seemed like some weird punishment. Mama was teetering from side to side, embarrassed and uncomfortable. My brother was breathing loudly, like he wanted to say something but couldn't find any words.

"Happy Birthday, Mama!" I said into the buzz of the room, cringing at my voice booming in a space it didn't belong. The cackle jumped, their giggle-calls quieting with the interruption. Everyone looked over at us, frozen in their familial positions. They had dinner once a week without us, Mama knew it but pretended like she didn't. We're all so good at make-believe.

They were staring, caught and frozen. Mama stopped rocking and squeezed her hands into fists, like she didn't know what to do with herself. The three of us stared back, sinking into the squishy carpet, waiting for the ground to swallow us whole. I think I made it worse.

"Sorry baby," my grandma said, rushing to the rescue. We came back up, the floor spitting us out. "Happy Birthday, honey." She came up with her arms outstretched and Mama fell into them gracefully. Putting her head into grandma's neck, a little girl, so young and so far away. Nobody else got up. Grandma didn't greet me or my brother, instead she grabbed Mama's hand and brought her over to the lackluster celebration.

babygirl

"Where's that husband of yours?" My grandpa asked my mama jovially from his chair, still resting in Rosie's headlock. He didn't like Daddy. Outside of Mama, no one did, but he liked his daughter married.

Grandpa officiated my parents wedding, said a long spiel about how important it is to be a good spouse, to love one another through all things, and when he was done and got the audience good and crying, he turned to my father and said "there's no returns, she's yours now." He meant it, too. Bad news, granddaddy, *bad bad* news.

Mama stuttered, for all her birthday wishes, it'd be her that spilled the beans. Sticking to my gift, easy-peasy, I told him, "Daddy got a new job. He's workin'."

"That's good. What's he doin'," my uncle asked, a glint in his eyes. There was something here between them the three of us weren't in on. They're looking at us the way one looks at a toddler, like they knew more. Like we're just the slightest bit dumb. Superiority permeated the atmosphere.

"Big man work," I said disrespectfully. "Heavy duty shit."

The only thing my grandfather admired about Daddy was his work ethic. My father was a hard worker, did the jobs no one else wanted to do. Didn't mind getting dirty as long as he got paid. He was strong, a real working man. It made my uncle insecure because he wasn't very good at sweating. Born with small hands and soft skin, he chose college.

"Watch your mouth, Babygirl." Mama said, jabbing her elbow into my arm softly. Usually she'd have some sense about her, she'd be angry at me for cursing in public, but I

kept the cap on the beans.

"You know, everybody has different talents. Some people are born with strong brains and some people are born with strong arms," my uncle said sophisticatedly.

"Mhm," I replied, letting it rest before picking it up again. "You callin' your daddy dumb?"

"*Jesus Christ*," my grandma murmured, putting a hand to her forehead. "How about the kids go sit down, huh? Go, now. Go." She flicked a hand at me, like she was shooing away a pest, sending us to spend our night in the corner.

I grabbed my brother's arm, pulling him along with me to the tiny table. Rosie floated behind us, her footsteps elegant and soundless. Kitty skipped, the buckles of her itty-bitty black shoes jingling with each hop. When I got to the table I pulled out the chair closest to my brother, but Kitty slid into it. She had bows in her hair, light pink sparkly sweet. Destined for a no-good-night, I settled next to my cafeteria buddy.

It was fiddly and the table was ugly. All of us gathered in a quiet circle; it felt like time-out. We were close to the adults, but had enough space so if you talked quietly there was privacy. Twisting my head to the side, I saw Mama, small and hunched into herself. Giving so much personality so little volume. She was the only one in the room with no partner; at least I had my brother. The table was still chattering, keeping Mama out of it on purpose. She watched them, a desperate look on her face as she tried her best to be included. Smiling at something that wasn't told to her, leaning forward, like maybe it was the distance keeping her apart. Her eyes were sad and feral, darting around the table

babygirl

and room, looking for some sort of reprieve, self-conscious about the lack of interaction.

“My mama knows what you said,” Rosie told me, bringing me back into my circle. I turned around, giving her my attention. She was leaning on her fist, elbow pressed against the sticky wood, fossilized with all the remnants left over from multiple unwashed kid hands. Her grin smashed into her knuckles, cheek pulled upwards, polished canines bared.

Kitty swung her feet back and forth, poking at my brother with her little pink painted fingers. He swatted her away, unaware of the war brewing. I hadn’t even thought about her telling her mother. It felt like something you carry yourself, saving the other person from an embarrassment they shouldn’t have to deal with. It was schoolyard shit, not talk-to-parents shit.

“What’d she say?” It’s like I couldn’t help it, the words falling out of my mouth crookedly in their hurry forward, no wit or intelligence behind them. I wanted to know if it was my fault, the icky in the room. I felt gross, my mother’s birthday ruined because of my mouth. My heart was beating fast, sweaty hands pulling at my scratchy dress as I fought down impending panic. I hadn’t meant to make a mess.

Rosie sat up, smiling at full force, big teeth and killer’s eyes; she was always winning. Kitty wasn’t poking my brother anymore. Bored at the lack of mollycoddling, she started kicking the table. Gentle and constant *thump thump thump* as she watched the entertainment.

“What’s it matter?”

“Why’d you bring it up if you don’t wanna

talk about it,” I asked back. “Could’ve just kept your mouth shut.”

My voice was fast and shaky. I felt like a stray dog getting meat dangled in front of it, just too high out of reach. If it was my fault, this terrible dinner, I’d fix it. Go to my aunt personally and apologize. I’d force the words out of my mouth, pry them out with my fingers.

“I just wanted you to know, Babygirl,” she said, waving her hand in the air like she was dismissing the issue, diffusing the conversation.

My meat was yanked, the string tugged back into the Heavens. My brother looked at me, *What’d you do?* his face asked. He had my father’s eyes, warm and nonthreatening. A liar’s eyes, he just hadn’t grown into them right. I shrugged my shoulders, *nothing*.

The food was brought in on big metal trays with fancy clattering lids. The waiters went to the grownups first, plating their food for them, dishing it out in hearty spoonful’s. The adults clapped gleefully, salivating as steaks were slapped on plates.

“I haven’t eaten all day,” Mama burst out. A trick passed to her from her mother’s mother, an excellent excuse for her hunger. She was digging in, cutting up her steak and buttering her bread.

“You look like it,” my aunt said. There was a pause in my mother, hand halting mid-butter. The room held its breath. There were multiple ways to take that comment. The good way: she looked thin or the bad way: she didn’t. The game, dealt out in sneaky hands across the table, had begun.

Female hyenas have working penises. They

babygirl

mount both the males and females, ensuring their position. They're the most aggressive in the species, big and powerful and bitey. "Thank you," Mama said quietly, mounted with teeth at her neck.

My aunt was usually kind, good hearted and sugary to be around. She had crystalized, harsh and tart. My fault, *all* my fault. The waiters came to the sticky table next, our dinner wasn't nearly as luxurious. Paper plate made beige with tater tots and a hunk of chicken breast, pure fine dining.

There was a hush as we all ate our food, a clink of silverware on porcelain the background music for the big night. Acrid static bathing the ambience in bile. Both tables were rickety and disjointed, failing at loving family.

"So, when does your man get home?" My aunt addressed my mother, friendly and genuine. Their first real conversation all night. It would be such a simple question if Daddy hadn't dipped less than a week ago.

Rosie leaned in close to me, calculated and poisonous. "We know what happened," she whispered. Her long hair fell, hiding us behind a blonde screen, concealing us from the others. I felt stuck, like a fly caught in a web. I missed being on the outside. My stomach hurt. There were no beans to spill; the can had been long dumped.

"Late." Mama replied to my aunt, trying her best to maintain the lie, while quickly realizing the show was coming to an end.

"What did you say his job was again? Must be a strict one if he has to miss his *wife's* birthday." Playing dumb for the sake of the bit. Maybe we don't change as much as we think we do. We'll always be kids fighting

in the cafeteria at lunch time. "Such a bummer, too. I know he'd love to spend it with you, huh?"

"You remember the girl that sits next to me at lunch? Our mama's are friends and she told hers what you said." Rosie disclosed, soft and evil. "My mama was so angry, but then we saw your daddy with his suitcase hitchin' a ride out of town. You and your mama drove that man *away*, Babygirl."

I swear to God I wasn't breathing. My skin turned blue and my vision went black. Mama's smart, played this game many times, but she had the baggage this round. No upper hand. I turned to her and she was already looking at me. We were ugly, stripped to our insides. It was jarring seeing her like that; she looked so much younger than I was. Parts of her stolen by the people she loved. A chunk of her taken from me.

"We know," my grandma says, putting down her knife and fork. "We know he doesn't have a new job and trust me, as your mama, this *whole thing* is hard for me too."

Mama sat silent, stunned as everyone continued to eat their food. Dark red dripping down their mouths as they bit and ripped apart the meat. Using their teeth to tear into the flesh, licking up the scarlet ooze that trickled down their arms and stained the tablecloth. Animals, savage and wild.

"What's it like to have a daddy that doesn't want you?" Rosie whispered in my ear.

It felt like too much, unbearable and excruciating. My body caught fire, lit up and burned slowly. All I could think of was my mama and how my heart ached for us. A lady that saw so much of herself in me she could rarely look me in the eye without turning

babygirl

away in disgust. I hurt for her and hated her, too. I was born my mother's tongue, speaking the words she can't get out. The words that jump through her veins and scratch at her skin, begging for their release.

"You're a bitch," I said to Rosie, who just smiled wider. It grated at my charred skin. Kitty was still kicking the stupid fucking table and taking bites from my brother's chicken. He didn't even notice, focused on Mama and the battle she was losing. The silverware rattled, clinking obnoxiously every time the table was thunked, overwhelming the tension. The knife that I used to cut my food toddled closer and closer to its departure with each goddamn kick. It was at the edge, *thunk thunk thunk*, then on the floor.

"Don't be rude," Rosie said, sweetly. "Pick it up."

Sometimes in an act of aggression, a female hyena will eat the cub of another to sustain their rank. I grabbed the knife off the floor, grasped its handle tightly, and lunged. Unlike most predators, hyenas eat their prey while it's still alive. We fell backwards, the chair hitting the ground hard, jerking our bodies roughly, our heads knocking together. People around us were moving and shouting; bones creaked with the strain of old bodies running. Rosie was looking at me scared and stupid, both of us hideous, regurgitated pictures of our mothers. But our eyes were the same, our blood so similar.

The knife was dull, so I had to saw and hack my way through. There were hands on my arms, tugging me away, bruising my stinging body. I let them drag me back because I had my prize. My gold. I dropped the knife. Rosie lifted a hand to her head, trying to feel for the yellow strands that used to float down her shoulder. My brother was holding

me, all the adults gathered around Rosie except for Mama, who never left the center table. My head was fizzy, clonked hard and irritated by Kitty, who was still sitting in our corner, kicking the table and eating my brother's dinner.

When Rosie saw her hair in my hand she wailed. Screamed and cried and kicked the ground. My aunt cradled her close, murmured to her softly, and made her angrier. She looked over at Mama, not me. I eat my prey while it's still wriggling.

"You need to keep Babygirl on a leash," she spat venom. Then she hauled Rosie off the floor and grabbed her youngest on the way out the door, my uncle trailing behind them.

My grandparents were shocked, still kneeling on the ground where they'd been when they tried to break us apart. Slowly, my grandpa got up, bad knees making him wobbly in his old age. I would've offered him a hand, but they were full.

"That is not how a lady acts, Babygirl." His steps were still strong when he marched fiercely towards me, waving an arthritic finger in the air. He was sneering, red in the face, steam out his ears. "Now, your daddy's gone, so someone's gotta teach you some manners." He raised a hand, bigger than my face and strong from years of hard work. My eyes widened, lungs straining as they attempted to do their job. My brother's grip tightened on my arms as he tried to retreat me.

"Don't you touch my baby girl," Mama called from the big kid table, popping the dangerous bubble that had trapped me in. Grandpa stepped back, shocked and reprimanded, hand still in the air. Then, after swinging his arm back into place, he turned

babygirl

around and left, no good-bye or look backwards. My grandmother stood up swiftly and smoothed out her dress. She made her way over to Mama, kissed her head, grabbed her purse, and walked out of the room.

I stood with my back to my brother's chest, unsure of my next move. Mama's knife scraped against her plate as she cut her meat up; it had to be cold by now. I forced myself forward, went to the big table and plopped myself in the seat closest to her. Sitting where the grownups sat, the cushion still warm.

I was stone, dazed, a champion's penitence. Resurrected by something that moved across my head, smoothing my singed hair and soothing my burns. Mama's hand dropped down to mine, the one that still gripped the golden locks, and grabbed it. She pulled me close, tucked my head into her neck and held me for the first time since I was a baby.

After a long second, she mumbled, "Oh, you're sweaty." And gently pushed me back into my chair. I sat there warm and unsteady with a handful of hair, as Mama cut another bite of her steak, liquid red running across her plate and down her chin.

*



FLASH FICTION

RORY O'NEILL

Rory O'Neill is a writer and artist originally from Los Angeles, currently based in Boston. Rory's plays have been produced in the Boston Theatre Marathon and by local theatre companies, and can be found on New Play Exchange. She's currently trying to write Hamlet.

REGULAR HEADED CALF

regular headed calf

And when I stare into the sky, there are half as many stars as usual.

And I wonder why this is, until I remember that it was your idea to play with the cattle prod, that you thought it would be fun to take it out back and see what happens. We walked through tall grass together and all I could think about was the ticks likely finding homes behind my kneecaps. You walked ahead of me and you never checked to see if I was following. You held the prod like a scepter and the early-evening setting sun gave you your crown, a cloud of gnats and pollen floating through golden motes of light as if you were something good.

And Joshua showed you how to work the settings, being a real city mouse you didn't know they had settings. You know everything now, though; you're a real expert, and that's why I'm following you. Our house (the house where we stay)(the house where we happen to be staying) looks smaller now. If I had to paint this, it's all golden green grass at this hour, and a tasteful dot of red in the distance (it's a classic farmhouse)(it's red so the museum-goers know it's something man-made and violent).

And you tell me that it's fine. That you held a long piece of grass up to the cow's electric fence earlier and it barely hurt, like it didn't even hurt *that* bad.

And I believe you. Because what else is there for me to do?

And the sun has set more now and you're only cast more in gold, you don't even need to try to convince me. You're all I know how to listen to. You're a beacon of light, all blonde and sunwashed and I have to assume you're saving me from something I just don't know about yet, that you know better than I do.

And when you turn the cattle prod on and the hum of electric energy begins I swear I see you start to float.

And it's the lowest setting, you promise me that, we can start slow. Anything to make me feel safe. You say that to me and I nod, yes, I do feel safe, yes, you're telling me that. I wonder why I have to be the one to test it when this was your idea, but you say that *because* it was your idea it's only fair. That makes sense to me, mostly. I close my eyes and put out my hands. You tell me to get down in case something bad happens and I do. This makes sense to me, I think. I kneel in front of you, palms open, asking for it. As if you're about to knight me. I could be something good, too.

And there are calluses on my hands that would be perfect, thick skin to protect me.

And the world is still dark when you push the cattle prod into my left eye.

And the world remains dark for a while. Also wet, the world of my face is incredibly wet and I can't tell why, because I don't think I'm crying. I don't think that's it.

And the dark isn't my choice anymore – the world of this world has fallen into night, as told by the crickets and the coolness and the way I can tell you're not here and the way I can hear your scepter buzzing in the grass ahead of me. I lay on my back.

And

It is a perfect summer evening.

*



ANDREA VILLA FRANCO

Andrea Villa Franco is a writer and researcher from Bogotá, Colombia. Her fiction and non-fiction writing has appeared or is upcoming in *Hypertext Review*, *The Madrid Review*, *Americas Quarterly*, and *Pie de Página*. She holds a B.A. from Stanford University and an International Joint M.A. from the EU's Erasmus Mundus Program. In her work and life, she enjoys blending genres and experimenting with language(s).

EMPTY NESTING

empty nesting

Strolling, hand in hand, among the honeyed oranges and crimsons of fall, we stumble upon a nestling lying in our path.

“Look, look...”

Creamy brown feathers frame a pale chest; the baby bird lies face up on the bare concrete.

“...he’s still breathing.”

The chest struggles to rise and fall.

“How do you know it’s a he?”

Almost as if, at any moment now, the small rib cage would collapse, caving life into a rubble of bone, feather, and tissue.

“I don’t have to know.”

The last rays of twilight set the leaves ablaze as the wind sweeps them from the branches and onto the indigo sky above. We meander in place. The question of gender only serves as a distraction. It is a detour in our journey together to the inevitable, true question:

“What should we do?”

It was meant to buy us a little bit of time, but every day the sunlight fades faster, if only by just a few minutes.

“Well, I’ve heard that if we touch him, then his parents will reject him.”

“Wasn’t that about bunnies, not birds?”

From here, we can still see the far-off pines that coat the hills that rise beyond the shingles of the houses.

“Do birds have noses?”

She buries her chin deeper into the folds of her fluffy orange scarf. A chill has crept into the breeze, and I realize I have never thought about it—do they, or can they, like us, smell the leaves in decay, the damp dirt, the pines?

“He’s a late nester, in any case.”

“And what’s that?”

“A baby bird that is born late in the year.”

“Too late?”

She lowers her gaze back onto the sidewalk. The question has left a small frown on her lips, and I want to tell her that no, it is never too late.

But I hesitate.

I watch, instead, as she fidgets with an orange strand of wool that has come undone from her scarf.

I shouldn’t have mentioned it.

By the end of the season, all the trees will be bare, but not the pines. They will continue to watch us from the hills and then, one day, through the flurry of snowfall.

Perhaps the time has come. Perhaps I should speak to her now about the cycle of life, as my mother did, on a summer morning, when a bird of prey carried off the squirrel I was chasing across the park. After all, who will feel sorry for the eagle when it starves?

“Why don’t we move him somewhere safer for the night?”

“Somewhere where the cats can’t get to him?”

empty nesting

She watches me as I bend down and gather the nestling into my hands. He is impossibly weightless, almost too light for hands so big to carry. The cold flushes my fingers red.

“Look at how he shivers...”

She speaks in hushed tones as she peers into my hands.

“Do you think he fell from all the way up there?”

And it is suddenly too late to see much among the tree branches that, like dark veins, web the evening above us. The leaves continue to fall, but the early night has robbed them of color.

“Maybe over here...”

It feels like, soon, we will all begin to dissolve into shadow, in the moments just before the streetlamps alight.

“...this could be a good spot for him to pass the night.”

I place the nestling in the small nook of a young tree that sprouts near us, at the edge of the path, and hope that the embrace of wood will be a little less cold.

“Don’t you think?”

She tilts her head and her smooth skin creases around her almond eyes, like it tends to do on those late weekday evenings, when she stays up at her desk, frustrated, under the glare of the study lamp, confronted with some tricky long divisions she just can’t solve.

“I don’t know.”

She looks away and, for a moment, we pause, unconvinced. As unconvinced, perhaps, as when, on those late evenings, I try to make the equations and the numbers on the page make sense, but she knows, and I know that I just can’t make them sit still.

“I think we’ve done the best we can.”

But she doesn’t hear me. And I can feel it now, how she—like a moth drawn to light—is beginning to flutter off.

I watch as she begins to hop around, scattering the fallen leaves that crunch under her knit boots. It will take a few minutes for her to tire, to catch her breath.

I’ve done the best I can.

Even if I can’t always help her arrive at the right answer by the end of the night, not anymore.

I’ve done the best I can.

The temperature drops and the evening thickens; I realize we have lost sight of the tree.

But it’s late now.

She has fallen quiet now.

I see her, wide-eyed, staring out beyond the park’s shadows and into the electric glow of the city. A mug of hot milk, her favorite blanket, the old plushy green couch—it all awaits her. She is ready to go back home.

And I graze, with the tip of my tongue, the words that would bring her back to me. I could do it, I could raise my voice and chart out a new path for us, for all three of us—one in which I would feel, once again, the drum

empty nesting

of the tiny heartbeat, between my palms.

It'll be too cold tonight.

Let's take him home.

Together, we could find a warm spot near the heater in her room. And with some old clothes, we could make a soft bed in a shoebox for him. I could teach her how to dip the dropper into a cup of water, how to squeeze out tiny, glowing beads like morning dew.

My breath condenses for a moment.

Before dissolving back into shadow.

And I watch as she begins to wander off, beckoning me to follow.

She too has tucked the nestling away into a nook, within her memory, and she is ready to walk away, until one day, without warning, she will find a way back to him, to the tree, and to this evening.

Once we found a baby bird that had fallen out of its nest. I don't know what happened to it after that night.

It was so cold.

*



AMANDA SIRI HILL

Amanda Siri Hill loves to explore inner demons through storytelling. You can find her short fiction on the *Creepy Podcast* and Utah's Best Poetry and Prose 2023. Accolades include multiple First, Second, and Third Place awards at Storymaker's Conference and The Quills Conference. When not writing, she collects books and bikes in her South Jordan home that she shares with her husband and five children. Connect with her on Instagram @amandasirihill and her website amandasirihill.com.

THE GREAT SWIM DIVIDE

the great swim divide

May 5, 2024

To: Carol376@gmail.com

From JohnTMalrose@gmail.com

Subject: Please stop taking all the swim lessons

I know you check your email. You can't pretend you're too old to understand technology because you're an expert at using the computer to get online and take all the swim lesson slots before anyone else can. You've forced me to send this email since you insist on avoiding me at the mailbox.

Don't think I've forgotten, or that I will let this go. James is the best swim coach this side of the Mississippi and I found him first. Please, stop taking all the swim lessons from my kids. Please.

May 11, 2024

To: JohnTMalrose@gmail.com

From: Carol376@gmail.com

Re: Please stop taking all the swim lessons

I've lived 84 years and I can do what I want.

May 12, 2024

To: Carol376@gmail.com

From: JohnTMalrose@gmail.com

Re: Re: Please stop taking all the swim lessons

Do you just want my kids to drown? You know these lessons are for children to learn how to be safe in the water? You can barely walk, why swim?

the great swim divide

May 22, 2024

To: James@swimsafekids.com

From: JohnTMalrose@gmail.com

Subject: Evil elderly woman intends for children to drown

James,

I can't thank you enough for your dedication in teaching my children to swim. I know your time is valuable so I will be brief.

I referred my neighbor Carol to you when she mentioned a desire to learn to swim in her old age, and now she books all the lessons the moment they hit the website. I don't even have a chance to check my calendar before they are all gone. There must be a limit on the amount of lessons she is allowed to sign up for.

Please speak to her about her lack of consideration. I would hate for the drowning of a child to be on her conscience.

May 23, 2024

To: JohnTMalrose@gmail.com

From: James@swimsafekids.org

Re: Evil elderly woman intends for children to drown

John,

Please refer to the booking policy on our website. All lessons booked through our online process are final. Best of luck.

James

the great swim dividee

May 25.2024

To: Carol376@gmail.com

From: JerricaOlsen20@gmail.com

Subject: Benefits of Knitting

Carol,

Your tulips are looking lovely, they're the best on the street. Thank you for taking such good care of your yard; it lifts the beauty of our neighborhood.

I just got off the phone with John and he isn't happy. I know it's a free country and you have every right to book whatever swim lessons you want, but don't you think the kids need them more? What kind of swimming are you going to do at your age anyway? Maybe you could pick up knitting instead? It's meditative and relaxing—just up your alley. Anyway, John said he won't shovel your driveway this winter if you don't stop.

Jerrica

May 27, 2024

To: JerricaOlsen20@gmail.com

From: Susan_Buttars@taxoffice.com

Subject: Back off

Jerrica,

I ran into Carol while walking my dogs yesterday. I know you meant well, but you can't tell a woman to pick up knitting, even if she is 84.

Susan

the great swim divide

May 31, 2024

To: ChadCarter@healthsystems.com
From: ToddBlack@Designstudio.com
Subject: So long friend

Chad,

My wife said your wife said you helped Carol fix her internet, and now we can't go biking anymore. Sorry.

Todd

June 1, 2024

To: Carol376@gmail.com
From: JohnTMalrose@gmail.com
Subject: Enough already

Carol,

It is heartbreaking to see a friendly neighborhood break into two factions. I think enough is enough. Can we please meet to discuss a solution?

John

June 4th, 2024

To: Catwhisperer@comcast.net
From: BombshellBlondie69@gmail.com
Subject: Not freezing over yet

Not a chance in hell. John found James first and Carol can shove it. She's too old for swim lessons anyway. What's she gonna do? Swim the English Channel? Remember last year when she kept feeding the deer and they ate our gardens? I'm sick of her acting like she is the only person in this world. What about the rest of us?

the great swim dividee

I'm sick of her acting like she is the only person in this world. What about the rest of us?

June 7th, 2024

To: Carol376@gmail.com

From: JohnTMalrose@gmail.com

Subject: Final warning

Your lack of concern for myself and the rest of our community is appalling. You hide behind the face of a sweet old woman, when in reality you are a child-killing witch and we won't stand for it anymore. This is your last warning before we implement a new plan.

Lessons for the next month hit the website in a few days—you better be ready because we are.

June 14, 2024

Free listing on Craig's List

Please come get all the granny swim diapers you want, no charge. I had to buy every package from the local store to keep a certain woman out of the pool so my kids won't drown. If your name is Carol, do not respond.

June 14th 2024

To: Carol376@gmail.com

From: JohnTMalrose@gmail.com

Subject: Warm water

Todd was able to get one slot before you took the rest and he will be peeing in the pool before you get in.

the great swim divide

June 20th, 2024

To: JerricaOlsen20@gmail.com

From: Catwhisperer@comcast.net

Subject: A million thanks

Carol gave me the yarn and needles you left on her front step and showed me your last email about the benefits of knitting. Since Carol is retired, she is more relaxed than either of us and does not need to knit, so I decided to take it up. Turns out you were right, I love it! Maybe you should join me.

July 1st, 2025

To: Undisclosed recipients

From: James@swimsafekids.org

Subject: Welcome Carol

Dear Customers,

You may have noticed when you showed up to lessons last week that we have a new swim coach. We are pleased to welcome Carol and we'd like to congratulate her on her recent swim across the English Channel. We are honored she chose to be a part of our community. With Swim Safe Kids in her competent hands, I have decided to retire from lessons after ten years of teaching. Thank you for being a part of the Swim Safe Kids family.

Be sure to sign up fast, her slots fill up quickly.

James

December 10th, 2025

To: Carol376@gmail.com

From: JohnTMalrose@gmail.com

Subject: Stop taking all the ski classes

*

The background is an abstract composition of textured, painterly strokes. A broad diagonal band of vibrant green runs from the upper left towards the lower right. Above this band, there are soft, blended areas of pale yellow and light blue. Below the green band, the colors transition into deeper blues and purples, creating a sense of depth and movement. The overall texture is grainy and organic, reminiscent of watercolor or heavy ink wash.

SHORT CREATIVE NONFICTION



DANIELA GARVUE

Daniela Garvue hails from central Nebraska but now lives in Missoula, Montana, where she received her MFA in creative writing, and works as a gardener and receptionist. Last year, her band The Pettifoggers released their first album, *Small Claims*, available everywhere. She's been published in several magazines including *The Bellevue Literary Review* and the *Tahoma Literary Review*, and has a forthcoming story in *The Sewanee Review*. This year she finished her novel at her desk job, which unfortunately means she has to start paying attention to her work.

A LIST OF MISSOULA AREA GROCERY STORES TO CRY IN, RANKED

a list of missoula area grocery stores to cry in, ranked

1. Yoke's Fresh Market. It's familiar, yet anonymous. The lighting suggests you may be in any town, any decade. You may call your mother, who is too busy to talk, and when you hang up, you may hear the voice of your ex-boyfriend behind you, who asks why you are crying. Why do you think? you say. But he is already blurring into the eggs and the lactose-free milk, which you have started drinking because of him. Even now with your freedom to buy regular milk, you pay extra for the ultra-processed lactose-free cartons you're used to. There are people you know here. Your ex says hello to a shelf stocker. Your neighbor is gesturing wildly at the pharmacist. You turn the corner to cry in the frozen foods aisle, and your ex drops to his knees between the ice cream and the premade pies. An old man squeezes around you to reach for the sorbet, says nothing as though he's used to public displays of woe. Your ex is getting softer around the edges, fragmenting into refrigerated light. He is diminishing into a tiny, sorrowful star. Thank goodness. You don't have to face the clerk because there are four self-check-out aisles, but you do anyway, because she is familiar, anonymous, and because she will give you the code to the bathroom. **4.5/5 tears.**

2. The Good Food Store. How can you possibly cry among such healthful and nutritious bulk grains? Yet here you are again. The tubs behind you are full of honey, with honeycomb floating ghostlike, barely visible through the opaque plastic. If you want, you could swab your finger around the rim for a treat, but it's crusty, and anyway a young woman with a green apron and earrings made from the shell of an invasive beetle is tipping a gallon of safflower oil into a nearby tub. All you want is sunflower oil and ibuprofen. None of this is right. Nothing has been right since you were twenty-six. You stumble to the home goods section, where tasteful cedar knife blocks look like you might always wake up to starched sheets and clean sunlight. Like your windowsill gathers no dust and your father is still alive. If you lose yourself here, you might end up among arnica salves and activated charcoal toothpaste tabs. You cannot find ibuprofen anywhere. But if you turn past the knife blocks, you will find self-serve soups by the pound. There are many container options available, but you cannot weigh them until you check out. How are you supposed to know how much a pound of soup feels like? You

a list of missoula area grocery stores to cry in, ranked

can't afford a pound of soup, so you aim for a half-pound. Only at the register, the clerk weighs the soup and tells you it's a pound and a half. **3/5 tears.**

3. Walmart. This is a safe place for crying. You are not the only one. When you were a child, you pressed your forehead to the lobster tank and cried to watch them crawl over each other, their claws bound in blue rubber bands. But Walmart no longer keeps lobsters – no one ever remembered to clean their tanks, so the lobsters grew white and fuzzy with mold even before they were boiled alive. Now you can cry in the inhumanly wide chip aisle, or behind the teen girls accessories display, or in a changing room. But there is always a risk of hearing the sobs of another woman in the room next door. And if you stay too long in the teen girls accessories display, you might remember a set of earrings you bought your ex-boyfriend's child, who might have been your step-daughter. And why, when her older sister told a group of boys at the mall that you were their mom (to stop them from teasing her), did you say, No I'm not? Why didn't you just play along? This question will follow you down the chip aisle and into the rows of beer and past the cleaning supplies and through the self-check-out line. They don't even have real clerks here. They expect you to bag your own groceries while you are wondering what to say when she texts you. What do you tell a thirteen-year-old girl about love and its pitfalls? What do you tell her about anything? The best you can do is cry into the coin vortex, where, if you're lucky, you will spin faster and faster until at last you are allowed to fall into the one private place in the whole store, and rest there among the pennies and dropped suckers and, near the bottom, a child's tooth. **2/5 tears.**

4. Costco. You haven't cried in Costco for a long time, but when you do, you open like cystic acne finally brought to the surface. Here all along were the signs of your decline: the too-sweet granola bars, the rattling windshield wipers, the thirty-pound bags of dog food. Why are you here? How did they even let you in? You don't have a card anymore, not that you ever did. So much of what you had was dependent on others. And surely the oldest dog is getting low on his bag, and who will remember to sing him a little song in the morning as they scoop out a cupful for his breakfast? Who will pour water into his bowl to soften the pellets? There are women in hairnets serving the

a list of missoula area grocery stores to cry in, ranked

worst potato salad you've ever tasted, but you are too polite to say so, and you tuck a tub of the premade mix under your arm and make your way to the front. You cannot help but measure your finger size at the affordable wedding ring stand. A man asks if he can help you. There is nowhere to hide in Costco. Even in the darkest corner, among the car floor mats and the fifty-pack of ballpoint pens, you will run into a couple pushing the biggest cart you've ever seen, and they are frantic. They are not interested in going quietly by because they need an appliance that is on sale right behind you, and you can't even tell what it is. It doesn't seem to clean, cook, or refrigerate. Its interface glows with an ominous blue light, which signals its Bluetooth capability. The couple is so intent on this strange machine that if you are not careful you will be scooped up into their enormous cart and taken to their home, only for them to realize you are cracked beyond repair. You army crawl under the cart, abandoning the potato salad, and slip out the front, but the checkers who count your merchandise see you and know you don't belong. They call for you, but you're already running out the door, passing the row of sickly trees out front, which are bound and gagged among the river stone like twinkles in a sex dungeon. **1/5 tears.**

5. Orange Street Food Farm. This is the worst grocery store for crying. The aisles are narrow and all your friends shop here. A woman who used to be your neighbor talks about her dead dog. The deli boy (a full-grown man) flirts with you. You can't even cry in the bread aisle, usually the calmest shore of every grocery archipelago, because here it is sandwiched between the preening eye of the deli boy and the discount beer vortex, where people circle round and around, disappointed. All they have are strawberry radlers. Once, years ago, you and a group of friends bought a pack of ninety-nine Pabst Blue Ribbon beers here. It was rumored that inside the extra-long box of white and blue cans was a single cherry red bonus can, rounding it up to an even hundred. After that, all of your friends started moving away, and at goodbye party after goodbye party, the extra long box grew emptier and emptier until you had opened the ninety-ninth beer without even realizing it. There was no red bonus can. There were only ninety-nine blue cans. This bothered you more than you can explain, and it still does. Now all your friends are gone, and you don't even know what happened to the box. **0/5 tears.**

*



KATHRYN O'DAY

Kathryn O'Day is a nonfiction writer and former teacher. She writes about work, friendship, politics, and cities. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee and winner of the Northwind Writing Award. Her creative work has appeared in *Pangyrus*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Prose Online*, and *The Northwind Anthology*, and she reads fiction submissions for *TriQuarterly Magazine*, which also published her interview with Aram Mrjoian. Much of her free time is spent wandering around the Cook County Forest Preserve, composing long, elaborate lists, and dreaming of the day her memoir hits the bestseller list..

AMONGST WOMEN

amongst women

I'm rushing off to the twentieth reunion for the Immaculata Class of 2004 when I realize I've misplaced the postcard.

The back of it says something like, "Merry Christmas and Blessings for a Faith-Filled 2001." Turn it over and you'll find a photograph of several hundred women, most of them young. I'm in there somewhere, though it's impossible to find me among all the blurred faces. Behind us, the beige-yellow bricks of the school, a scraggly leafless tree, and, in sharp focus, a heavy-browed, hollow-eyed statue towering three stories up into a gloomy, overcast sky. This metallic colossus is Our Lady of the Millennium, a supersized iteration of the BVM (the Blessed Virgin Mary, for anyone not in the know).

I thought of the postcard immediately when Cherise Johnson invited me to the celebration. I'm honored by the invitation – how many teachers go to their students' reunions? Still, time and distance can create awkwardness, and a relic of a shared memory might ease conversation.

The postcard isn't lost-lost. I've simply hidden it from myself, as I sometimes do. I've no time to search, though, having squandered all my time trying on different teacher-y outfits. I rifle through a drawer, glance at my watch, and head out, sighing.

I've never lived close to Immaculata, not even twenty years ago before I moved to the Chicago suburbs. I'm a North-Sider, and Immaculata is on the South Side – south of the Loop, south of Comiskey Park, south even of the University of Chicago, and another five miles west from there. I remember driving that first day, foolishly taking Western Avenue instead of the highway. Seventeen miles of interminable red lights. Of car dealers and empty lots and taquerias. Of dodging

potholes and aggressive merges, two lanes squeezing into one at each overpass.

Until the turn at 67th Street, where industrial sprawl gave way to evenly-spaced catalpa trees and well-tended front lawns. Two-flats, bungalows, the red-brick motherhouse for the Sisters of St. Aldabert, and, finally, the parking lot and the back of the school.

There's something soothing about this hidden place, I remember thinking on that first day in 2000, before reminding myself that my work here would be temporary.

I never wanted to work in a Catholic school.

The problem wasn't the size of my paycheck (painfully small). Nor was it the commute (painfully long). It was the fact that I wasn't Catholic.

Yes, I'd grown up in the church – mass on Sundays, CCD on Mondays, forehead-smudge on Ash Wednesday, and so on. I even fantasized at twelve about joining a convent. By the time I got to college, however, I realized how deeply uncool Catholicism was, particularly when I viewed it through the eyes of my militantly secular boyfriend. The church was misogynistic, homophobic, corrupt, and, above all, *weird*.

Now, however, I was 28 and desperate for work. I'd bounced from city to city, job to job, having graduated with an English degree and no plan beyond marriage to my militantly-secular boyfriend under the foolish assumption that I'd find my place through him. Unfortunately, he was just as lost as I was.

We finally settled in Chicago where I decid-

amongst women

ed to try putting that English degree to work in a high school classroom.

I sent out my resume and waited.

Weeks passed, but I received no responses, save one: Immaculata, a Catholic single-sex school almost twenty miles south of my apartment.

“They’re barely even paying you!” my new husband protested.

But I needed work. So, I packed a few decorations into a crate and gassed up for a long drive down Western Avenue.

Walking into the school on that first day, I couldn’t believe how still the halls were, my footsteps the only sound beyond the gentle hum of fans. The air was warm but clean, permeated by the scent of Murphy’s Oil Soap.

A nun greeted me in the front office, gray curls peeking from beneath a crisp blue veil, and handed me the keys to my new classroom.

“Who will I be sharing with?” I asked.

“I beg your pardon?”

“Who else will be teaching there?”

“Oh no, dear. It’s *your* space!” she said, then wished me luck, eyes twinkling.

The room was a revelation. Its walls were a buttery shade of yellow, and sunshine poured through an entire wall of windows. All the furniture – desks, chairs, and podium – was made of wood and stained the col-

or of honey. I strolled between the rows of round-cornered student desks, wondering if I could fit them into a circle rather than rows. I breathed deeply, my extremities slowly loosening and unfurling like the petals of a flower.

This will be my sanctuary, I thought.

Then, I spotted the crucifix.

Right in the middle of my classroom wall.

I’d never been much of a crucifix fan. At mass, I’d usually ignore it, preferring to gaze at the pictures in the stained-glass windows. Or sometimes I’d simply close my eyes and allow the woody aroma of incense to carry me off to an imaginary realm.

This time, however, I found it impossible to ignore the bowed head, the slumped, defeated body. How gruesome it was, how barbaric. Like a public hanging, or a head on a pike.

It had to go.

I peeked out the door to check for stray nuns. Moving quickly, I dragged a chair from one of the student desks and climbed it, replacing the crucifix with a picture of Virginia Woolf. It wasn’t long before Gwendolyn Brooks, Sandra Cisneros, and Eudora Welty joined her in a line above the chalkboard. Women writers for a class of women, Jesus tucked away in a cupboard.

It was *my* space, after all.

A week later, the freshmen paraded in. They marched solemnly, single-file and silent, a row of penguins.

amongst women

After selecting their desks in the large square I'd arranged, they waited silently for class to begin. One girl sat frozen, spine straight, eyebrows raised, mouth in a small "o." Next to her, a girl with stud earrings shaped like aliens, eyes flitting from face to face. Only one girl seemed unfazed by all the newness. She swept the room with a haughty glance, then opened an enormous leopard-print binder and brandished a feather-topped pen.

The bell rang. We stared at each other.

A sweet-faced girl raised her hand.

"May I lead the class in prayer?" she asked.

I nodded, grateful she'd taken the reins.

"Does anyone have special intentions?" she asked.

My students peered at each other, strangers with whom they would learn and pray for the next four years. I didn't know this yet, but since preschool, many of them had never ventured beyond their ethnically-homogenous parishes.

Eventually, the silence gave way to a few tentatively raised hands as they took turns sharing their prayers. God bless my family. God bless my friends. May God grant me a good start to high school. "May God grant me a boyfriend," the girl with the feather-pen prayed. The other girls giggled, then made the sign of the cross.

Prayers said, my students looked up at me, all smiles now.

I was smiling, too.

Over the course of the first week, my freshmen became acquainted with the school rules. A sample:

Prayer: Listen to the Bible passage over the intercom. Do not giggle, even if it's the one about the ravens pecking out your eyeballs and eating them.

Liturgy: Every Wednesday, your homeroom teacher will guide you to your seat in the auditorium. Everybody must stand and move towards the front when it's time for communion. Do not goof off when we sing that song about the BVM. Nothing about the BVM is funny. Ever.

Halls: Silent during school. Do not look up at the sound of Sister Maria's scooter.

Library: Do not touch the ferns. They are the pride and joy of Sister Marianne. Do not visit pornographic sites on the school computers. Everyone will know.

Cafeteria: Remain at your table until you are dismissed. Do not scream or catcall should a workman happen into the cafeteria.

Computer Lab: Do not touch the computers. Do not touch the blinds. Do not close the door. Do not open the door wider than 45 degrees. Do not sit down until Sister Petra has told you to do so. Be respectful. Sister Petra has just celebrated her eightieth birthday, her sixtieth anniversary as a bride of Christ.

There were rules for me, too. Most of these were unspoken, others broad and open to interpretation. A few, however, were absolute and explicitly delineated on my contract as conditions of my employment.

amongst women

I was to attend all after-school prayer meetings (approximately six per year) as well as the annual faculty retreat. I was also to attend one after-school tour of the motherhouse to learn about the Sisters of St. Aldabert, their migration from Poland to the South Side, their vision of Catholic womanhood, and their mission to mold generations of South Side girls into lovers of Christ. Part of my job, therefore, was to promote and model this vision: speaking gently, dressing modestly (toes and shoulders covered regardless of the weather), bowing my head in prayer, and queuing up for communion.

The good news was that I could simply fake it. All I had to do was go through the motions, motions that were already rote, thanks to my Catholic upbringing. Stand up, sit down, genuflect. Like clapping along to the song about the Farmer and the Cow Man in a high school musical. I didn't have to *believe* anything.

I got along just fine until mid-September, when a nun interrupted my class to call me into the hall.

It was Sister Maureen, the guidance counselor. Normally, she was quite friendly, but today, she wasn't smiling.

"Your cross is missing," she hissed.

"My what?"

"The cross in your room – it's missing!"

"No!" My eyes opened wide, feigning innocence, though I could feel the warmth creeping into my cheeks. How had she noticed? Had she somehow seen me pulling it down? Or had she been snooping in my room?

Sister Maureen moved a step closer, besieg-

ing me with the powdery aroma of Dove soap. Her icy eyes bored into me. A tight sensation moved from my chest to my throat as I pictured her charging into the room and rifling through my cabinets and drawers, locating the crucifix and waving it before the shocked eyes of my students.

"We'll take care of this," the nun finally muttered, then marched toward the front office.

Not even ten minutes later, the school custodian was banging away with a hammer in the spot between Gwendolyn Brooks and Sandra Cisneros, my students all the while diligently completing their grammar exercises. The custodian stepped down from his ladder, revealing a brand-new crucifix twice the size of the original. Nobody, including Jesus, looked up.

It may have been my space, but I was expected to share it with Jesus.

Once up, however, I came to accept the crucifix as a condition of my employment. I didn't want to leave Immaculata. I liked it.

I liked the South Side, its boulevards and bungalows. I liked its pace, slower than the North Side, slow enough to provide a hint of warmth to the usual gruffness of Chicago interactions. I liked the school building, its uncluttered halls, my divine classroom, cross included. Truth be told, I liked the Sisters of St. Aldabert. I even liked Sister Maureen, crucifix-enforcer, whose beatific smile returned with the restoration of Jesus to my classroom walls.

Best of all, I liked my students: South Side girls whose meekness in the classroom gave way to a wonderful boisterousness once the

amongst women

bell rang.

“Hey, Girl!” they’d holler from their lockers. “Hey, Girl!” they’d call out at lunch. “Hey, Girl!” they’d scream at pep rallies, to the girls on the team and especially to the members of the surprisingly raunchy cheerleading squad.

Soon, they were shouting at me, too, whenever our paths crossed in the hall. “Hey, Ms. O’Day Girl!” Cherise Johnson would shriek before school and “Hello, Ms. O’Day *Dah*-ling!” Crystal Jefferson would trill after.

Once the school day ended, they’d drop by to say “hey” again. Some lingered, bragging about their ruthlessness on the community water polo team or recounting the highlights of a recent pro-wrestling match. They shared stories of trips “back home” to Mexico or Mississippi, showed off pictures of pets and grandparents and crushes. I found myself leaving the school later and later as the year progressed, though it prolonged my commute-time.

“You love those girls more than you love me,” my militantly secular husband pouted one night in between fights.

“That’s ridiculous!” I replied, laughing uneasily.

I want to say it was a Monday in early December when she arrived.

The morning was raw, I remember. Still groggy from the weekend, I turned off 67th Street to behold an awesome erection in the school parking lot. It was Our Lady of the New Millennium, the BVM herself, cast in thirty-four feet of stainless steel.

I staggered out of the car and approached the platform, the statue’s toe peeking out at me like the burnished head of a newborn baby. I craned my neck, taking in two stories of billowing stainless-steel robes, modest undulations at the breasts and belly. Wrists peeking from bell-like sleeves, hands not quite meeting in prayer, hollow of neck, jut of chin.

It wasn’t my first run-in with the statue. She’d been making the rounds in Chicago church parking lots for well over a year, and I’d caught glimpses of her head poking out from behind steeples from time to time. Word was that a devout millionaire had been inspired by the statue of Ceres on the Chicago Board of Trade to sponsor the creation of an even-taller BVM, upping the ante by casting it entirely in stainless steel. The millionaire was so taken by this idea that he oversaw and funded the entire project, including a flat-bed truck to cart her around and a hydraulic lift to hoist her up. She had even traveled down to St. Louis to be blessed by the Pope during his visit a few years earlier.

And now she was here. I shuddered. This was worse than the crucifix.

Still, what could I do? School was about to start. Sighing, I headed into the building and up the stairs to my classroom where the statue’s hollow eye stared zombie-like into my window. It couldn’t have been more than half a foot wide, but it seemed so much bigger, like the eye of a monster. Kong eyeing Fay Wray in her bed or a giant octopus glaring into a porthole.

Unblinking, the eye saw all. It saw my room, my decorations, the replacement-crucifix. It saw the place where the first crucifix had hung.

amongst women

The eye saw me, too. And it knew me for what I was: an imposter.

Shuddering, I pulled the drapes shut, reminding myself that the statue wouldn't be there forever. I just had to endure it for a week or two, then the truck would haul it off to another parking lot.

"Hail Mary," I murmured along with the Immaculata students and staff. A thousand hushed recitations reverberated around the auditorium. It was Wednesday, liturgy day, with a few added Mary prayers because of the statue.

From what I could tell, I was the only person in the school creeped out by Our Lady of the Millennium. The nuns loved her. The students mostly regarded her as a curiosity, an extra-large, extra-shiny tchotchke. Eye-catching, perhaps, but hardly menacing.

"Blessed are thou amongst women," we chanted. How would I have seen that statue when I was the age of my students? In those days, I rather liked the BVM. I even displayed an old bust of her in my bedroom, and in spring, I'd scatter fallen blossoms around her base, infusing my space with a sweet scent. The practice would make me feel deliciously feminine, at one with a long line of Catholic women ancestors.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God." It was a prayer I'd known as long as I could remember. I might have recited it fifty-three times in a single sitting when I was younger. That's how many "Hail Marys" there are in the Rosary – fifty-three. Each "Hail Mary" represents a rose for the BVM, making the full Rosary a "crown of roses" for the Queen

of Heaven, not unlike the blossoms I once scattered around my bust.

I never believed anyone was listening when I prayed. Still, I'd say the Rosary from time to time. The practice reassured me, sheltered me, quieted my teeming brain.

I snuck a glance at the bowed heads around me. What did prayer do for them? Did it soothe them when they were uncertain? Steady them when they were anxious? Comfort them when they were lonely?

Could it comfort me, too? Could it provide a safe space for my restless soul? Warm me, embrace me, accept me? Could prayer be a place? Could it be my space?

"Amen," we all said, standing for the final hymn.

By Friday, the school was crackling with excitement. Christmas was approaching, and afternoon classes were suspended for an all-school gathering under the statue.

"It's time, girls!" a voice called from the intercom. My students slammed their books shut, springing from their seats. The hall was swarming, lockers crashing open and shut as girls collected coats and greeted friends with screams of delight. Clutches of nuns chattered and giggled, joining the students down the stairs to the parking lot.

Together, we poured out the back door into the icy air and the soaring strains of an aria. *Puccini*, I thought, scanning the scene to detect the aria's source, when I spied two smiling student faces posted with speakers at an open window. I looked up at a fleeting break in the clouds where beams from the sun

amongst women

ricocheted off the statue like lights from a mirror ball, the parking lot transformed momentarily into a giant outdoor discotheque.

Somehow, a photographer corralled us all into a group. “Smile,” he said, and I could swear we all smiled, the BVM towering above us like a massive hen guarding her chicks.

And yet, we look somber on the postcard, the statue staring zombie-like, its steel dulled by a gloomy overcast sky. How I wish now I had taken the time to search for it before leaving the house. Then, maybe, I could have asked my students about it. Did they remember the Puccini? Did they catch the rays of the mirror-ball, too?

How will I approach my girls now? Will I pour out my heart, tell them how they changed my life, what it meant to me when they called out to me in the halls, or stopped by my room to chat, or introduced me to their dates at prom? Will I finally tell them about the sudden protective urge that swept over me our second year together as we watched the towers go down on television, a moment I will never forget, not only because of its awful place in history but because it was then I realized I wanted to be a mother?

My militantly secular husband was on to something when he accused me of loving my students more than him. Certainly my love for them and the school would last far longer than my marriage, which collapsed at the end of my second year at Immaculata. And my love for them would nurture and fortify me until I was ready to move on. Unlike my love for him, it would never fully leave me, not even when I left for a public school job on the North Side, married again,

started a family.

My students, meanwhile, would also move on – graduating, taking jobs, some as teachers. Others are now raising daughters the same age as mine, the same age as that girl with the feather-topped pen.

She, incidentally, is a fashion-influencer now. The girl with the alien earrings is a Chicago police officer. Cherise Johnson is a “Crafting Connoisseur.” Pulling my car into the lot, I can hear their voices escaping from the windows of the cafeteria. “Hey, Girl!” the voices call out, high over the bass of a song by J. Lo.

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ARTWORK

ISSUE XVII

ART

COVER: "Kunik" by Hiokit Lao

My name is Hiokit Lao. I am a 29-year-old self-taught artist based in NYC. I aim to create art that ignites conversations and celebrates life, encouraging viewers to explore different narratives within the artwork. Each piece is a homage to cultural diversity, intertwining social narratives and my artistic vision. Through surreal, abstract, and vibrant elements, I aim to create meaningful art that instills hope and positivity.

"Iceland Ice Circles 2'" (pg. 3) "Mississippi" (pg. 19) by Cynthia Yatchman

"In my paintings, I primarily use acrylic paint, latex paints, inks, papers and charcoal. My images contain many diverse layers of meaning, from the universal to the specific and personal. Many of my works are abstract. I am frequently interested in pattern and/or creating a rich sensual surface by making layer upon layer of marks. There is often an unseen history within these layers as images are obscured and revealed.

My Prints are frequently made with SafetyKut, a softer type of linoleum, I often print on unconventional surfaces, like plaster and wall paper."

"Glass" (pg. 7) "Moontime" (pg. 29) by Audrey Larson

Audrey Larson is a queer writer and visual artist who is far more interested in asking questions than in finding answers. They prefer to create imperfectly, to call tradition into question, and to texture their work with layers of words and images to make something that defies easy categorization. They draw strong inspiration from their physical surroundings and community in Bellingham, Washington, and are known for their love of cold beaches, public libraries, and old bicycles. Their work has been published by *Cyclista Zine*, *carte blanche magazine*, and *Pile Press*. Audrey can be found on Instagram @_audreylarson

ISSUE XVII

ART

"Gloom Madness Beauty" (pg. 23) by John Widdowson

"My art basis is on abstract expressionism, depth of visual texture and structure. Most based on traditional media and techniques, such as canvas, acrylic and mixed media."

TikTok: ghetto.gallery

"Untitled" (pg. 51) by Lizzie Falvey

Lizzie Falvey, a New England native and graduate of Massachusetts College of Art and Design, is a professor and artist whose acrylic monoprints are characterized by bold colors, angular lines, and frenetic compositions. She is interested in bringing the attention of the viewer to the present so that they can engage with their own disquietude.

"Water" (pg. 65) by Karissa Ho

Karissa Ho is a writer and artist from Los Angeles. Her poems and paintings have appeared or are forthcoming in *JMWW*, *Red Ogre Review*, *Radar Poetry*, and *Flash Frog*. She studies English literature and economics at the University of California, Berkeley, and she is a very fast walker.

"Season of Change" (pg. 78) by Britnie Walston

Britnie graduated from Goucher College with a bachelors in studio art. Inspired by nature; she depicts the absence of human presence, liberation ("set free"), and freedom ("being free") through light and vibrant colors. Capturing the beauty of nature, Britnie blends boundaries between reality and abstraction, creating a unique dreamscape atmosphere. Experimental processes such as combining abstract painting with digital manipulation are utilized. Her work's featured in magazines such as *Denver Quarterly*, *Chestnut Review*, and others.

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