The Good Life Review

TGLR
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thegoodlife 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 – witing that lingers in the mind long after he 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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www.TheGoodLifeReview.com

ISSUE NINETEEN MASTHEAD

TGLR in this issue

COVER

Sarah Kohrs * Natural Hue

"In “Natural Hue,” taken in Oregon, the moment settles like a lambda point, portraying humanity’s interactions with nature. Old farming equipment piles up next to the edge of a forest, whose trees are razed for humanity’s needs.

Desmond Tutu said, “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.” When we pause and savor the image, the emotional draw-up can impact real-world change. That’s what I hope for my art."

POETRY

SHORT CREATIVE NONFICTION

TGLR in this issue

FLASH FICTION

FLASH CREATIVE NONFICTION

SHORT FICTION

ART


POETRY

CHRIS LISIESKI

Chris Lisieski is an attorney and poet. He graduated from Antioch College with a degree in philosophy and creative writing, and the University of Virginia with a J.D. His work has been published by *In Parentheses, The Courtship of Winds,* and *The Journal of Undiscovered Poets*. He has one good dog, one other dog, and a multitude of rotating hobbies.

ephemera 31

hunter is deadly
quiet when he comes
home after seven
twelves on the rig
eyes in the defilade
between brow and cheek
nothing's bad
enough to hold sway
like what he saw
in the desert a girl
holding half of her
twin like a red rag
doll like half
of her heart missing
so when he drinks
he does it with purpose
and his doodles
on the napkin
spiral looser
as the fallen soldiers
mount next to him
until becca brings them
to the recycling
quietly.

*

ALEX DODT

Alex is working on a book of poems and a screenplay, and you can find his words in *Emerson Review*, *Stoneboat Journal*, *Ghost City Review*, and other wonderful places across the internet. He founded *The Grief Commune*, a magazine about the politics of public grief which will publish its first issue this year. Free Palestine!

SOMEWHERE BETWEEN CHILDHOOD & YOUR VERTICAL ABANDONING YOU & YESTERDAY IS

somewhere between childhood & your vertical abandoning you

My student, apoplectic, hallucinatively frothing, eyes
the growing boatload of candy on my desk,

asks *Will that be curved?* Into their test-warm palm
I pour fifteen Skittles. A handful lands

somewhere between jack shit & a shit ton—a scooch
more than some, a tad less than a load,

cousin of bunches—but a handful, I'm sure, is nothing
like a fistful. The difference is what's being

held. A handful nurses gifted milk Kisses, a newborn's
wet cheek, a spring cherry blossom

surprise; a fistful clenches dollars, trophies, enough
pills to not wake up. A hand can console

a fist which cannot hold a hand, a prayer, an inchworm
suspended in silk. A fist cannot raise

a basketball & dunk it for a crowd of cul-de-sac kids.
Maybe the difference is how it's held.

I pull back a handful of Sara's hair & kiss her naked
collarbone; she grabs a fistful & yanks

after slamming down the phone. Sworn enemies shake
hands in truce; businessmen shake

on greed. Maybe the difference is whether we grab it.
A hand fills with the memory of a father's

somewhere between childhood & your vertical abandoning you

thumb snagged in a steel chain net, a ball bouncing
into a bulbed street. A fist forms

around the memory & when it opens the memory
has the face of a boarded-up town

named for someone not born. The memory returns
home alone, compresses the hand

into a fist into a bomb which is still just a handful
of dust; this body, name, life,

too, one handful of dust held up briefly by another
hand, which is the heart's,

which is the Milky Way's, which means the difference
is the hand's will to be empty.

*

yesterday is

Teaching punctuation with infanticide
examples was Mrs. Arnold's way—

Use your scissors to cut kids! she would
read aloud, flashing her incisors

at us as if to say *Write that comma,*
or else! I would chase my grandmother

around the kitchen after school, my index
finger swinging like a sickle, a scythe,

the comma that separates supper
from cannibalism, squealing *Let's eat*

grandma! It was her who taught me
tense too can turn meaning inside out,

unmask a conquest. Every place was another
place in disguise in the stories she told

about New York—stories so old
that in them she is still *Cynthia* & my mother

a dream. *That farmer's market is a mall now,*
she would say, as though the farmer's market is

still there, the mall its costume, nowhere really
past. I never thought to ask before

her memory went: what does that mean
for the market? For the mall?

yesterday is

During the war that led her to my grandfather
& that he never spoke of, hollowed out

cities shipped rubble to America, the ruins
of Parisian cathedrals building Manhattan

into the sea, my grandfather driving home
atop wreckage he had fled, survived, maybe

sifted through for life. It is very American
to believe with enough effort you can

be anything, to believe God could be
human & a human a slave.

Sitting on the lawn of Calvary Cemetery
in Queens, my grandparents six feet below,

three million interred beside them,
I can't tell whether the skyline is made

of these tombs, or the Empire
State Building is a mausoleum

blotting out the sun.

*

ALICIA ELKORT

Alicia Elkort's first book of poetry, "A Map of Every Undoing" was published in 2022 by Stillhouse Press with George Mason University, after winning their book contest. Alicia's poetry has been nominated several times for the Pushcart, Best of the Net, and the Orison Anthology, and her work appears in numerous journals and anthologies. She reads for *Tinderbox Poetry Journal* where she also writes reviews. She works as a Life Coach. For more info or to watch her two video poems: https://aliciaelkort.mystrikingly.com

ODE TO THE WET TOWEL ON THE FLOOR

ode to the wet towel on the floor

Sunlight blooms akimbo
through the window
where you've left wet towels
on the bathroom floor, your mother
is in the next room, the candle
you lit for the bath
burns a black "s" rises
your mother is dead
your mother has died
she's on the phone in the next room
you can smell her perfume

your mother hands you
a platter of grilled chicken
marinated with tamari & lemon
your mother puts the chicken in the broiler
asks you to water the violets
hang the spider plants
where the sun will find them
the cantilevered windows open
trails of jasmine float on summer air, cold
rain falls like a broken spigot

the air is chill, fog is thick
soup simmers in a red pot
you're on the couch
you're on the floor

your mother says I love you
your mother never says I love you
your mother is a myth
ordinary, chews her food
like any other you hear her high
heels walking around the house

ode to the wet towel on the floor

toast on the plate, coffee
in the cup, no one is home
you are eleven years old
you are forty years old

your mother holds you
your mother never holds you
says you are beautiful
the sound of you never escapes her lips
your mother is never home
she forgets your birthday
she remembers—brings you roses, sweet
peas & a basket from the pueblo
near where you were born

you were never born
you were born to parents
who fill a merry house
with cherry & pomegranate
flats of strawberries, the cream
is white, the cream is fresh,
whiskey pours into shot glasses,
lights are on, lights are never on
moldy soup is in the fridge
no one is home

your mother, mermaid
your mother, nightingale
your mother, no one

you find a photo of your mother
the day she married your father
there are no photos
you were never born,
but you find a photo

ode to the wet towel on the floor

from when she was five
your heart breaks for the child/
woman she was never allowed
to be, you want to step through time
hold her close, your arms, her arms—
teach her how to love you

your mother is dead
your mother is in the next room
drinking black tea with sugar
& lemon, she asks you
to bring her a biscuit, you bring
five biscuits with dark chocolate
you bring her no biscuits
your mother is dead
the black “s” of the dead
candle rises, the towels are wet
on the floor, they are drying
on the hook, the towels—
still in the linen closet

there is no bath, there is no house
the house is filled with art
soup simmers in a blue pot
the night reverses itself, rain
returns the sky is black the night
is cold the sky pink, the fireplace lit
whiskey flames in a glass

wet towels on the bathroom floor
remind you of your mother.

*

KEIRA DEER

Keira Deer is a writer and poet based in Southern California. She holds a BFA in Creative Writing from Chapman University, and her work has been published in *Scapegoat Review, Hawaii Pacific Review,* and *Halfway Down the Stairs*, among others. She can be found on Instagram @keiraswords.

Masses would not have cried
for days on end, nor would the streets
outside The Dakota be littered
with poster board—a quarter of the alphabet
torn and strewn along the street,
the letters *I M A G I N E* painted
in black—and something of a blood stain
on the ground. John would be
alight with life, sitting naked
on a plastic cube and tickling
the fraught ends of his vocal cords—
new bars for the next great album
off Geffen Records: a legioned fantasy,
the accordioned fold of each note stretched
out, John tilting his head to see
the vibrations that hum from his throat
moving the folds in various different lights.
The wailing ambulance and winding red
siren would not bend through the streets
of New York to find him there, dead—in fact,
John is rearranging the abandoned
letters of poster board now,
sitting on a bench in Central Park,
spelling *I, ENIGMA*
on the ground at his bare feet,
his sneakers kicked away at some length,
eyes squinting behind lenses
to sketch a man: alight with life, barefoot
on a bench, with vines of strawberries sprouting
from his shoulders like wings,
ripening for flight.

*

KATHARINE JAGER

Katharine Jager is a poet and medieval scholar. She is Professor of English at the University of Houston-Downtown, and has published poems in such venues as *The Gettysburg Review, Friends Journal, Commonweal, GoodFoot, The Red River Review* and the *Yale Anthology: Before the Door of God*, among other places.

ENUMERATION

enumeration

~ Texas Southern University, Special Collections:
The Heartmann Collection
Texas Slavery Documents, 1818-1886

These notarized letters are written
in oak gall ink, itself a burnished brown
eating the paper, they bear wax sigils,
but sometimes the notary has no stamp,
relies on a squiggle labeled “my seal.”
Mr. Amis of Lowndes County brought
his hundreds from Mississippi, he died,
his lawyers split them into sale for Fort
Bend, Brazoria, Galveston, the maw
of sugar and money and grief. “Ada
Abt 18 mos,” “Hetty, F, pregnant,
20,” a receipt that runs for pages
and tawny pages. In the slave schedules
my children would be “C” for “copper,” and
would go anon. Here’s a crowd of people
who are not people even though they’re named.

*

PAMILERIN JACOB

Pamilerin Jacob's poems have appeared in *POETRY*, *Lolwe*, *The Rumpus*, *Agbowó*, *Palette*, *20.35 Africa*, & elsewhere. He is the Founding Editor of *Poetry Column-NND*, as well as, *Poetry Sango-Ota*.

IN DEFENSE OF LIQUOR

in defense of liquor

Nunc est bibendum
~Horace

Whiskey clarifies what God does
not. Its philosophy: pungent & purifying.
Look how we banish sadness from our bones
with a gulp. Join us. We are touring the world,
adding sweetness into every root & tongue.
Our blood, full of praise songs. Tornado-
in-the-gut, it unscrews the knees, undoes the need
for self-importance: dancing made easy.
Thanks to whiskey, we are freer than most.
Mouth full of liquor, my prayers ricochet off God's
shin like tennis balls. Then he picks it up, bites into it.
Tastes good, he says, tastes good. Who let sin into
the world? Why is love so full of shadows? What were
Okigbo's last words? I don't care for such
anxieties anymore. There is a gun to be put down.
There is flight to be made. O glee, now that I
know where you live, I will never stop drinking .

*

EZRA FOX

Ezra Fox lives and writes in San Francisco, CA. In their writing, Ezra is curious about impermanence, and non-duality, and how it pertains to their subjects of lineage, queerness, and spirituality. You can find Ezra's work in or forthcoming in *TriQuarterly, EcoTheo Review, Zone 3, Zócalo Public Square*, and elsewhere. Learn more about Ezra at ezrafox.net.

DON'T ASK ME ABOUT THE HYMNS

don't ask me about the hymns

~ after Michael Kleber-Diggs's "Coniferous Fathers"

i.

Speak to me about the boys. Sunday armor
ill-fitting and incomplete. Their starched
collars yet scuffed soles. I bow to no deity,
still I watch their lips, shape words
like *abomination* and *love* while knelt
in this stained-glass aquarium, swaying
to currents of guilt and glory,
as if still nestled in the flood
of their mothers' wombs.

ii.

Only in dreams do we truly sing,
limbs unfurling like hesitant ferns.
In sleep, we are all Davids dancing
before the ark, unashamed.

iii.

After service, these boys, with patent leather
dulled to scars, litanies already fading
from their tongues, weave through each other
like water. Even their shadows play
at holiness, neckties slipping off like shed skin.
The chain-link net singing its metallic psalm,
each rebound a confession, each shot arcing
towards grace.

don't ask me about the hymns

iv.

They don't yet know which rituals they'll spend
lifetimes unlearning, or how fiercely they'll cling
to the sacrament of touch long after the sermon fades.

*

SHORT CREATIVE NONFICTION

RAMONA EMERSON

Ramona is a writer and nurse in Philadelphia. She is currently working toward her PhD at the University of Pennsylvania where she studies drug use and addiction. Her work has been published in *Allure, Buzzfeed, Wired* and *The San Francisco Appeal*. You can find her at ramonaemerson.substack.com.

YOU COME NOW YOU LEAVE NOW

you come now you leave now

It's impossible not to take the people we love for granted. All that appreciation. How could we live? But there are a few things I would change if I could go back. I would have insisted we stand in line to see where the Constitution was signed when my dad came to visit me in Philadelphia a few months before his death instead of asking, "Do you really wanna wait?" I would have worked harder to loosen up when we went to Iceland on our last trip together. I would have taken more videos. Pictures are great, but videos bring a person to life in a way I never even thought about before I realized I'd never see him in motion again. I only have a few, and I don't play them often. I don't want to build up tolerance to his ghost.

The timestamp on this one says it was taken at 9 p.m. on February 8, 2023, one month before he died. My dad, sitting in his red recliner, is the only person in the frame, but I know my mom and our longtime family friend Cathy are there too. Over the months of his illness, the wooden table next to the recliner had slowly filled up with all his little items: incentive spirometer, headlamp, his weed vape in the elegant holder he'd made from a square of 2x4. Mugs and glasses of unknown contents. Drinking was easier than eating by then, and he always had several beverages going at once.

You can hear by my halting breaths that I've been crying, or still am. I don't remember taking the video. I'm sure I'd taken an Ambien, which I was doing a lot. (You can add that to my list of regrets.)

Cathy tells my dad he will continue to live in her memory as long as she's alive. He doesn't appear to take much comfort in this, saying that while he may be remembered for her lifetime, by the next generation – "In which we have absolutely no oar in the water" – "I'll be gone."

Although my dad has apparently forgotten that we do have an oar, and she is sitting right in front of him, I take his meaning. "Should I have a baby?" I earnestly ask the room at large. I'm roundly ignored. It wasn't until this year that I ever really thought about the fact that, absent some intervention, I'll be the last person in our family. I'm a childless only child in my mid-30s without even a single cousin. This thought has become intermittently terrifying. I remember sifting through boxes of family photos as a kid, asking, who's that? Hearing how my grandfather called my grandmother, Helen, his little hurricane. Who will I tell our stories to?

Several months after my dad's death, the father of an investigator on the study I work on died. During a meeting a couple of months before, he had told the group he might be less available for a bit. His parents were ill, and he didn't know how it would all shake out. I had told him I understood. That my dad had recently died after several years of illness. I remember how he'd looked at me sharply, and said, "We're not there yet." I'd been trying to empathize but, on some level, he'd taken it as a threat. *This is what's coming for you*. And now his father is dead, and when I write him a condolence note I wonder if there's some part of him that thinks I'm saying, *I told you so*. And I wonder if there's some part of me that is. Grief doesn't make you a good person. It just makes you a different person.

It's a bright blue day in Iceland, and we're headed west along a peninsula we refer to as, "Snuffles" because we couldn't pronounce the Icelandic word and Snuffles is funny. This is our favorite kind of humor. The kind where you just laugh at words. It's Septem-

you come now you leave now

ber, the fall before his death, and we're on what we had enthusiastically declared "our last trip." This wasn't because we'd come to a circumspect acceptance of his mortality, but to guilt my mom into turning a blind eye to the exorbitant amount of money we hoped to spend.

That morning, he'd had another neuropathy related foot-slip while driving, and I'd taken over again. It probably would've been fine, but I hadn't wanted to worry the whole time. I was feeling annoyed because he, thinking he'd be doing most of the driving, had insisted we get a manual, even though I hadn't driven one since high school. I was sad too. He'd always been such an elegant driver: cocking his head just so and raising two fingers from the wheel at a passing acquaintance, turning his palm toward the shifter and pushing rather than pulling it into fourth, decelerating so smoothly you hardly noticed you'd stopped.

He was a terrible backseat driver, but his suggestions were so earnest and idiosyncratic that it was only moderately annoying instead of homicidally so. Still, I had to tell him to *seriously stop* after he said I wasn't wiggling the gear shift the right way when checking whether the car was in neutral. The crazy thing was that I was doing it "the right way" – placing my hand loosely over the ball and giving it a rapid jiggle. It was a move I executed flawlessly because I'd watched him do it a thousand times.

It was a small thing, but the fact that he'd missed this detail showed his decline. There's a possibly apocryphal story about a man throwing a punch over a game of pool and my dad catching the guy's fist in his hand. Whether or not it's true, it's believable because it illustrates one of his most marked characteristics. He was unusually observant. He noticed the moment the guy started to swing.

At his funeral, my mom told me the most frequent thing people said to her after my dad died was that they liked him but never really "got" him. He lived on the same end of the same Pacific Northwest island for 48 years, and going anywhere with him included a stream of nods, hellos, and fingers raised from the steering wheel, but he had only a few close friends. He liked people and loved to chat but could quickly go from affable to far away. At dinner parties you'd look over and see him staring dreamily into the middle distance. "Is your dad okay?" I remember a friend asking one year at Thanksgiving. He wandered, and not just in his mind. You'd be on a trip walking around some foreign city and suddenly he'd be gone. This was very annoying, as was his response to being called on it. "What? I was just over there," he'd say, gesturing vaguely away.

He was a specific kind of person, but it would be hard to say which kind. He had a dry sense of humor but wasn't sarcastic. He was mischievous but almost never unkind. He had an easy physicality, probably from the years he spent outdoors chopping wood for a living, but he couldn't have cared less about sports. He loved animals. Dogs especially. He always gave our late dog Bella the last bite of whatever he was eating. The effect was that he started hurrying through his food, becoming more and more anxious as she stared at him expectantly. Only once she had received that final bite could he relax.

He taught middle school for years, and one of his most strongly held convictions was that children shouldn't spend all day sitting in a classroom. One of his classes was called Adventure Education and it culminated

you come now you leave now

each semester in a week-long outdoor trip. I went along on one during my junior year of college. It started with a 36-hour train ride from Seattle to Southern California with 16 eighth graders and only got more harrowing from there. I swore I would never do it again, but he loved those trips and could remember them in elaborate detail even years later, always referring to his former students by their last names as he recalled the little quirks of their personalities. He took children seriously, which is probably why so many of his students adored him. A few absolutely hated him, and he got a kick out of that too.

After he died, my mom showed me a piece of worn yellow paper with a list of names written in his distinctive all caps handwriting. He'd told her that these were people who had been especially kind to him during his illness. During his last few weeks, she would frequently see him gazing at it, or sometimes just holding it in his hand with his eyes closed.

***

Has anyone you loved ever died really slowly? Toward the end of my dad's life, I told my therapist Roger that I sometimes wished he would just die already. It had been over two years since his diagnosis, which is not even really that long, but I was tired of the false alarms, the dire phone calls and emergency trips home, sobbing in the gynecologist's office because my mom had just called to tell me he'd decided to take the medication he'd been prescribed for when he was ready to go, but by the time I got to the airport that afternoon, he'd changed his mind.

Roger said this was the kind of thing people usually keep to themselves, but he was smiling because he loves this kind of stuff. He paused, seeming to weigh what he was about to say, and then told me that his first wife had died suddenly of a brain aneurysm. A week later at the wake he had caught his son laughing. Or at least his son felt caught. The color drained from his face when he looked up and saw his dad see him, but Roger had told his son what he tells me now, "Don't ever apologize for living. Life wants to be lived."

We celebrated what would be my dad's last birthday on a balcony in Reykjavik. Seventy-four years old, and a plate of fresh bread, apples, Camembert, and a sliced Snickers bar. We toasted with Coke Zero in wine glasses, both of us wrapped in gray blankets against the evening chill. The trip was almost over, and I was feeling bad for how irritable I'd been. Annoyed at his memory loss and then feeling guilty for being annoyed.

I don't remember what preceded it, but he started talking about how he had become invisible in old age. He said he'd first noticed it when we were visiting New York City 15 years before. The feeling of not being able to get the bartender's attention. The sudden impossibility of ever getting the bartender's attention again.

I told him this transition was probably more jarring for women since the difference between the vocal attention of youth and the later invisibility is so stark. He sat for a moment before responding and then said that invisibility is women's consolation prize for having had to be at least a little bit afraid almost every moment of their lives.

I remember I was taken aback by this clarity from a person who by dinnertime yesterday couldn't remember where we'd eaten lunch. I realized I'd stopped giving him the benefit of the doubt pretty much the minute we

you come now you leave now

touched down in Iceland. I'd been so intent on cataloging his slips that I had stopped listening. Earlier, I had mistaken a joke for an earnest question and asked if he was being serious.

The way he held my gaze when he said, "No."

In January, I call my parents and find them still in bed. I picture their wonderful room. The muted colors, the immensely inviting king-size bed, the sun flooding in through the French doors that open to the backyard.

They're in a light mood. My dad starts talking about the dog, but stops mid-sentence, asking, "What is there really to say about the dog?" He moves on to the plot they've just purchased at the cemetery up the road. "It's right next to Renee Neff," he says, sounding delighted. Mrs. Neff was my fifth-grade teacher. She and her husband lived behind my parents until she died of pancreatic cancer a few years ago.

I ask my mom if she got a plot next to my dad and she responds with her usual pragmatism that she will be cremated. I suggest her ashes could be buried, but before she can respond her phone rings. I hear her say, "We're not diabetic bye," and hang up. Then she texts me a picture of the casket they're considering.

The Titan Seagrass is a coffin-shaped basket woven from willow branches and decorated with lengths of seagrass. It has two bittersweet reviews, giving it four and five stars. From Bob in Texas: "Beautiful and exactly what my wife of 50 years would have wished for had she been able to choose for herself."

We were lucky my dad was able to choose for himself because it meant we had time. Two and a half years, and for almost half of that we knew he was dying. It's surprising how hard that was to admit – even in the face of overwhelming evidence, even for the doctors (maybe especially for them) – but doing so was strangely enlivening.

A year before, my dad was at the University of Washington Medical Center in Seattle for surgery that would remove the tumor by cutting out a part of his colon. It was supposed to last six hours, so that morning my friend Jamie and I had gone on a long hike as a distraction. The trail was called Mailbox Peak, so named because there's a mailbox at the top that people leave stuff in. Even after almost five miles of steady climbing, Jamie somehow picked up speed on the final incline. She went straight to the mailbox – lowering the door with the reverence of an archaeologist opening a tomb – and began rummaging around in its assorted "treasures." After setting aside a half-smoked joint and several troll dolls, she pulled out a crumpled piece of paper and asked if she could read me a letter to the universe. "No," came my swift reply.

We were almost back to the car when my mom called. By this point, it had been almost 12 hours since he'd gone into surgery. For a moment she didn't say anything. I heard her ragged intake of breath. I felt dizzy. I remember thinking *this is how it happens*. "He's alive," she said. Then she told me the bad news. When they'd gone in, they'd found the tumor had spilled into the surrounding tissue, the blood stream. They'd spent the entire day removing as much as they could, but that didn't change the news we got when he woke up. The cancer was terminal. Jamie drove me straight to the hospital. I remember it was a beautiful summer evening.

Because of COVID, only one visitor was allowed at a time. My mom came down and I

you come now you leave now

went up. When I walked in, my dad opened his eyes and smiled weakly. “Boo Boo,” he said without raising himself from the pillows. I pulled the chair up to the bed and sat down. We talked for a bit. He recounted a story a staff member had told him about fleeing Chinese oppression in Tibet by walking across the Himalayas. As he spoke, his eyes filled with tears. I grabbed his hand, and we sat for a while just looking at each other, not saying a thing. I wanted to offer something comforting, and if not comforting then just anything. I wanted to look away. But I didn’t. No platitude could save us now. He wouldn’t get better. *This* is how it happens. How you go from one thing to the next. How you give comfort by not allowing yourself to get comfortable.

My dad was different after he found out the cancer was terminal. It was like a wall had come down. He was now easily moved to tears. Less witty perhaps, but so tender. He drew people to him. At one point, Cathy came to stay with him so my mom could visit me on the East Coast. She later told me it was the highlight of her year. That’s the thing about visiting the dying. We walk in, nervous we won’t say the right thing. Worried we’ll give up the game, accidentally reveal that they’re dying, but they know they’re dying, and worse (so much worse), they know we are too. We look down with our faces arranged in sympathy, and they look up and see the ignorance of a cow on slaughter day. They know how it goes by in the blink of an eye.

On some level we know this too. It’s why we tend to avoid them. But if my dad’s death taught me anything, it’s that finding out you’re going to die is a good thing. Even if this knowledge is fleeting, which it always is. Like I’ll be looking out the car window watching the trees go by and suddenly think how someday I’ll be dead forever. I’ll never know anything again. Never have any idea how it ends. Usually, these thoughts don’t carry much weight. It’s hard to feel them, but sometimes I’ll get this drop in my stomach and a sense that everything is moving away from me impossibly fast, and for that second, I’ll know.

On a phone call later that summer, my dad told me about the tuck. He'd been taking these long walks through the fields on the outskirts of town. One day he came upon a spot where the tall grass had been tamped down by a deer settling in for a nap, and it being an August afternoon and just about that time, he had decided to follow suit and laid down right there and fallen asleep. Since then, this had become a habit, and he called these places *tucks*. He said that when he woke up from one of these naps, he felt like he had become a part of the place. Something about the vulnerability of sleep anointing it as his, or rather, him as its. Of course, not all tucks are created equal, and he would sometimes lull himself to sleep in his current tuck by thinking about an even better one. He said the Ur-tuck would be at the base of a Hemlock tree where the branches fan out and sweep the ground like a twirling skirt. You crawl in and curl up with your back against the wide trunk, and after a while you fall asleep.

When he stopped talking, we were quiet. I think we both understood what he was saying. Years before his cancer, he’d told me about how a sick wolf would leave the pack. Find somewhere quiet to die. I think that’s what he was doing – practicing. We never explicitly discussed his feelings about dying, and after his death my mom remarked that she didn’t think he ever truly believed he would die. But this conversation made me think he did, and that he wasn’t over-

ly frightened, and that he was maybe even looking forward to returning to the earth where he had found so much joy and solace.

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We'd always talked on the phone a lot, sometimes several times a day. When you speak that much there's no fear of phone calls, of long catchups, compulsory rundowns of how you've been. We picked up and hung up with impunity. We came with little observations, a funny person at the dog park, a petty complaint, a song recommendation. We got off as breezily as we got on, *gotta go bye* and towards the end, *gotta go I love you bye* and sometimes, *alrighty well, I'll let you go*, a little joke where we tacitly blamed the other person for the goodbye.

Our last phone call was a week and a half before his death. After talking for a few minutes, I suggested we watch an episode of *Succession*. He hardly watched TV his entire life, but in the last three months he'd fallen in love with this show, a family drama filled with cruelty and twisted love. We got off the phone so my mom could get him into the bedroom where the TV was. She'd set everything up so that when I called back all we had to do was put our phones on speaker and count down *3 2 1 Play*.

Immediately it was annoying. I could hear his audio just slightly out of sync with mine and I'm sure he was experiencing the same. We had valiantly endured ten minutes of this when he asked, "Can I hang up now?" He was often pretty muddled at this point, and I realized he'd forgotten why we were even doing this dumb thing. He told me that when I'd suggested we watch together, he'd thought I meant together, like I was in the next room instead of on the other side of the country. I'd come in, and we'd cozy up together in that bed that's like an ark and watch the Roy siblings battle for their father's empire. We'd laugh at their foibles, secure in the knowledge that it was a question we'd never have to ponder: no company, no siblings, no problem.

I got there three days before he died. My mom had tried to prepare me, but it's hard to be prepared. He was lying in his hospital bed in their room, his mouth slightly ajar with the corners pulled down. His eyes were open and rolled up. He looked like a saint in a Renaissance painting, like he was being pulled in two directions. I'd last seen him only a month before, but this was the first time he'd looked like a person who was going to die.

Two days went by in a strange haze. Sometimes he was lucid and other times not. He fretted and picked at invisible bugs. My mom said he was hallucinating. He'd asked her why there was a naked man in the backyard but didn't seem overly troubled by it. His speech, when he was able to talk, was soft and mumbled, mostly unintelligible. We'd passed the point of last words, so I held his hand. I tried to match my breath to his like I'd read about in a book. My mom gave him water from a green sippy cup, and I lay down next to him and slept.

On the third day, my mom lifted his covers to turn him and saw that his legs were mottled and blue. This happens when someone is very close to death, as the heart loses its strength. She said she hadn't realized how close he was. Our capacity to be surprised by what we know is coming reveals the tenacity of hope, and once again I was so grateful for her. That steely pragmatism, undercut continually by love.

I slept in their room that night. We lowered

you come now you leave now

his hospital bed to the same height as ours, the mattresses forming one continuous field. We drifted to sleep.

I woke in the dark. Something had changed. At almost the same moment, the dog raised his head. So did my mom. She got up and went to my dad, putting her arms around him. He took three ragged breaths and died.

I looked at the clock. It was 11:18 p.m. It was March 8, 2023. We turned on the light and quietly removed his catheter and oxygen line. We arranged his body, touched his still face. After a while, we went back to sleep.

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In the weeks after his death, I saw my dad everywhere. Not literally, but I'd be stopped in the street by the odd twinkling of Christmas lights strung up across a second story balcony. Old men on bicycles in Costco jeans.

I told my therapist I was embarrassed that as an ostensible atheist I'd suddenly become consumed by wondering where he was. Roger said not to worry too much about what made sense. That it wasn't necessary to have a totally cohesive world view right now. Maybe not ever. This is how grief rearranges us. Someone is reincarnated – the person who lives.

I had physical symptoms. My body ached and I felt hot and cold but when I took my temperature, I didn't have a fever. My left leg buzzed, and I slept three hours at a time. I sometimes felt a sense of hyperreality and a strange energy.

They don't tell you about euphoric grief, which is the buoyant feeling of becoming suddenly aware that you're alive. It's the other side of vertiginous grief, which is the dizzying experience of realizing your mom will die, and everyone you love, and you, and not necessarily in that order.

Sometimes the grief creeps up, surfacing when you least expect it. Like when I was signing for a prescription at the pharmacy and the little screen asked, "Are you the patient or the caregiver?" Or when I was walking down the sidewalk and found a crescent moon charm with an engraving that read, "I love you to the moon and back." The tears came so fast. Even though he'd never said it. Never would have said something so schmaltzy. Never will say it.

Other times I went looking for it. I listened to our songs. Our taste was bittersweet oldies. John Prine. That part in "Lake Marie" where he asks, "You know what blood looks like in a black and white video?" My dad would always finish the line, yelling, "Shadows!"

It was on the playlist I made for his memorial. The title was YCNYLN. It was an acronym from a long-ago joke that had started on the drive to a friend's twelfth birthday party. We had been laughing about how they'd put both the party's start and end times on the invitation: you come now, you leave now. We were indignant, like, who are they to tell us when the party's over? But it turns out that's exactly what happens.

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SIOBHAN RING

Siobhan Ring is a writer, organizer, and progressive movement-builder in the Pacific NW. She writes about parenting, caregiving, health, illness, and survival in a world that seems bound on destruction but overflows with beauty anyway. Her work has been previously published in *The Write Launch, Lunch Ticket,* and *The Forge:Journal of Organizing Strategy and Practice*. She lives with her sweet queer family in Seattle..

space / time

In the heat of the first pandemic summer, I set off alone on an ill-advised, improvised, road trip toward my mother.

More than a year before COVID plowed into our collective lives, my brother and I had moved her from her home of 35 years to memory care. On moving day, she walked out of her house with her head up, although she had only reluctantly conceded to this plan. "I can adapt to anything." she had told me, years earlier, as she resisted any serious discussion of this eventuality. She proved herself correct.

Every few months I flew 2,841 miles from Seattle to upstate New York for a long weekend visit. Although I told her I was coming, my arrival was always a delightful surprise. When I was there I felt loved and mothered, even as I zipped up her coat and reminded her who I was.

In the selfies I captured on my phone from my visit in late January 2020, our heads tilt toward one another, we are smiling, and my arms are wrapped around her shoulders. She is bundled in the ankle-length puffy blue coat I bought her to guard against the cold winters. On the day I flew back to Seattle from that trip, the first person in the United States was diagnosed with Coronavirus. Soon the promise of safety we had bargained for her freedom evaporated into the contagion-filled air.

As the COVID-19 lockdown stretched on, the staff at the memory care began orchestrating video calls. One day, in a sweet moment on FaceTime with my mom, she smiled at my image on the tablet and said, "It's so good to be together."

And then her face clouded. "*Is that what we are?*" she asked.

"Yes," I tried to assure her, "we are together."

"But how is that?" She asked, looking up from the screen and scanning the room she was actually sitting in with a skeptical face. "I don't think it's like that."

She had a point. It really wasn't. Even her muddled mind could see something was amiss in the space between us.

In July 2020, with cases dipping, New York State lifted some of the visitor restrictions on congregate care facilities. I ruminated obsessively on the question of how to get to my mother. It was the bewildering pre-vaccine days of the pandemic. Waves of illness overwhelmed hospitals and ravaged assisted living facilities like a capricious deity. I did not want to be the vector that killed my mother. Flying was too risky. A friend had a camper van she would lend me immediately, available for just enough days to drive from Seattle to NY, spend five days there, and drive back. I would travel in my own sanitized spaceship and arrive untainted.

My mother was, as a rule, up for adventure, but even she would have questioned the wisdom of this proposal. Then again, she might have done it in my situation, if she could have grasped my situation.

I'd driven six hours eastward over the Cascade Mountains, across the Columbia River, past acres of potato fields, and was just hitting the Washington/Idaho border when New York State's Governor announced that Washington State had just been added to a travel advisory. Residents from WA entering NY would now have to quarantine for 14 days. I got a text notification that my campground reservations at NYS Parks had been canceled based on my home address and a

voice mail from the director at my mom's facility. I pulled over and texted a friend who worked in the WA Governor's office. "We're trying to get off the list," she texted back. I kept driving.

Somewhere in Montana, my second-rate cell phone service got spotty and the GPS gave out. Never one with a good grasp of geography, and having left without a map, I texted my wife from a truck stop "What are these mountains called and when do they end?" She was not amused.

I bought a paper map at a truck stop, asked the man at the counter where I was, and texted my wife again. I asked her to look up the meaning of the dashboard indicator light that had just turned red. This is the sort of problem my anxious mother would have envisioned. She always told me to leave time for an emergency on my way to the airport, which I never, ever, do.

The hours delay for impromptu camper maintenance derailed my hastily planned itinerary. As darkness fell that night, I pulled off at the first highway sign tent symbol. I slept parked in a campground that was just a wide field somewhere in Montana. A ridiculous grouse waddled past my window in the morning. I got up and drove East.

As I crossed into South Dakota, I got another message from the friend in the Governor's office. "It doesn't look like we are getting off the list," she said. "I'm sorry."

That night I stayed in a vast campground in Hermosa, SD, on the outskirts of Rapid City, surrounded by RVs festooned with Trump for America flags. Alone in my queerness in the van, I briefly considered trying to cover up the gay bumper stickers. Instead I called the memory care and asked to speak to my mom. I told her a funny story about my son that I had told her before and read her a poem she always asked to hear twice. I hung up, closed the curtains on the van, lay down and marveled at the absurdity of both my effort and its failure.

I was working as a consultant at the time of this endeavor. I kept most of my work meetings on Zoom, pulling off the highway to find a place my hotspot would connect. I met with a client to discuss political coalition dynamics in the parking lot of a gold mine in Idaho, surrounded by real-life oversized Tonka trucks. I interviewed graphic designers for a policy report while parked on the edge of a state highway near the Badlands, a ragged, bewildering landscape. It was 101 degrees and I couldn't figure out how to run the air conditioning in the camper without draining the battery. I smoothed my unwashed hair into a ponytail and tried to project some not-very-credible professionalism as sweat drained down my chest in rivulets and pooled in the waistband of my sweatpants.

I didn't turn around in South Dakota. Having driven 1,140 miles, I decided to go another 617 in the direction that wasn't home or my mother. A dear friend in southern Minnesota was living with cancer. She'd been living with it for decades, with a quiet sense of refusal. When I pulled into her driveway, she came out and gathered me in a hug. I tried not to let my face show my shock at how worn and delicate her body looked. We had a glorious visit. She died seven months later.

The visit with my friend, my fiercely alive friend, wasn't about death at all. But, then again, it wasn't *not* about death. Would I have continued on if she weren't sick? Maybe not. The whole venture was provoked by my ardent hope to outpace death's path to

my mother. On my return trip a woman at an RV park in Wyoming asked where I was headed. “Home,” I said. “I was trying to go see my mother.” I told her of my thwarted effort. “I’d be afraid to do that long trip all alone,” she mused. I was more afraid not to.

I returned home eight days after I left, to exactly where I’d begun.

Two months after my failed voyage to see her, my mother was hospitalized with a non-COVID infection. Desperate and scared, I flew East wearing two masks in a nearly empty plane.

My mother recovered. I spent a day with her at the hospital, gallivanting alongside her through a generally pleasant delusion. She seemed to be sending me off to college, with great excitement for me about what was to come. A sweet fantasy, since when I actually left for college at 17 we couldn’t afford a second plane ticket, so I traveled alone. When a gaggle of medical students passed by the door to her room in a walking lecture she asked “Shouldn’t you join them?” But I said I’d catch up later. The social worker arrived and announced she would be discharged. But memory care wouldn’t take her back. She had to move to the nursing home next door.

The pandemic rules required that anyone discharged from a hospital to a nursing home had to be isolated for two weeks. My mother had no way to understand the foundations of this policy; not contagion or a calendar. The first option was to stay in one’s own room, a little gate across the door, like one used to deter toddlers. This attempt at containment made her wary and suspicious, and then afraid, angry, and unruly. She walked through the gate and out of her room and raised her voice. The head nurse made a determined face and announced the second option; she’d have to stay in the empty COVID isolation ward.

We wheeled her there across the open grounds. Fall leaves crunched under the chair wheels and she smiled as a cool breeze brushed her face. In the isolation room, a jumble of tables and chairs were shoved to the side to make space for a semicircle of hospital beds. A giant TV loomed on the wall. Piles of dusty puzzles and games spilled out of a corner, detritus of the pre-pandemic times when this space was a day center for people living with dementia. A sole staff member sat in a chair at the edge of the circle of beds. It was not the place I wanted to leave my mother. I hugged her. She hugged me back with strong arms and held my face in her hands. I left her there and flew home to my wife and child.

Just eight weeks later, I was ringing a doorbell and shivering in the winter darkness at the back entrance of the nursing home. My mother had had a stroke. The head nurse called and told my brother that she was dying. Not today, but soon. We were allowed to come see her, one at a time, although the doors were locked, and no visitors were allowed. There were exceptions for death.

Entering the nursing home every day was traveling through a portal, outside to inside. Through the back door, I entered a narrow hallway. A pile of plastic wrapped gowns, face shields, and masks cascaded across a gray table that also held a blue binder and a thermometer. I logged my name, the time, and my temperature in the binder. I took a gown from the pile and put a plastic face shield over my N95 mask. Gowned up, I was allowed to walk across the common space, a big open kitchen with empty tables and a living room with empty couches, into her

room. I could stay as long as I wanted, but I could not leave her room until I was leaving the building.

Alone with my mother in her room, my body pulsed with problem-solving adrenaline with no outlet, and ached with anticipated loss. I gently brushed her hair back from her forehead. She couldn't speak. She couldn't move most of her body. To transfer her from bed to wheelchair involved two caregivers and a mechanical lift. She was reportedly dying, but she didn't seem to be. She seemed more suspended in some unknown realm, floating, just like she was when the sling gently lifted her from bed to chair.

I was asked to keep my PPE from day to day, to save resources. I learned that, even if it was 12 degrees Fahrenheit outside, I should wear a tank top under my clothes and strip down before putting on the gown. The paper-plastic material didn't breathe and sweat immediately soured whatever clothes I wore underneath. The nurses and nursing assistants were all wearing tank tops under their gowns too. They worked 12 hour, 16 hour shifts. The whole team was trying to avoid hiring agency staff, who work across multiple facilities, and could introduce COVID. I bought them cans of lattes when I made my curbside pickup order from Target. I ordered bottles of wine from the liquor store next door to Target and opened them alone in my hotel room.

When I arrived at the nursing home, they had successfully kept COVID out for the first nine months of the pandemic. But soon the first case settled into a resident's lungs. Day by day the number grew. The staff wouldn't talk about it; when I asked questions, they just shook their heads. But it showed on their strained faces, in the whispers between them, and in the flashing red lights that shimmered on the frosted window of my mother's room as ambulances came and went. It was, we know now, looking backward through time, the first deadly winter surge.

My mother's mind was a veil. I played music and didn't know if it was annoying or pleasant. I talked. She squeezed my hand. She held my gaze. She communicated with her eyes, but the meaning was open to interpretation. In the background there was an endless, mechanical sighing and clicking of the inflating and deflating mattress, specially designed to prevent bedsores on the papery skin of the old when they are bed bound. I took an audio recording, because it was the soundtrack of the last days of my mother's life next to me.

Before we moved my mom out of her home, we attempted to sort through the accumulations of 35 years. In the crammed drawers of an old wooden desk, I found the yellowed, typewritten pages of a small memoir my grandmother wrote. I sat down amid the piles and read it through, absorbed in a sudden intimacy across generations. She was a good storyteller, the language vibrant with scenes from her life as the youngest of 13 Irish kids in a small town in Connecticut.

And then another pandemic appeared in the pages–the Spanish Flu. She wrote of an older brother sick in bed. Every day the priest came and prayed. The doctor came and whispered. After the doctor left, her mother would cry. Her oldest brothers were sent home from military training to sit at his bedside and hold their mother's hand. My grandmother's brother, fevered and suffering, called out for his mother, although she was right there beside him.

After her brother died, as my grandmother

told it, her mother gathered her remaining children around her and promised they would never take another family photo, because their family was irrevocably changed. Nothing was the same. Nothing would ever be the same.

In the midst of my own pandemic, listening to the click and sigh of the mechanical bed holding my mother, I could see, in my mind's eye, my grandmother a hundred years ago, her little child self, watching, waiting, quietly keeping a record. I sat next to her, with my mother, in that strange room, the thin December light filtering through the window. Watching. Waiting.

I can't remember the name of the nurse who, on my mother's last night, came to check on us every hour, squidging little vials of morphine into my mother's open mouth until the rigid clenching of her hands and shoulders eased and she breathed more quietly, without the ragged edge of pain. She was balancing her care for my mother with the rise of the deadly outbreak around us, but I felt nothing but her gentle focus.

In the early morning hours of our night vigil my brother and I broke the rules. I crept to the back door and let him in, and we stood together, holding hands over my mother, as her breath slowed, telling her how much we loved her, how grateful we were for her. The night nurse saw that we were both there and said nothing.

My mother died and we buried her on a cold day. A small portion of the people who loved her scattered six feet apart as light snow fell in impossible beauty over the rolling hills of the cemetery.

A death *of* COVID and a death *during* COVID are not the same thing. But neither is the same as a death *without* COVID.

My home in Seattle was across the street from a big hospital. I could look out my living room window and see people huddled, families gathered around cars parked on the street or in the parking lot. They lingered there, outside. One day, a man got down on his knees on the sidewalk, face turned upward toward the brick building.

For the first two years after my mom died, I only allowed myself to feel grateful. Grateful I had been able to touch her, talk to her, hold her hand, wait for her last breath. I was grateful. I am grateful. Because I was with her, and because in those strange and frightening months in the first year of the pandemic so many people had to say goodbye on a screen, through a window, or not at all.

Late at night in the months after she died, I replayed the hours alone in the room with her, trying to remember what I'd said or not said, done or not done, worrying myself into a terror that I'd failed at something essential in those stretching, awkward, lonely days. Then I'd shudder and shake my head, reminding myself I was lucky not to have been on my knees on the concrete. My grief stunted and clenched in my chest.

On the second anniversary of her death, I took myself to the wild, empty Washington coast in winter. I plunged myself into the frigid ocean. I spoke to my mother, sitting on the damp dunes in the cold gray mist. I apologized for all that I couldn't explain, that I couldn't fix, that I couldn't resolve for her or for me. For the way my mind wandered when I sat alone in that room for hours, and how I played solitaire on my phone sometimes. For the way I never was sure what to say and worried about it instead of just ly-

ing down next to her, afraid of bruising or bumping her frail body, invading what remained of her personal space. I remembered the way she, in her advancing years, grew into a stunning clarity of knowing what mattered and what didn't, and that she laughed often and freely. I remembered the way she loved me, the cool smoothness of her hand as she brushed my hair back from my face, how she would leave the room shaking her head slightly, lovingly, when I said or did something she couldn't make sense of, or disapproved of.

The clotted river of grief under my rib cage softened and broke open.

My great-grandmother speaks across 100 years from one pandemic to another. Nothing is the same. Nothing will ever be the same.

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FLASH FICTION

MYNA CHANG

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the next empty cup

We meet at the old Pandemonium Deli on 6th Street. Every Thursday morning, coffee and pastries, for more years than we can remember. Well, Cora, Elaine, and I get coffee and pastry. Diva preferred hot tea and chocolate cake. Always had to be different, that one. This morning when we shuffle in, there are only three of us.

We slide into our customary booth. Diva picked it because it offers a good view of the counter. To *watch the action*, she'd said.

The owner's sexy grandson, Peter, brings out baklava and coffee. Three mugs.

"We need a cup of tea, too," I say. "And a slice of cake."

Peter glances at the empty seat and nods.

We wait, quiet, holding onto the foolish illusion that perhaps our best days are not all behind us. We know that once we begin, our tightly-held fears may spill out, the secret dread of our remaining years impossible to deny. We let the silence cocoon us for a few more moments.

Peter returns with the cake and a teacup, setting it gently in front of the empty chair, then retreats.

We pause for another heartbeat. Elaine inhales a deep breath, then begins: "Diva was a poet of men, wasn't she? The way she understood them. Like Peter. Remember how she called him Pandemonium Pete?"

Elaine's words wash away our reluctance. Memories emerge. And, of course, top of the list is a sexy man. It's Diva we're mourning, after all.

"It was his hair," Cora says. "That's what she found most attractive in men."

Pandemonium Pete did have glorious hair. We studied him as he boxed up sandwiches for the coming lunch crowd. Morning sun streamed in the front windows, highlighting his untamed crown of chestnut waves.

"Remember how she said she wanted to *weave her fingers into the storm of it*?" I say.

We laugh and nod. She was the only one of us brash enough to flirt with a man as young as her grandson. Up at the counter, Peter locks his gaze on us, as if he can hear our thoughts. Cora and Elaine flush, and my own cheeks heat. He winks, and *oh my god,* he is a cocky thing. No wonder Diva fantasized about him.

Cora picks up her baklava, then drops it. Flakes scatter across the table. "My son wants me to go to a retirement home," she blurts. Her hands tremble as she wraps them around her coffee.

I rub my eyes and reach for Diva's teacup. A bag of her favorite black tea rests on the saucer. I dunk it into the hot water and press it down with the spoon. The bag splits and tea leaves spill out, swirling in the tiny whirlpool of the spoon's wake.

"Ah, it's ruined," I whisper. "Isn't that how it goes? Everything aswirl?"

"That's the way she liked it," Cora muses. "Everything aswirl."

"Maybe you should consider it," Elaine says abruptly. "The retirement home, I mean. It might be nice to have that safety net."

Cora taps her finger on the table. "No. Don't

the next empty cup

want to live with a bunch of strangers. Besides, it pisses me off when my son tries to boss me around."

Elaine bites her lip. She'd only had one child, and he died years ago. We're all widows, but Elaine holds the additional burden of a lost child. She shifts the conversation back to Diva.

"Remember when she set her kitchen on fire?"

Cora snorts. "Told her husband she'd been lighting the burner. Didn't want him to know she was trying to learn how to smoke cigarettes."

"They had to move in with me for three months while they repaired the damage." I laugh until I wheeze. It'd been a cramped, chaotic mess, but I'd missed them after they returned to their own home.

We pause as Pandemonium Pete brings a fresh round of coffee.

Then it's my turn to share a memory. The words catch in my throat. I'm thinking about Cora and retirement homes. About Elaine, with no children to dictate her final years.

My breath shudders. I'm overwhelmed by the terrors we share. The specific shame of getting lost, of falling, of embarrassing ourselves because our hands are too shaky, our fingers too clumsy to work the buttons on these goddamned new phones and touch screens and self-checkout kiosks. I'm burning with the anguish of young people humoring us, of doctors and receptionists and salespeople ignoring us.

It's not the dying I'm afraid of. It's living that scares the hell out of me. Living diminished. Living *lonely*.

I take their hands, my remaining friends pulled close. "Move in with me. We can cram our beds into the living room. It'll be like the old days in the dormitory."

No one speaks for a moment. Then Cora's smile lights the room, more dazzling even than Pandemonium Pete's hair. Elaine swipes at her eyes and says, "Yes, of course. We must stay together."

Pent-up tension drains away with the decision. "We're old enough, we don't have to hide our vodka in the laundry hamper anymore," I say. "Remember how Diva used to do that?"

Laughter bubbles freely now, spirits rising. I'm almost buoyant as I listen to my friends reminisce. I don't tell them about my diagnosis. How the next empty cup at the table will probably be mine. I'll leave them my apartment after I'm gone, but that's a conversation for another day.

"Hey," I say, "do you remember the time we stole twenty bucks from the bingo hall?"

The girls gape at me, puzzled.

"I don't think we ever did that," Elaine says.

I grin. "We've still got time."

*

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You can find more of her work at corinneharrison.com.

FLYING FISH

flying fish

I bend to pick up another bottle and a sharp pain in my back makes me freeze, bowed to the sand. My hand flies to my back, but the pain mellows into something dull and pulsing.

I straighten and look towards my daughter. Ida is scanning the line of froth, sea stones, and litter while dusting caked sand from a mud-green bottle. She usually works early morning shifts, but today she's free to accompany me.

Behind her, the bay is a mass of slow undulating bars. At its fringe, foaming sheets of water fall on top of each other, clapping for the two women who have foregone sleep to scan the beach for the previous night's leftovers.

My knuckles punch my lower back but there's a deeper pain it can't reach, one that thrums through my chest and orbits my heart. I sigh, chase off thoughts of my cleaning shift later in the day, and look at the bottle I've picked up. The blue label tells me it's a *Flying Fish*.

We've been the only people here for the entirety of early morning. So I'm surprised to see a figure break from the palm tree-lined strip far down the beach and struggle over the sand towards us. They're indistinct, a rocking white column in the distance. Another Cape Town early riser.

Ida returns and drops an armful of beer bottles in our pile with a small crash. She has my deep-night skin tone, and it makes the sea spray along her cheeks sheen like the Milky Way. She inherited her beautiful round eyes from her father. They flick between the bottles and I'm sure that, like me, the numbers are tumbling and merging through her mind. Some rice and potatoes for dinner. Maybe a meatless meal.

She bends to pick a piece of litter from the mouth of a bottle and as she does, I see her premature greying crown, an iris of embers. Her arm hosts a thin landscape of boils, the same kind that erupted when her father died and again when we were thrown out of our apartment, left on the street with our belongings around our ankles. Even after I'd crushed and liquified a root of devil's horsewhip and thickly applied the ointment along her forearms, the skin would settle only for a while until something else made it pucker and rise.

My heart burns.

"Hi there," a voice says behind us.

I turn and see that the stumbling white column has arrived. A boy. He's young, maybe as young as Ida. Like her, but not like her. He's *young*. And soft as a marshmallow. He has pancake cheeks with a hint of stubble, a radish-like sunburn on the side of his neck, sand-white shirt and chinos, hair bright as a yolk. Blue eyes flicker to the pile of bottles between us.

"Sorry to – disturb you. Don't suppose you've come across a watch? It's black, got a silver rim. Left it here last night."

I stare.

Now that he's arrived, I see his shirt is crumpled, as though he's slept in it. His eyes are bloodshot. An unwashed sour odour hangs around him, detectable under the sea breeze. I think of the ring of burnt-out wood at the other end of the beach where we found most of the bottles.

He meets my unwavering stare and his slop-

flying fish

py-adolescent grin falters. His gaze drops to my shoulder. He's frazzled, like a brood of chickens spooked by a fox. His feathers are all awry.

"No, nothing." Ida says. She gives him the down-and-up again look, raises her eyebrows my way, just an inch, and grabs a bin-bag for the bottles.

"Oh – ok then," the boy mumbles. He fiddles with the hem of his shirt, and his eyes go to the boils on her arms and stay there.

I look at his rolled-up sleeves, his forearms. They're smooth and covered in downy strands. They speak of starched sheets and cool white tiles, and I think of the neighbourhoods on the other side of Cape Town, broad pastel-coloured homes dispersed by private pools, streets embedded with topiary shrubs and palm trees.

"Well, I'll just –" the boy says. He still doesn't know where to look, what to do with his hands. I haven't taken my gaze from him.

He throws one last, disconcerted look at the boils on Ida's arm and crunches back over the sand. Probably back to his bed. Or to a meal, prepped, steaming and waiting.

Ida watches the boy and shakes her head sardonically. My hand is at my back again. She touches my shoulder and says affectionately, "I'll give you a back rub after your shift Mama."

The mention of my cleaning job brings a wash of weary dread, but I pinch her chin and smile up at her.

"I knew I raised you right."

She laughs and walks back across the sand towards more bottles.

I throw the *Flying Fish* in the pile with a clink.

*

SUSAN L. LIN

Susan L. Lin is a Taiwanese American storyteller who hails from southeast Texas and holds an MFA in Writing from California College of the Arts. Her novella *GOODBYE TO THE OCEAN* won the 2022 Etchings Press novella prize, and her literary/visual art has appeared in nearly a hundred publications. She loves to dance. Find more at https://susanllin.com.

TACO BELL CUSTOMER SATISFACTION QUESTIONNAIRE

taco bell customer satisfaction questionnaire

Welcome to the Taco Bell Customer Satisfaction Questionnaire. Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to bare your heart and soul to a group of data analysts on the Internet. We appreciate your honest feedback.

Store Number/Location:

Date of Visit (MM/DD/YYYY):

Section I: True or False

Please respond to each of the following statements as truthfully as you can.

1. This was my first visit to any Taco Bell restaurant.

2. This was my first visit to this particular Taco Bell location.

3. Arriving at this restaurant was like finding an oasis in the middle of a hot desert.

4. Arriving at this restaurant was like finding powdered cinnamon in the middle of a hot dessert.

5. My food looked/sounded/felt/smelled/tasted like my childhood stuffed into a paper sack.

6. I was provided with sufficient napkins to soak up my nostalgic/bitter-sweet tears.

7. I was very satisfied with my overall dining experience.

8. I am likely to return to this location again.

taco bell customer satisfaction questionnaire

Section II: Multiple Choice Fill-in-the-Blank

Please choose the word clusters that best complete the following sentences.

9. If I were holding a Taco Bell _____ right now, I would no longer feel _____ or _____.

A. Mexican Pizza; hungry; Italian

B. MTN DEW® Baja Blast® Freeze; my fingers; my thumbs

C. cash register; hopeless; short-changed

D. employee; horny; alone

E. all of the above

10. _____ is the reason Taco Bell _____ my _____ every day and/or night.

A. The color purple; catches; eye

B. Fast, cheap food; finds its way into; stomach

C. A fond childhood memory; permeates; thoughts

D. An unpleasant childhood memory; haunts; nightmares

E. all of the above

Section III: Short Essays

Please select two prompts from the list below and respond appropriately with well-developed thesis statements and supporting arguments.

taco bell customer satisfaction questionnaire

11. If you were given the opportunity to create your perfect custom Taco Bell Chalupa, what would the secret ingredient be? Why?

12. If you were given the opportunity to design your dream Taco Bell hotel, what would the guest keys look/feel/sound like? Why?

13. If Taco Bell discontinued your favorite menu item tomorrow, would we trigger the apocalypse? Why or why not?

14. If Taco Bell brought back everyone's favorite discontinued menu item tomorrow, would we finally achieve world peace? Why or why not?

Section IV: The "Are You a Robot?" Math Section

To confirm your humanity, calculate the solution to this simple algebra problem. Please show your work.

15. In the distant future, you're exiting the last Taco Bell on Earth with a greasy paper sack full of delicious warm food. You are, however, in a foul mood because the restaurant was experiencing an alarming shortage of salsa verde packets. "How exactly is one expected to live más when all our basic condiments have been stripped away?" you wail, shaking your fist at the heavens. That's when you notice a hot air balloon rising vertically into the sky at a steady velocity of 1.5 ft/sec from a launch pad roughly 30 feet away. Whoever is picnicking inside the basket waves an elusive red bottle above their head. "Fire sauce!" they yell. "Want to feel the flames?" You peer inside your bag. The Crunchwrap Supreme® at the top could indeed use a little kick. "Toss it my way!" you reply, but the stranger ignores your command. Instead, 22 seconds after the start of their aeronautical journey, they simply allow the hot sauce to fall from their open hands. How fast

taco bell customer satisfaction questionnaire

must you now run to catch the bottle before it shatters on the pavement?

Thank you for completing the Taco Bell Customer Satisfaction Questionnaire. We will never sell your personal information to third parties. If you choose to share your email address below, you will be entered to win a lifetime supply of reheated Doritos® Locos Tacos and the one-million- dollar equivalent of our Taco Bell x Dogecoin ‘90s throwback Chihuahua Pog® cryptocurrency.

*


FLASH CREATIVE NONFICTION

ALLISON HUGHES

Allison Hughes is a queer writer living on North Haven Island in Maine. She holds a BFA from Emerson College. Her work has been featured in *Wack Mag*.

I AM A BODY LYING IN THE GRASS

i am a body lying in the grass

On my walk to work in Jamaica Plain, I think of something I want to tell you. Something I see or feel or remember, typically, as I pass the first pond on my route, the one with a walking path that was fenced off for months due to renovations. Today, the fence is gone and the pond is a swamp, more brown than green, like the time you visited me in November. I told you we weren't stopping here to eat our takeout Thai food because the water was kind of icky—lots of geese traffic. I don't know when the renovations to the path occurred, if ever, but I want to tell you that they did.

On my way to work a couple of weeks ago, as I walked by that first pond, I saw a woman sitting in the grass on the opposite side of the road. She held her cell phone up to her ear with one hand, and with the other she held onto a dog who lay limp on its side. I paused, waiting, hoping to see the rise and collapse of its chest. Its pale yellow fur, uninhabited by wounds, blended with the dry, spring grass. A heart issue? I wondered. I kept walking. I did not want to know the outcome. I did not want to know I saw a dead dog.

Do you remember? In November, we walked to the second pond on my route to work, Jamaica Pond, to eat our takeout Thai food. This walking path was free from construction, only obstructed by runners, strollers, and couples carrying cups of coffee, all lapping each other around the pond. I ate chicken pad thai and you ate basil fried rice. We sat on rocks cushioned by fallen leaves and watched a dog chase a tennis ball through the water.

The sun dipped, the color of burnt butter setting in your eyes. I asked to take your photo on my disposable camera. My pointer finger hovered over the shutter button, anticipating a pause in your monologue about posing. I complied and took the picture while you were mid-sentence, and then another while you laughed.

You returned the favor. I sat with my arms around my knees. You strived for the perfect angles and direction and lighting but returned to your original position. That was the third time I felt a strong urge to kiss you but didn't.

On my way to work a week later, I walked by that first pond, and a bicyclist almost hit me. Am I invisible here? Am I a walking ghost?

At least run over my pinky toe. Rip off the nail and give it room to grow. Leave me evidence of my near-death experience. I've been hit by a car before, was left with no mark, not even a bruise on my elbow. I told you this on our way to my apartment, right before you sprinted across the road to avoid an accelerating car. I watched your backpack, heavy with a handful of books, thud against your shoulders with every stride.

I waited for the walk sign and then we skipped on the sidewalk. The irony of almost being hit by the kind of car you once owned, you joked, once we were reunited on the same side of the street. A Toyota Corolla.

During our last morning together in your bed, I asked if you ever had braces. We were naked and I wanted to touch your teeth. You didn't have braces, but I did. In middle school. Braces, glasses. acne.

You dweeb. I would've pushed you into the lockers, you told me.

And sometimes there are things I don't want to tell you like I never would've interpreted that as flirting and you are beginning to

i am a body lying in the grass

leave a bruise.

During our first morning together, in your bedroom that I flew across the country to see, you asked to kiss me. *Yes please*, I said. We dressed and undressed and dressed again. You called your mom back during our walk to drink tea and told her your plans for the rest of the year. I pointed to the mountains that enclosed the city, our surroundings shrinking with every step. You planned to move and move and move every few months. You looked to the mountains and back to me. The cafe was packed and the plastic chairs outside hadn't been shielded from the snowstorm that fell the night before. We barely spoke and I chose the wrong tea.

I like you but I don't want to be with you, you said, navigating our way through a construction zone to get to the liquor store. *We live so far apart and I don't know if we'll ever see each other again*.

We took the tram back to your house to drink cocktails with the apple syrup you made and the bourbon we bought. We undressed and dressed and undressed again. I finished and did not tell you. I took a deep breath, your cheek on my bare chest. Rise and collapse. I traced the jagged lifelines on your palm, rubbing two marks that hadn't yet scarred. Burns? Bites? I wondered. But you had tripped and caught yourself on sharp rocks. There is so much of your life I'll miss, I thought.

When I walk by that first body of water, I feel nauseous from missing you. I want to tell you that I saw a dog lying peacefully in the grass, and not that it was dead.

*

ROSE MARIE TORRES

A native of South Texas, Rose Marie Torres is an MFA candidate at LSU with a focus on screenwriting and creative nonfiction. Since 2023, Rose has been the Creative Writing Program Assistant for the LSU English Department. She has been supported by the 2025 Tin House Winter Workshop and can be found in *Latinitas Magazine, Hothouse*, and more..

I LIKE WHEN MY ASS HANGS OUT OF MY SHORTS

i like when my ass hangs out of my shorts

I've been approached by three different men at the library in the last month.

The first time, I was trying to find a free table near an outlet. He followed close behind me for a while, swerving in and around too many bookshelves for it to be a coincidence. He tired—after I'd circled the building multiple times and climbed two separate flights of stairs—and let me be.

The second time was after I found said table. I'd put my headphones on to watch a documentary on how the brain shapes our reality and we shouldn't trust what we see. The man tapped my shoulder, and I reactively pointed at my earbuds, signaling I was busy. He bumbled his way through some line before realizing I wasn't into it. He muttered some obscenity and walked away.

The third time I was reading Salman Rushie's latest novel, *Victory City*. I had just reached the part where Pampa Kampana is forcefully blinded by a hot iron rod after being sexually assaulted when I saw him walking my way. I thought he was approaching because he could see there were tears in my eyes. Maybe to offer a tissue.

You shouldn't sit like that, he said.

I'm sorry? I replied.

You. Shouldn't sit. Like that, pointing underneath my legs that were perched atop another chair.

(For context, I was wearing a dress. I don't think you need context.)

If you want to sit like that, you should really cover yourself.

Then he turned and walked behind the front desk, going into a room just out of view. He worked there, I realized.

Thanks, I mumbled, because what else was I supposed to say?

* * *

It's not even a big one—my ass. I've always thought it more like two squishy plums than a single ripe peach. Sure, my hips make up for that, wide like my mother's and her mother's and our Mexican mothers.

But it's not a dump truck if you get the picture. Maybe an SUV with a solid amount of trunk space.

My thighs, I will admit, are larger than most. They dimple when I sit on the floor and create holes in my jeans from where they rub.

I can't imagine wanting to hide them.

* * *

When my brother and I go home, it's an unspoken tradition that we visit our local Taqueria for dinner on Friday night with our parents. We drink margaritas, make rancheros, and take multiple rounds of shots. Except for my mom. We've decided that Betty shouldn't do shots. She gets loud, and then my stepdad Hector has to take her to bed.

Hector doesn't like when I wear short shorts. I think he thinks he's being protective.

My brother wears short shorts too, white ones that are tight around his thighs and make his dick bulge, but only I am told something.

i like when my ass hangs out of my shorts

Hey! Where's the other half of those shorts, missy?

Up this fat ass, I say, biting into my beef fajita taco.

* * *

My best friend, Mirely, and I aren't into the same kinds of clothes. We'll shop together and watch the other one try on outfits, but we never share clothes. She's much smaller anyway, so I don't think anything of hers would fit me comfortably.

I visited her a couple weeks ago, and when she opened the door, we were wearing the same black athletic shorts from Target.

She laughed.

Don't you just love them? I want every color. I just hate that I have to keep pulling them down all day. My ass hangs out so bad.

I say, *And?*

*

SHORT FICTION

SARA MARIA HASBUN

Sara Maria Hasbun is an American linguist, currently based in Beijing. You can find her on instagram, @misslinguistic.

TBILISI

tbilisi

The morning I arrived back in Tbilisi, I messaged my old trainer, who met me just inside the door to Urban Garden. He rested his swollen hands heavily on my shoulders.

Ana, he said. Anuka. You came back.

He looked into my eyes without a smile.

Of course, I said. How is everything here? How are the protests?

Immediately, he disengaged. With his bear paw he swiped away the thought of protests.

No protests, he said. You watch too much foreign media. This is just a few kids.

He set up my weights, gestured impatiently that I should start. Almost noon, he said. Very busy at lunch. Hurry up.

The gym was already busy. Russian women with their swollen lips, a group of German twenty-somethings in old t-shirts. And Israelis. So many Israelis. Later, Davit told me that Tbilisi was "crawling with Mossad." Anytime there were protests, Tbilisi swelled with Israelis.

Where do the Georgians work out? I asked my trainer. I never see Georgians at this gym.

Georgians don't work out, he said.

You work out, I said.

I *work*, he said. This is my job.

###

After the workout we got a coffee at Slink. Wi-Fi password: putinkhuilo. Putin Sit on a Dick.

The trainer drank his black coffee and looked at my face. You're drinking again.

I was always drinking, I said. I didn't stop.

He shook his head. If you stop drinking, I'll put you on my Instagram.

I don't want to be on your Instagram.

You foreigners drink so much.

You Georgians made the wine, I said. Did you think we came here for the Wi-Fi?

He laughed, then got up and walked away. Tomorrow, Ana, he said. Anechka, Anuka. Legs. No drinking.

###

I didn't make it to any more training that week, mostly because of the drinking. But also because there were a lot of people to see. I was based in Beijing then, but Tbilisi is one of those world cities that absorbs you quickly into the fabric, social digestion of the most expedient order.

In the hours I had free, I wrote, and once I had adjusted to the timezone I finally called Davit.

Davit had been a diplomat in Beijing. The Georgian embassy there was small, they were badly understaffed, Davit was overworked. But he was always good for a nightcap, always good for some dancing at the sandwich shop that turned into a disco.

Now Davit was back in Georgia's capital, working for his family business, taking a break from foreign service. We met at a posh bar in Vera, the embassy district, and sat outside next to the heaters. I should have

known where the night was going when he violently ordered shots of chacha to start.

The chacha settled into our bloodstreams, hot and fiery and reassuring, and Davit filled me in on the latest. Georgia's accession to the EU was "on pause." Protesters were irate. It was enshrined in the Georgian constitution, he explained, that Georgia should aspire to join the EU.

Should you be talking like this? I teased. Don't you work for the government?

I should not be talking like this, he said. Seriously. Why do you think I needed a break from foreign service? I'm tired of letting them speak through my mouth. Don't get used to this, Ana. Hearing my own words from my own mouth.

I asked him if he had been to any protests, and he said no. That if he went, he'd lose his job.

A cat jumped onto his lap; there were cats everywhere in Tbilisi. They were clean and chipped, but numerous. Belonging to no one and everyone all at once. The cat sniffed the glass of chacha, retreated.

How big are the protests? I asked. Bigger than last spring?

Tens of thousands, easily, he said. They're small in the evenings, but by the late hours of the night it looks like a New Years party. A really angry New Years party.

My trainer didn't think there were protests at all, I told him. He said it was all a foreign hoax.

Is your trainer Russian? he asked.

No, I said. He's Georgian. He speaks Russian, though.

Well, said Davit. We all speak Russian here. Speaking Russian doesn't make you less Georgian. Except in some cases, when it does. Anyways. That's enough politics.

He called the waiter over and they chatted in Georgian. We ended up with two bottles of Saperavi, a Mukuzani and a Khashmi Oak.

Two at a time? I said.

Let's not pretend we don't know where this night is going, he said. Let's dispense with the modesties.

And where is it going? I asked. My hand was easily within reach of his; in Beijing he had been greedy with my hand, in Beijing he had clasped it, traced it, squeezed it.

But he just shook his head, and poured two glasses for each of us, encouraged me to switch between the two wines, to enjoy the comparison. The Mukuzani was chocolatey and herbal. The Khashmi was nutty and earthy. If we hadn't said a word for the rest of the night, I could have happily sat there switching off between the two glasses, watching cats slide noiselessly along stone walls, meowing, waiting in vain for us to order food.

I want to work on problems that are mathematical, he said finally. Logical. Cold. I'm done with foreign service, I won't be bidding again. I want to track the cost of goods sold. Top line, bottom line. I don't want to deal in the abstractions of sovereignty. I don't want to deal in the currency of relationships. People suck, you know, Ana.

Not all people, I said.

Some of our best friends are people, I said.

Not all people, he repeated.

You're people, he said. You're good people.

Thanks, I said. You're good people too. I reached out my hand, but he looked away.

Most people suck, he said. I wish I were like you, Ana, I wish I still didn't know about how much people suck. Why did you even come here to Georgia?

I thought about it. I guess I'm the opposite, I said. I'm tired of business. I'm tired of the black line. Top line, bottom line. All the lines.

The only lines you should care about, he said, are the ones you'll do off a mirror if we go to Bassiani tonight.

Where? I said, absently. I was trying not to think about the fact that he still hadn't taken my hand.

You don't want lines, he said.

I guess I want inspiration, I said. I'm still trying to write. I think I'm your opposite. I'm done with business. Abstraction is what I want.

Abstraction is fine when it isn't *your* abstraction, he said. When it isn't *your* country's abstract problems. When it isn't *your* country's muddy pain. Then abstraction is just art.

He smiled at me. That's good, right? Put that in your book.

You're drunk already, I said.

Maybe.

Over the course of the next few hours, Davit and I both got ragingly drunk on the Saperavi. We had forgotten to eat. Davit got louder and louder, and I laughed harder and harder. He became more and more insistent on the idea of going to Bassiani.

You want something to write about, he said, I'll take you to Bassiani.

The waiter was pouring wine at that moment and momentarily paused the flow. Then clucked, shaking his head, muttering in Georgian.

Davit was clearly displeased at the intrusion and sparred with the waiter in language I didn't understand. Then the waiter shrugged his shoulders, turned to me, and said in Russian, it's not a good idea.

Then I suppose the waiter had reason to doubt my Russian, because he squeezed out, in effortful English: Is. Not. Good. Idea. Understand?

She's American, said Davit to the waiter, in Russian. She'll be fine at Bassiani.

The waiter shook his head and spoke to me in Russian again, slow and careful. Bassiani. Police. Many police. You understand?

Davit waved off the thought. The police came once to Bassiani, he explained to me in Russian, for the waiter's benefit. Only one time.

He switched back to English. It's great music. They say it is second only to Berghain. But it can get political, he said. At Bassiani. If you look Slavic, you must show your passport to get in, to prove that you're not Rus-

sian. But you don't look Slavic. You'll be fine. Police resources are very low because of the protests, they're not going to raid a dance club.

We paid and called a cab.

As our cab crossed the river, I put my hand on Davit's hand. He squeezed it, then put my hand back in my lap.

I can't think about that right now, he said. I'm sorry, Ana. I'm feeling terribly old.

You're forty, I said. Spring chicken, I said. Spring chicken kebab.

He was quiet. Our cab crept through the Chugureti weekend traffic, slow enough that I could read the English and Russian graffiti that crept over building facades, like so many vines. Russians Go Home. Glory to Ukraine. Georgia is Europe.

I feel so old, he said again.

You're a spring chicken, I said. Spring chicken mtsvadi. I drunkenly stumbled over the Georgian consonant cluster. Not that I could have done better sober.

Or too young, I don't know.

You're older than me, I said. Is there someone else?

Davit took my chin in his hand, kissed my mouth quickly, chaste. It's not you, he said. It's not anyone else. I haven't jacked off in a month.

Ah, I said.

I'm just stressed, he said. It really isn't you.

###

The Bassiani idea didn't last long. As we pulled up, Davit saw some friends who had already been waiting in line for an hour, ready to give up. They convinced us to go instead to a wild little corner bar where glass shards already lined the floor, already crunched under our shoes, and where two Spaniards were already dancing on the counter, singing in Spanish.

It's all fucking foreigners here, said Davit, perhaps forgetting I was a fucking foreigner.

A man at the bar turned around, leaned back on his elbow, and spoke to Davit in English. That's because any real Georgian is at the Parliament building, he said.

I felt Davit go very still.

The man spoke calmly, but those within earshot had gone quiet.

I looked at Davit's face. His features did not change, but he put his hand on the back of my neck. I could feel the heat from his fingers.

Excuse me, said Davit to the man at the bar. Excuse me. You're here. You're not at Parliament. Are you not a real Georgian?

I'm from Abkhazia, said the man. I'm a Georgian from Abkhazia. A real Georgian. And I'm only here to pick up a friend, then we'll go back to the protests.

Well, Abkhazia, said Davit. You don't fucking know me. You don't get to fucking judge me.

Abkhazia shrugged and sipped his drink.

How do you know what I'm giving, said Davit. What I have already given.

Davit switched into Georgian, then, and let forth a barrage of words I couldn't hope to understand. Abkhazia was unperturbed; he shrugged and turned back to his drink at the bar.

Davit turned back to me, put his hand on my lower back, guided me to another part of the bar. He waited for the bartender's attention but kept glancing over at the Abkhazian.

Abkhazia's friend soon arrived, as forecasted, and took a barstool. He was a dark man in a black t-shirt, very built. Had I seen him at Urban Garden?

The two friends slapped hands, did a half-hug. Abkhazia showed off the contents of a plastic bag full of little plastic bottles, and the friend seemed to approve. They left the bar without another look at us.

Davit's friends were already nowhere to be seen, but we befriended the Spaniards who had been dancing on the bar. Then some Belorussians showed up and we started throwing dice. We tried not to talk about the protests, or at least Davit tried, and I definitely tried. But one Belorussian had just come from Minsk that morning; he wanted to see what it would look like, a protest in Georgia. Protests in Belarus are very different, he said, I can assure you. You Georgians don't know how good you have it. How lucky you are. His face tightened and he did not elaborate.

Davit's dark eyes grew darker by the hour, he threw dice and didn't even watch where they went. He couldn't hold onto the thread of the conversation, he laughed a few beats behind everyone else, he grunted at the wrong times. I nudged him when it was his turn to play, and he threw, then smiled and patted my hand, the smile disappearing as quickly as it had appeared, as he stared down the bottom of his drink. He got up to order another round of chacha.

I thought of a TV news producer who had taught me about "gear shifts." Sometimes, he said, after reporting on a terrible tragedy, you need to switch to a lighter story. But you can't make the switch right away of course, that would be gruesome. Sometimes, at the very least, you need to say, "the time in London is 10:30, fog is expected to last through the evening."

Our new friends were rowdy, silly, we were at that part of the night where everything is hilarious, everything that happens is in the service of hilarity. But as drunk as we all were, as accepting as I knew the group would be of any insanity that came out of my mouth, at 3 a.m. in a bar in Chugureti, I couldn't think of how to say it, the gear shift. The time in London, I thought desperately, watching Davit. The time in London.

It all started to get very dark. Not even the wine and the chacha could keep us light although we were really trying, even though Queen was playing, then Carly Rae Jepsen, then Tatu, then Abba. Davit and the Spaniards and the Belorussians were groping desperately for lightness, ordering drinks with a vengeance, twirling me halfheartedly, laughing loudly, translating terrible Belorussian jokes for my benefit. But the lightness wouldn't take. Protesters were coming into the bar with red eyes from tear gas, washing their faces in the same sink the bartender used to wash our glasses. A protester came in with a broken nose, the bartender gave him a stack of branded napkins to stuff into his nostril. One of the Belorussians

started to cry and told us he could never go home. I felt their sadness take shape in me, and I shuddered involuntarily with fear. I didn't, back then, have the faculties to cope with that kind of existential precarity.

Around two in the morning, I got a phone call from an old lover and there it was, a chance for lightness. I stumbled outside to take the call, to listen to sweet words, to lower the stakes a bit.

Davit came out to the street shortly after, to throw up into the sidewalk trash can. I told the lover I'd call him back.

They didn't understand, Davit said to me. That Abkhazian, those Georgians. You should have told them I'm a diplomat. That I'm serving my country. Even if I have to pretend it isn't all just a puppet show for Bidzina. You should have told them that. I can't tell them that, I'd sound like a jackass. But you could have told them. You could have defended me.

I'm sorry, I said. You're right. I should have told them.

I'm so old, said Davit, I'm so, so old. But I'm really not in a hurry to die.

Who's dying? I said. No one is dying. Who's dying? Jesus, Davit. It's the weekend.

Not me, he said. I'm not dying. Because I'm staying out of that abstractionist bullshit. I'm not trying to be some hero, I'm not trying to pretend like the future of Georgia depends on whether or not I'm standing in front of Parliament acting like an idiot.

Davit, I said. I tried again, like an idiot, to take his hand.

Don't fucking judge me, Ana. I'm still a man. I'm still a man.

He kicked a wall. I backed away a few steps.

I'm not judging you, I told him. Do I look like I'm judging you? Do I look like *I* am risking my life for my country? Do I look like I am risking my life for anything?

Just then my old lover called again, so I told Davit I was going to take a walk around the block. He shrugged and went back inside.

I walked around the block, I walked some more, and then I found myself back at my Airbnb. I pulled the covers over my head while I listened to the lover's sweet words. There in my bed I let the phone sex pull me out of the abstractions, let it pull me into the singularity of a present moment, the tunnel vision of desire. The absolution of having, as the single most important short-term goal, the release of orgasm. No other thoughts in my head. No other abstractions. I came hard, then immediately felt guilty. I felt bad for leaving Davit, in that state.

Come back, texted Davit. The Abkhazian came back with his friend. They almost smashed a bottle over my head, but now we're doing shots.

You're really selling it, I told him.

I considered going back to Davit; I did feel pretty bad about abandoning him at the nadir of his moral reckoning. But I quickly realized the guilt I felt was not enough to propel me outside. There was no fucking way I was going back out, not into that darkness. The lover was still on the phone. He kept going, mostly for himself by then, he kept saying his sweet, pretty, filthy things. I half-listened, half-scrolled through Georgian news

alerts. Took some notes for my writing.

Did you come? asked the lover. Yes, I said. I came. But keep going. I can come again.

###

The next morning Davit called and woke me up, I'd forgotten to mute my phone.

He was having brunch at Slink, with the Abkhazian and his friend, they'd gone all night, they were friends now. They'd lost the Belorussians but had ended up at Bassiani after all. They'd ordered too many syrniki, he said, your favorite. Come eat syrniki.

I threw on my clothes and hoped I wouldn't run into the trainer, since Slink was right next to the gym.

I joined the group and dug right into the fluffy clouds of cheese syrniki. Hunger was clarifying, it had temporarily eliminated my fear of Davit and his existential dread. Once I finished a couple fluffy clouds I looked up. They were all watching me eat. Davit reached over and dumped more cherry sauce on my plate.

So much sugar, said the Abkhazian's friend.

Do you work out at Urban Garden? I asked him.

Of course, he said. Every Israeli works out at Urban Garden.

So are you Mossad? I asked.

He laughed and shook his head. No, little girl. I'm just here for the party.

Davit raised his eyebrows at me.

The Abkhazian told me his story. He had fled Abkhazia during the five-day war in 2008, when Russia had occupied the region. He had ended up a refugee in Istanbul. When he finally sorted a proper Georgian passport, he came back, this time to Tbilisi. He opened a poetry café. The police had closed the cafe last Spring. Health code violation, he said, making quotation marks of his fingers.

Stupid move for them, he said. Because now that I'm not supervising pourovers I can work full-time in service of a European Georgia.

The Abkhazian put more food on Davit's plate. Eat up, he said in Russian, *yesh, yesh*. You'll need your strength for tonight.

Davit shook his head. I'm not going out tonight, he said.

Are you going to stay in and cry? asked the Israeli. Like you cried last night?

You cried? I asked.

Davit shoveled food into his mouth and watched the Israeli. I was drunk, he said.

Well, tonight you can cry from tear gas, said the Israeli. Or if you prefer, you can stay home, and you can cry because you're a little bitch.

I tensed, but Davit was either too drunk or too sober to be baited anymore.

It's so much more complicated than that, he said to the Israeli, looking exhausted. Trust me. I told you. I work in government. You guys have no idea. You have no idea what else is going on. Even if you get what you think you want—it's so much more compli-

cated than you think.

The Israeli shrugged. I'm sure it is very complicated, he said. But if so, then I am glad to have no idea. As long as I can still see what's right in front of me. And if you're having trouble seeing what is right in front of you, they say just a few drops of these can help.

He held open the plastic bag that the Abkhazian had given him the night before at the bar, showed us the contents. Inside were dozens of bottles of saline solution.

###

A few days later I was back in Beijing, back at the café where Davit and I used to go, where we used to have breakfast after a night of dancing. I met with a journalist from *Russia Today*, an old friend. A longtime Beijinger, originally from Siberia.

I'm glad you went to Georgia, she said, I'm glad you could see it for yourself. How much the media is blowing everything out of proportion. You didn't see any protests, right? No drama? Just a few kids making trouble, right?

I thought about it and realized I hadn't actually seen the protests. Not with my own eyes. I hadn't gone anywhere near the parliament building. I shrugged.

Just then my phone rang. Davit. 9 a.m. in Beijing, 5 a.m. in Georgia, I did the math.

You ok, Davit? Everything ok?

Yes, Ana, he said, Anyushka, Anuka. Aniko.

He was drunk, perhaps. Or amped. Using all of my Georgian nicknames at once.

I just wanted to show you this, he said. He turned on his video, and I pulled the phone away from my ear, to watch.

Around Davit was a colorful wave of people and flags, a wave that licked and retracted, flowed and receded, seemingly meters from the steps of Parliament. No, not quite reaching the steps of Parliament. In between the steps and the crowd was a black mass of police. With the poor resolution, I had thought the mass was an empty shadow. As the details came through, as the pixels multiplied, I saw helmets, shields, yellow reflective stripes.

You're at the protest, I said.

Yes, he said. Can you see?

I thought you didn't want to deal in abstractions.

What? he said. I can't hear you. Sorry, it is so loud. I saw the Abkhazian, pulling on a black balaclava.

Be safe, Davit, I said. Please be safe.

He laughed and shook his head. I can't hear you, he said. I just wanted you to see. Can you see?

I can see.

He laughed, I can see now, too.

Mid-laugh, the line cut off. Perhaps the signal was weak in the crowd, thousands and thousands of mobile phones guzzling data. Or perhaps Davit had given up, since he couldn't hear me, perhaps he had ended the call.

tbilisi

My phone screen returned to black. In the dim and distorted reflection of the screen, all I could see was my face.

*

MARILEE DAHLMAN

Marilee grew up in a small Iowa town. Now she lives in Washington DC and writes about invisible outsiders searching for where they belong. Most of all, she's inspired by the women in her family: no-nonsense farmers and nurses who drive pickups, eat at McDonald's, and don't get knocked over by a 40-mile hour wind or anything else that life hurls at them. Her short stories have been published in *The Saturday Evening Post, The Bitter Oleander, The Colored Lens, Cleaver, Molotov Cocktail, Mystery Weekly, Orca Literary Journal*, and elsewhere. She can be found at www.marileedahlman.com.

MALL GODDESS

mall goddess

Let's put this into perspective. There were problems in the world. Bill Clinton, at that time, he had problems. The whole Monica thing. O.J. was free, there was still stuff going on in Bosnia, and the Spice Girls were breaking up. But my problems, right then in that food court? They were epic.

What was happening was I was sitting across the table from my true love, Justin. He was doing more wincing than talking. I could see palm sweat where he'd been gripping the edges of his Sbarro tray.

"I felt like I had to say yes, Kylie," Justin said. "I mean, when you just grabbed me in the hallway. I was in the moment, you know?"

The hallway, grabbing him—that would be in the school hallway, right after the class we had together, Greek & Roman Mythology. Sometimes I called Justin my Apollo, which he liked, but the truth was that he reminded me more of a centaur. He had doe eyes, soft and brown and hidden by long lashes, just as I imagined the eyes of a half-boy, half-horse. He was beautiful and strong, but prone to skittishness. At that moment, his soft eyes kept glazing over and flitting sideways to glance at his friends, sitting at a table over by Subway. He drummed his fingers and fidgeted.

Justin and I were at our favorite table, the one by the window overlooking the parking lot that sits between the mall and Applebee's. That was our joke—let's have a date at Applebee's. But we couldn't afford that so he'd get two slices of pizza from Sbarro, I'd get a cinnamon Auntie Anne's pretzel and we would dine like gods at our special table.

"I know I said yes," he said. "I just don't know if I meant it."

My mind caught up to what "yes" he was talking about. I'd told Justin that we'd go to prom together. He'd said yes. I'd said yes to other things. Three times in the car, parked in a quiet spot, I had said yes.

I had to respond. But my breath whooshed up and down my throat, sweat popped out all over my body, including my face, and my brain mostly shut down, except for the part that became omniscient, able to see other people staring at us as they sucked on straws to hide their smirks. To top it off, I had to sit a certain way because of a bad zit on my back that hurt when I leaned against the chair.

"I love you." I wished we were together in his dad's Trans Am, Soundgarden playing low. Anywhere but here, under the glare of the mall's fluorescent lights.

"What, Kylie?"

"But I love you." I said it more loudly. At that point, people openly looked our way. Justin's friends, Marcus, Steve and Wendi. The two guys in blue Menards shirts eating KFC. The lady with a kid pushing Matchbox cars onto the floor.

Justin beamed a smile. His lips pursed to make a "pfft" sound. He acted like he was five years older, even though he was two months younger and we were both seniors.

"We can't go together." He paused to glance at the friends. "I know what I said, but no."

That's when everything burned. My heart went as dark as a charcoal ember, with crackling red pieces breaking off. My brain smoked. I looked around, anywhere but his face. Flames streaked up the food court walls, melting the octagonal skylights, blaz-

ing through electrical wires and drywall and incinerating everything in the whole mall, every fleece jacket, fruity candle, crappy piece of jewelry, all the CDs and Pepe jeans, everything, every shelf and mannequin. It all burned to a crisp, and it didn't make any difference to the world because it was all nothing to begin with. I ought to do it. Burn the place so there'd be nothing left but a jumble of blood and bones sitting on ash and the smell of smoke obliterating the lingering aroma of Orange Julius.

Justin was still in front of me. He started to push out from the table—no! I would not be left sitting alone, like a loser. I would get away first. Standing up fast, I shoved the table somehow, which I didn't mean to do, and Justin looked scared. Okay, if he was going to act jumpy, I'd make his performance worth it. I picked up my chair a few inches and slammed it to the floor. To this day, I try not to think much about what happened next, which is that I strode away, toward the mall's main corridor, but had to stop and puke up that pretzel. I did it next to a trash can, by the mural with the buffalo herd and the cornfield. I guess everyone saw me do that but, like I said, I try not to think about it much.

###

So, anyway, that was the drama of my life. When I graduated, it was clear I needed a job, so I tried different things and ended up back at Empire Mall. Weirdly, my best job was at Foot Locker. I didn't mind the people I worked with. The place had a clean, rubbery smell. Yeah, I felt I was above having to fit shoes on people, but it was better than working in fast food. And I had no interest in breaking my back or slicing off a finger down at the meatpacking plant.

Wendi, Justin's friend whom I finally understood was more than a friend, would come to the mall sometimes and pretend not to recognize me. Other times she would act really friendly. I met a guy named Brandon who worked at Sbarro. Justin never came to the mall, so God knew where he got his Nikes. I'd see him around town sometimes. He'd cut his hair shorter and gained fifteen pounds. If we were together, I'd still love him.

I married Brandon. We had a reception at the Best Western where we danced to the Kelly Clarkson song "Breakaway." More importantly, when Foot Locker left the mall, I snagged a job in maintenance. I was doing that for about two weeks when my supervisor retired and the mall's security guy quit, which left me as the mall's chief maintenance and security person. The mall management company emailed me, "We're happy to have you keeping an eye on things as this commercial center's chief custodian."

So, mall janitor. I had a job and a husband and you'd think that'd be enough, but I made a point of keeping tabs on Justin's whereabouts. Accidentally-on-purpose I'd end up in the same place as him. Picking up pop at Hy-Vee, waiting in reception at the vet, once watching the downtown Halloween parade. I wouldn't say anything. Neither would he.

That is, until the summer I turned twenty-nine. It was an average day, no warning. I hadn't even planned it. I was crossing the parking lot of the highway Culver's under the glaring August sun, mind going a mile a minute, just wanting to pick up a Butterburger and frozen custard. Justin was walking out alone, and when our eyes met, he got this look like he'd been caught shoplifting. Beauty's skin deep? Whatever. When I took in his brown-green eyes, quick smile,

and broad shoulders under that plaid shirt, I knew his soul was all colors of the rainbow edged in gold.

We passed each other. Behind me, his voice floated along the air.

"I was stupid back then. Sorry."

He actually apologized to me, at least to my back. But it was so unexpected. What do you say if you hear what you always wanted to hear but you aren't ready for it? In an instant, I remembered what he'd been like and why I'd never gotten over him. We'd bonded in art class and he'd paint with green while singing Green Day songs. He'd always found something nice to say about my mother, whose moods swung between vacant silences and hurricanes of pointless activity—"She wears the prettiest earrings!"

I faced him. "You were never stupid."

Justin flicked his head like he was making sure nobody was looking, stepped closer, and snuck a hand out to graze my elbow. He smiled at me with his mouth and eyes and whole heart. A wonderful moment. I've held onto it for years, always going over the memory with care, like it's a floor I'm waxing.

###

Brandon turned out ok. We pretty much get along. We have one child, though that took a while. When Sbarro left the mall, Brandon got a job at Casey's gas station. Sometimes the Casey's manager gives him old t-shirts for free when they get a new shipment. I wear them.

The weird thing is, sometimes I catch Brandon looking at me, his eyes on the hard plasticky print of a lizard or truck or whatever's on the front, and he's standing there, and I'm sitting on the couch, and his chin—he's still got zits, after all these years—wobbles and his eyes get wet. He looks so pathetic I have to get up and leave, trying to resist kicking in drywall on my way out. We don't have much to say to each other the rest of the time, but I give him orders. Pick up the kid, stop buying milk at Hy-Vee when it's cheaper at the new Walmart, and why don't you put laundry away for once?

He doesn't do what I say. Neither does our kid, for that matter. It's only at the mall where I'm really in charge.

The mall got quiet. Literally, because the speaker system broke and I didn't know how to fix it. But the place didn't become a ghost mall, not totally, not from my perspective. I kept it alive. The fluorescent lights glowed and the skylights were clean. It was only the vacant stalls that made it seem dim. Sometimes, doing my patrols, I got the feeling that the mall was truly alive. In the heat of summer, being inside the mall felt like being inside a human lung, all damp and warm and dark. The space slowly replenished its air, breathing in the hot mist hovering above the parking lot asphalt, and exhaling its humid stuffiness through every crack and orifice in the roof and walls. The circulatory system of pipes still worked and the nerve system of wiring and lights illuminated every inch of peeling linoleum. If this place was a ghost mall, it was a living ghost.

Justin never came in. He and Wendi had one kid, like me. I'd once admitted to Brandon that my feelings for Justin hadn't been a short-term thing. By junior year, I'd actually been in love with Justin since I'd seen him on stage in eighth grade singing the lead in *Music Man*. Brandon was understanding

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about it at the time. But once in a while, like an assassin slicing a dagger, he makes a comment about Justin and Wendi, twisting it in a way that makes it nasty about me. Like, Wendi went back to school and became a nurse practitioner. He says, "They must want more in life, you know?"

I did used to want more. Something with myth, maybe becoming an archeologist. But not everybody's meant to follow dreams. Some people have to survive a dying empire. I conduct my patrols, mop the floors, change lightbulbs, water plants in the brick planters, dust benches, tar up roof leaks, fix broken tile in the restrooms, pull weeds in the parking lot, and even repair the electrical although I don't have a license. The management company doesn't ask too many questions. They just claim new tenants are about to arrive.

Some vacant stores have beige banners across, showing jubilant women shoppers and the words "*Good Things Coming Soon . . .*" I stopped believing good things were coming when they stopped sending the banners. JCPenney was deader than a doornail. Bath & Body Works, a black hole. Spencer's Gifts, godforsaken and possibly haunted.

One time, I went into the old Kmart and saw graffiti splashed on the back wall, red and yellow flames bursting everywhere. That hit funny. It made me mad, like, if anybody's going to burn down the mall, it's going to be me. This place is mine. I take care of it, keep it alive, and I'm the boss. If I hear clatter or laughter pealing from the darkness of that empty Kmart, I go over there. I'll say, "Won't have that business here," but mostly my mere presence with a big yellow flashlight is intimidating enough.

But sometimes, when it's a bright day perfumed with Mr. Clean, it feels for a moment like all the retail could return. Everything could go back to how it always was, if only the mall management company or the U.S. president or God just flipped a switch.

###

I'll tell you what happened last July, when I was repairing a broken window: I saw an old red 1991 Trans Am cruise by really slow. Justin's ride. He'd kept it going all these years.

Quickly, I patrolled the whole mall, peering out all the windows. What I saw made my heart race and my head go all light, just like when I was a teenager. The Trans Am was parked at the old Applebee's. It wasn't an Applebee's any more, it was a Mexican cantina that a family started up three years ago in that building when the Applebee's left.

Justin had gotten a job as a server there, it turned out. I stood at our window, right by our old table, and watched him get in and out of his car a dozen times. He always wore jeans and an untucked white shirt, sleeves rolled up. His hair was still thick and he'd put on a few or fifty in recent years, like we all have. It was the same Justin with the charming tilt of his head and slow saunter like he had all day to get wherever he was going. I wanted to be closer, to know if his eyes were still penetrating and kind, if he sang along to the radio, if he still wanted a pet bird or ever got one. How can it be, after all these years, that I wanted to hold his hand on a blanket in the grass at a firework show?

The best part wasn't how he looked. Minor details. What mattered was *where* he looked. When he arrived or left, I would see him take a long glance toward the food court window

where we used to have our dates. This was true whether I spied from the windows, the roof, or the old Kmart's glass doors.

Take a long look, Justin. It's the place where you ruined your life. Both our lives.

I wanted him to come over to the mall. I also didn't want him to come over, because if he was nasty somehow, I'd lose something inside me, some little jewel of hope I pretend I don't carry around all the time.

But sometimes, you have to go out on a limb. After careful planning, I made a point of timing things. A month ago, striding across the parking lot to my car just as he was getting out of his, I lifted the hand that held my keys, keeping the wave as casual as I could. The first time he just nodded back. The second time, when I was up on the roof trying to push October's first snow off the worst leaky places, he waved first.

After that was the long waiting time, when the sun dimmed for winter and every day lasted forever. Every morning, I looked at Brandon sleeping, and saw someone I loved. But at the mall, in the women's restroom, I looked in the mirror and saw someone who'd never gotten what she wanted. Across town, was Justin looking into his own mirror, and contemplating what could happen between us?

The waiting got worse. I sat in the mall and things no longer burned. They vanished. The steel and concrete dissolved into the air. The linoleum sank into the soil and the artificial lights faded to let the real stars glow. In my mind I chased Justin. Confronted him. Long after closing up, I would collapse on the floor in the food court, next to the buffalo mural, now with chipped tile and the buffalo fur faded to corpse gray, and I'd unwrap a Pecan Spin, the crackling wrapper the only sound on planet earth, and I would wait.

The Mexican place closed in February, shut down for good. I don't know if they went bust or the family just moved away, but the cars stopped coming and so did Justin. It took twelve hours for the place to look like it'd been abandoned for centuries. With snowdrift piled against the front entrance and icicles dangling from the eaves, the cantina was a ruin that belonged in a haunted forest. I emailed the mall management company and they said they'd heard something about a barbeque joint going in, maybe.

The Mexican place going bust meant even less foot traffic in the mall. I still patrolled with my mop, trying to get my ten thousand steps in, but it didn't seem to do much for my physique or energy levels if I did or didn't. The Claire's left, as did the Things Remembered and the twin-screen movie theater.

So, now there's the florist, jewelry and watch repair, pawn shop, and military recruiting office. The place where the Buckle used to be is a Senior Citizen Meeting Room. I said to Brandon, I'll bring the kid one day. She can get some energy out. Brandon just sucked on his bottom lip and said, "I don't want her to see her mom as a janitor, ok? I just want more for her, you know?"

###

Justin's Trans Am cruised along Seventh Avenue, in front of the mall, twice in early spring. Twice that I saw. So, how many times total? And, why? He lived in a neighboring town. No reason to be here, except maybe to visit friends. He'd always had friends.

A mall is kind of a changing thing, just like a person. We would definitely get a medical

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clinic. That tenant was starting to set things up. The food court had a donut shop. There were white mannequins left where the JCPenney used to be, always standing like naked ghosts about to have a party. I left it that way because the gray hairs walking in the mornings always take a long look at that scene, it was part of the entertainment of their morning exercise.

I always kept the food court tables clean and the chairs lined up nice and straight. That's where I was when it happened. Right in the food court, while spring rain pelted the windows, I heard the soft tap of footsteps. A second later, I saw a man in a green plaid shirt, wet hair flattened across his forehead, amble in with a brave smile spreading on his face.

It was Justin.

He stopped under the sign that said "Food Court" in cursive letters. They used to be bright yellow. Now they're the color of stained teeth. He took in the scene, snake plants in big cracked pots under the skylights, every table empty, and the dark void where I used to buy big soft pretzels caged in metal. Even though he was the confident type, he said nothing. His grin froze up.

I edged closer, near enough to know he smelled like the rainy outside, damp earth and wet asphalt. He regarded our old table.

His face looked so sad, I said, "Wanna walk?"

He nodded. We took off into the mall's main corridor, strolling side-by-side past shuttered stores like we had some place to go. My heart raced. I attempted a dignified smile while feeling like a magical power would lift our bodies and we'd transform into people with shining eyes, wearing glowing garb. Why was I so devoted to this prince? He wouldn't change our realm of rotting mall and dying town. Yes, he'd been a friend. Back when we were dating, there were laughter and parties and fun and the belief that there was a golden odyssey of life waiting for us. Not always easy, but a journey with meaning and mystery along the way. Maybe, together with him, there would still be some wonder ahead.

"So, this is where you've been hiding," he said.

The way he said it, a little high-pitched, I figured the words were planned out. After he said them, he glanced at me. I didn't like that look at all. It was slightly timid, as if he was afraid that I'd strike him down with a bolt of lightning. He didn't used to have that look. Maybe I was overthinking things, but I got the feeling he'd been saying things for a long time, and getting mean answers back. I had stuff I wanted to say to him, aching matters to get off my chest, but I decided that, for the time being, I would just be agreeable.

"Yeah, but you found me, huh?" I smiled and stopped, and he did, too, and we didn't know what to do so we started walking again. Maybe a promenade is all he planned on. There was nobody else around. We got to the theater and I wondered if I should invite him in. We could sit in the dark and talk. The words just didn't come out, though. We went back to the food court, quiet the whole time.

"You could've been my prince," I finally said. Yeah, I know, I have a one-track mind. All these years haven't changed me. At least, not how I feel about him. Justin didn't seem surprised by my words. "My prince," I said again.

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Justin winced and waved a hand at the faded lime green acre of chairs and tables. “And this would be our court.” He twirled and gave a dramatic bow, swooping his head low and scraping the floor with his fingertips.

I felt sick. Like, depression walloped me like it was an ice road trucker and I was a half-wit doe. God, what did I have? What did I ever have that I could give to anyone else? And what could Justin ever give me? I’d never had much power over my own destiny. Not once the local college closed down, taking its arts program with it, and not when life had handed me the duty of caring for a mother with mental health issues. Yet, with Justin there could be laughter. Music and camping trips and laughter. At least sometimes. Maybe.

Justin’s hand was suddenly holding my elbow. I got a strange sensation, like my brain was in a Ninja blender. We were walking but my head was spinning and weightless. It was all I could do to plant one foot in front of the other and not puke or fall down. We left the mall and trudged through the parking lot. The rain had stopped. The only sound was the gigantic American flag at the dealership across the street flapping in the wind. We arrived at his Trans Am, parked between the mall and the old Applebee’s. He let go of me to rummage in the passenger side and grab a plastic Hy-Vee grocery bag.

“The pizza’ll be cold,” he said.

I looked at his wedding band on the hand holding the grocery bag. He noticed me looking and our gaze met.

“We’ll have an affair, see,” he said.

I nodded. Yeah, of course I’d go along with that. No question. The fleeting thought of my husband Brandon hurt more than I would’ve expected. It wasn’t a wood sliver under skin, it was more of a smash of a hammer on a thumb. But when that happens, you swear and keep pounding away. Sometimes, you just have to finish building something.

Justin still had the keys to the old Applebee’s. I guess that was his kingdom now, the way the mall was mine. The old restaurant was dark but not as dilapidated as I would’ve thought. The plants were dead, there were carpet stains and a slight mildew smell, but the ceiling didn’t look like it would collapse on us.

“They took care of it,” Justin shrugged. “But you know how it is.”

The electricity wasn’t on. The window shades were up, letting sunlight in, and cracked glass let in fresh air. We picked out the table facing the mall parking lot. We sat down, vinyl booths squeaking like crazy. It was funny to get this perspective, to face the gray boxy building with peeling paint and faded store names surrounded by a weedy parking lot moat. We’d started over there, a million years ago. I guess we got farther than where we’d begun.

Justin sat everything on the table between us. Some Mountain Dew, pizza slices and cookies.

“Royal buffet,” I said. The emptiness inside was filling up with something. Justin, this old place, the food – it was a nice concoction of novelty and the familiar. It was real life. It was magic. Whatever the power behind it, I’d have someone to share my realm with.

Justin laughed. He drummed his fingers on the table and his grin spread wide and genuine.

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We didn't eat at first. I took his hands and we looked at each other, the inside of the restaurant, and the outside of the mall. All abandoned property, or close to it. To put things in perspective, I guess everything crumbles eventually. But something else had begun. No myth or fairy tale. Just me and Justin together, finally, in our own ever after.

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ARTWORK

ISSUE XIX
ART

COVER: "Natural Hue"
by Ssarah Kohrs

My artist name is SENK, which stands for Sarah Elizabeth Nichols Kohrs. I create in pottery, poetry, and photography. As a state licensed homeschooling mother, who has a propensity for hiking in the Shenandoah Valley, Va, with her kids, I have found photography the most versatile when adventuring. There are so many eureka moments I want to remember—ones that inspire me—and I'm grateful for the chance to share them with you, too.
senkohrs.com.

Ellen June Wright's work revolves around the power of color and the emotions and memories they evoke. She is inspired by the works of Stanley Whitney, Mary Lovelace O'Neal, Frank Bowling, Howardena Pindell, Jamaican Artist Cecil Cooper and others. Her art appears in *LETTERS, NOVUS Literary Journal* and others. Her work was included in the 2024 Newark Arts Festival and featured at the HACPAC in NJ. To see more visit: https://fineartamerica.com/profiles/8-ellen-wright.

ISSUE XIX
ART

"Impressions of Waking Cranes" (pgs. 34 & 35)
by Kim McNealy Sosin

Kim McNealy Sosin rediscovered her love of photography and poetry after retiring from teaching university economics. She has published poetry, flash fiction and photographs in journals and anthologies including *Sandcutters, Failed Haiku, Beyond Words,* and *Voices from the Plains,* and also photographs in journals including *Rattle, Raw Art Review,* and *The Ekphrastic Review*. Her photographs were selected for the cover for several journal issues and books.

"In March, I drive to central Nebraska for one of the world's most amazing migrations: the Sandhill Cranes, over half-million of them, pass through a river length of about 80 miles. This photo was taken one coral morning when the sunrise created silhouettes of the cranes dancing and taking off."

Untitled (pg. 43)
by Ferris E Jones

Ferris E Jones is an award-winning, internationally published poet, artist, and screenwriter living in Manchester Connecticut. His work has appeared in both print and online magazines including as the featured poet for Creative Talents Unleashed. Other magazines include: *Dreich, Glo Mag, Piker Press, Se La Vie Writers Journal, Write on Magazine, Outlaw Poetry, Degenerate Literature 17, Tuck Magazine, The Literary Hatchet, Warriors with Wings, In Between Hangovers*, and more. He is the recipient of two grants from the Nevada Arts Council and the Editor/Publisher of Nevada Poets 2009. Ferris has twice received honorable mention awards from the Writer's Digest annual screenwriting contest. He is also the Author / Editor of nine poetry collections. You can learn more about Ferris E. Jones by visiting www.inquisitionpoetry.com where each month he features the work of other poets. The goal of this site is to spread the word of poetry throughout the world.

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