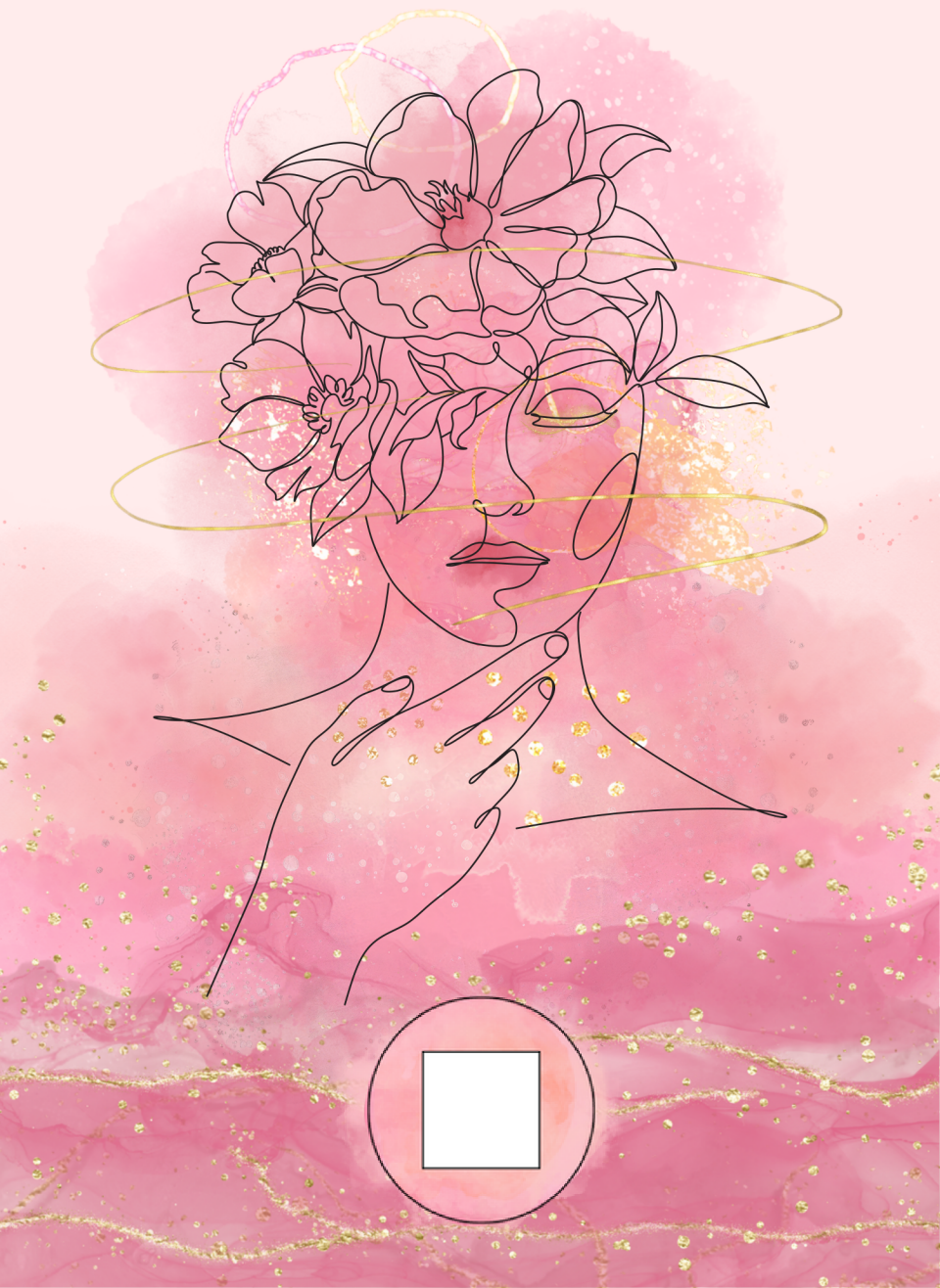


TABULA RASA REVIEW

ISSUE THREE



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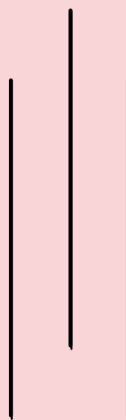
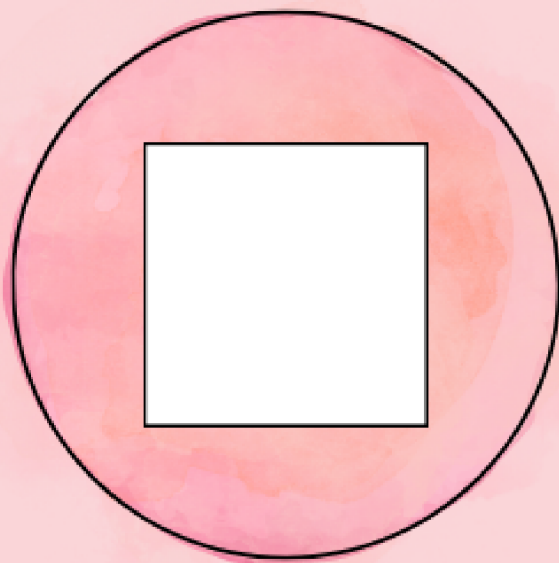
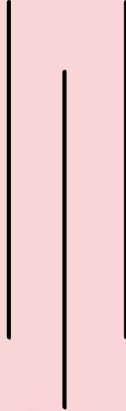
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Emma Snyder

Emma Snyder graduated with a B.A. in Creative Writing and a B.S. in Psychology in 2021, paired with a minor in Digital Studies. She has ten publications circulating in journals such as *The Emerson Review*, *Furrow Magazine*, *Periphery Journal*, and *Abbey Review*, among others. Her favorite genres to write and read are psychological realism, Bildungsroman, speculative fiction, and stream of consciousness. The brand and design of *Tabula Rasa Review* are her brainchildren, and she is thrilled to work year-round on expanding this literary magazine and its platform with such an amazing team.



Ross Christensen

Ross Christensen has a B.A. in Creative Writing and is fascinated by the surreal, fantastical, and satirical. He loves nothing more than diving head first into a new subject and learning everything there is to know. He happened to sit next to Emma Snyder in a nonfiction class, and the rest is history. Both he and Emma were on the masthead of *Rappahannock Review* during their undergraduate careers, and loved being involved with a literary journal. This ignited the conversations that led toward the creation of *Tabula Rasa Review*, for which Ross has taken the position of Managing Editor.



Stephanie Stephan

Stephanie Stephan is a red haired writer in love with bone china and bone chilling tales. In 2017 she received an M.A. in English from Arcadia University, and has worked as an editor and literary coach, providing creative guidance and critical feedback to fellow writers. Her fiction has appeared in *Tabula Rasa Review*, *Patchwork Lit*, and *Myth & Lore Zine*, and more. In 2021, her story about galactic lollipops was nominated for Best of the Net. When she's not writing, she loves reading tarot, cross stitching, and trying out new recipes. Visit her on Instagram [@stephanie.stephan.writes](https://www.instagram.com/stephanie.stephan.writes) or at stephanie-stephan.com.



Kendall Wack

Kendall (they/she) is a Chicago-based Queer, neurodivergent writer and editor with a double B.A. in English-Creative Writing and French Literature & Language from Loyola University-Chicago. They have found that the written word is one of the most powerful ways for like-minded people to connect, and they aspire to use their voice to break down taboos and the barriers they create. You can find her work in *Diminuendo & Cadence*, *Heroica*, *Eclipse Zine*, *The SOUR Collective*, *Poetically Magazine*, and *Moyé Magazine*. She's terribly honored to be part of the incredible literary magazine that is *Tabula Rasa Review*. Find them on Instagram at [@hopelesspoetesse](https://www.instagram.com/hopelesspoetesse).



Gretel Valdes

Gretel Valdes is an eccentric Las Vegas local with a life or death passion for poetry. Her massive appreciation for the catharsis writing has brought her has been the most rewarding therapist yet. This year, she's furthering her role as an editor for the *Tabula Rasa Review* team by taking on more responsibilities in regards to the publication's final design and structure of its third issue. Currently, she is working on her first full poetry collection. You can find her amongst the Oregon daisies in the meadow or down at Boulder Beach in Vegas, skipping rocks alongside passing thoughts.



F.M. Papaz

F.M Papaz is a Greek-Australian creative living in Brooklyn, NYC. Fi believes that there is space at the literary table for everyone and is excitedly setting up your cutlery. Her poems have appeared in *Wild Roof Journal*, *Five South*, *Mantissa Poetry Review*, & *Literary Revelation's Poetry Anthology* 'Hidden in Childhood'. She has been a proud editor with Tabula Rasa since 2023. In 2024, she joined the Marketing and Editorial team at Poetry Society of New York. Connect with her @fmpapaz or fmpapaz.com/ings to find her monthly newsletter about living a creative life.



Rachel Makinson

Rachel Makinson is a writer and editor based in the UK, with a BA in English Literature with Creative Writing from Newcastle University. In early 2021, Rachel's short story "Lily Pad" was published in Volume 6 of *Otherwise Engaged Literature and Arts Journal*. In 2023, her short stories "Beatrix Peterson Didn't Kill Charlie" and "Let Them Eat Cake" were featured in *Marrow Magazine* and *Tabula Rasa Review*, respectively. Rachel joined the *Tabula Rasa Review* editorial team because of her admiration for the inclusive and accessible space it creates for writers.



Prenesa Naidoo

Prenesa Naidoo is a popcorn fiend. She has a B.A. in English Literature and Psychology and an M.A. in Creative Writing – with her research paper on "Trauma as a Muse in Writing". You will always find a notebook, several pens, a half-read novel, and a moonstone tucked into her bag. The spaces between pages are where she feels, heals, explores, loves, hides, dreams, and becomes. She also believes that nothing can capture a reader's attention more than a lived experience. Her work has been published in *Odd Magazine*, *Nal'ibali*, *Dwelling* (a collection of South African fine art and literature) *New Contrast*, *Catatonic Daughters*, and *Brittle Paper*.

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AUTHOR BIOS

listed alphabetically by first name

AMARA TIEBOUT

Amara Tiebout is a queer writer and editor from Washington DC. She edits medical research, scribbles poetry, and devours fantasy novels. She believes, with her very marrow, in social justice reform, sex positivity, healthcare and reproductive rights for all genders, and a good latte. Her work has been published by Gnashing Teeth and is forthcoming in the *Pinch and Nimrod International*.

AMIAN BENT

Amian Bent is a young writer from India who has been writing fiction and poetry for about five years. Her writing journey started with the idea of a novel that she hopes to see published in the near future. Her poetry can be found on her Instagram page, [@words_of_an_endangered_soul](#), and her longer works are available on her Wattpad account, [@amianne_bent](#). Apart from writing, she also enjoys reading, exploring music, nature photography, and walking.

BRANDON MCQUADE

Brandon McQuade is an award-winning poet and the founding editor of *Duck Head Journal*. For his poem, "Bengal Tigers," from his recently published collection, *Oklahoma*, he was awarded the October Project Poetry Prize. For a selection of poems from his second collection, *Bodies*, he won the Neltje Blanchan Memorial Writing Award. He lives in Northern Wyoming with his wife and their children.

D.A. ANGELO

D A Angelo is a UK-based poet with work in *Literary Yard*, *Rabid Oak*, *Bluehouse Journal*, and several other journals. New work is forthcoming in *A Thin Slice of Anxiety*, *Moss Puppy*, *The Amazine*, and *Skipping Stone Review*.

GINA GIDARO

Gina Gidaro has a Bachelor's degree in Creative Writing and a minor in Studio Art from Ohio University. She received a graduate certificate from the Denver Publishing Institute, is a volunteer reader for *CARVE Magazine* and *Autumn House Press*, and is an editor for the *Outlander Zine* and *Divinations Magazine*. She is passionate about stories, playing guitar, and anything spooky. More information about her can be found at ginagidaro.wordpress.com.

JAMES DUNCAN

James H Duncan is the editor of *Hobo Camp Review* and the author of *Cistern Latitudes*, *Tributaries*, *We Are All Terminal But This Exit Is Mine*, and other books of poetry and fiction. For more, visit www.jameshduncan.com.

JEN COLCLOUGH

Jen Colclough is a poet, novelist, digital artist, and ESL Instructor from Nova Scotia, Canada. She holds a Master of Arts in Classics from Western University, and a Bachelor of Arts from Acadia University. Her poetry has been featured in *Ionosphere*, *MORIA Literary Magazine*, *OpenDoor Magazine*, *Tidewise Illustrated Quarterly*, *The Power of Hope Anthology*, and *Free the Verse*. Her short story, "The Opposite of Hunger," was published in *The Petal Pages Anthology*. Her academic article, "Memorialization in Thucydides' Plague Episode," appeared in Vol. 11 Iss. 1 of the *Journal of Ancient History* in May 2023.

JIM LANDWEHR

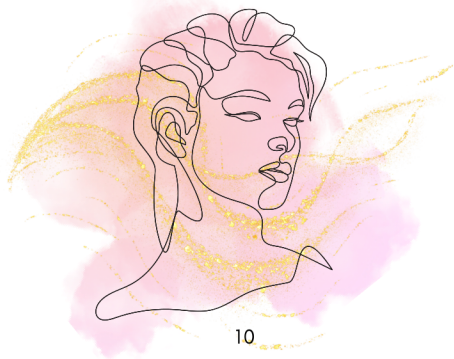
Jim Landwehr has four published memoirs, *At the Lake*, *Cretin Boy*, *Dirty Shirt*, and *The Portland House*. Jim also has six poetry collections, *Tea in the Pacific Northwest*, *Thoughts from a Line at the DMV*, *Genetically Speaking*, *Reciting from Memory*, *Written Life*, and *On a Road*. His nonfiction and poetry has been featured in numerous magazines and journals. Jim lives in Waukesha, Wisconsin and was the 2018-2019 poet laureate for the Village of Wales, Wisconsin.

LILI LOUZH

Lili Louzhi holds an MFA in Creative Nonfiction from Old Dominion University. Her writing gravitates toward the themes of myth versus reality, transracial and transnational adoption, Asian American identity, surviving abuse, unpacking trauma, and finding deliverance. Her work can also be found in *Vagabond City Lit*, *1807: An Art & Literary Journal*, and Norfolk's Poetry on the Pavement project. She currently resides in Maryland with her husband and works at Maryland Carey School of Law. She also teaches Creative Nonfiction at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County.

LINDAANN LOSCHIAVO

Native New Yorker LindaAnn LoSchiavo (she/her), a four time nominee for The Pushcart Prize, was also nominated for Best of the Net, Balcones Poetry Prize, an Ippy, a Firecracker Award, the Rhysling Award, and Dwarf Stars. She is a member of British Fantasy Society, HWA, SFPA, and The Dramatists Guild.



LISA ASHLEY

Lisa Ashley (she/her) is a 2021 Pushcart Prize nominee. She descends from survivors of the Armenian Genocide and has listened to and supported incarcerated youth for eight years as a chaplain. Her poems have appeared in *Amsterdam Quarterly*, *The Healing Muse*, *Thimble*, *Blue Heron Review*, *Last Leaves*, *Snapdragon*, *Last Stanza Poetry Journal*, *Wild Greens*, and others. She writes in her log home on Bainbridge Island, WA—the traditional lands of the Suquamish people—and navigates her garden with physical limitations in a constant state of wonder. Lisa is currently working on her first manuscript.

LISA CRISWELL

Lisa Criswell (she/her) lives in the foothills of the Cascades, where she threads words through the woods, weaving bandages for the ache. She is a maker of tenderness, nostalgia, and misplaced longing, and she has just entered a season of fiercely loving herself. Her words have appeared in *SamFiftyFour*, *Pile Press*, and *Free Verse Revolution*, among others.

MAR OVSHIED

Mar Ovsheid is a spoilsport who tragically dropped—and lost—her sea monkeys in the carpet as a kid. Her work has appeared in *Cream Scene Carnival*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Scavengers*, *Mulberry Literary*, and *oranges journal*, among others. Mar works as a housekeeper and is visible at [@amar_ovsheid](https://www.instagram.com/amar_ovsheid) on Instagram.



MARIA SCHIZA

Maria Schiza is a writer and translator from Thessaloniki, Greece. She has graduated with a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from Aristotle University in Thessaloniki, followed by a Master's degree in Creative Writing from the University of Nottingham. She is currently reading for a Creative Writing PhD at the University of Edinburgh, researching the possibilities of encounter found through ekphrastic poetry. Her recent publications include "Body Boundaries ii, iv, v, vii, viii" in *Coastal Shelf* and "Fishermen at Sea" in *The Ekphrastic Review*.

MARY FRANCESCA FONTANA

Mary Francesca Fontana was born in South Louisiana but now lives in Seattle with her husband and two sons. She is currently writing a narrative history about the migrant house on the US-Mexico border where she has volunteered part-time since she left college. Her poems have appeared in a number of journals, including *The Seneca Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, and most recently, *Kestrel*. Despite popular opinion, she really loves seagulls.

MICHAEL KOCINSKI II

Michael Kocinski II is a grant writer and program evaluator, poet, and illustrator from Columbus, OH. Some of his poems have appeared in *The Mid-American Review*, *Of Rust and Glass*, *Trailer Park Quarterly*, and others. If you're looking for him, he can be found creek-fishing the Olentangy River watershed or drawing at the dining room table. He lives with his wife and two sons, who are wonderful creatures.



MICHELLE MEYER

Michelle Meyer is the author of *The Book of She* (2021), a collection of persona poems devoted to and illustrated by women, and *The Trouble with Being a Childless Only Child*, forthcoming from Cornerstone Press. Recent work appears in *Under Her Eye: A Blackspot Books Anthology*, *Nebulous*, *Remington Review*, *Spank the Carp*, *Welter*, and *Zoetic*, among many others. In addition, Michelle is a worldwide house- and pet-sitter who especially loves cats.

R.A. ALLEN

R. A. Allen has published work in the *New York Quarterly*, *B O D Y*, *The Penn Review*, *RHINO*, *The Los Angeles Review*, *RockPaperPoem*, *Alba*, and elsewhere. His work has been nominated for a Best of the Net and two Pushcarts. He has short stories in publications such as *The Literary Review*, *The Barcelona Review*, *PANK*, and *Best American Mystery Stories*. He lives in Memphis, a city of light and sound. bodyliterature.com/2020/02/17/r-a-allen/.

REBECCA HERRERA

Rebecca Herrera is a strawberry-haired girl born and raised in New York. She received her Bachelor's in Art History and Museum Professions from the Fashion Institute of Technology and has two Associate degrees in Visual Arts and English. Her work has been featured in *Small Leaf Press*, *Horse Egg Literary*, *Hecate Magazine*, and others. She is currently the managing editor of *fifth wheel press* and lives in an apartment with many, many plants.



RIVER SNOWDROP

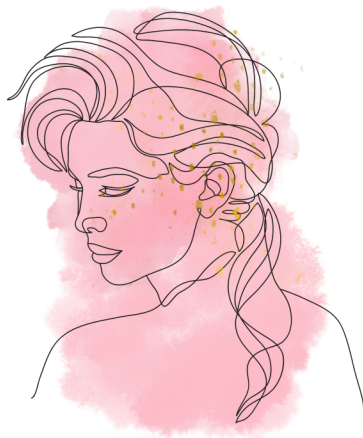
River Snowdrop is a queer, non-binary poet from Manchester, UK. They have been known to write about herons, lemons, and human's capacity for love. Snowdrop believes in everybody's fundamental goodness and is working hard to include themselves in this worldview. Their work has been previously published in *Free Verse Revolution*, *Querencia Press*, *orangepeel literary magazine*, *fifth wheel press*, and more. They are a 2023 winner of the Mulberry Literary Fresh Voices Award. You can find Snowdrop on Instagram [@riversnowdrop](https://www.instagram.com/riversnowdrop).

ROBERT BEVERIDGE

Robert Beveridge (he/him) makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry on unceded Mingo land (Akron, OH). He has recent/upcoming appearances in *Corvus Review*, *Boundaries and Bridges*, and *Defenestration*, among others.

T.K. HOWELL

T. K. Howell lives on the banks of the Thames and manages ancient oak woodlands, tending to trees that are older than most countries. His writing is often inspired by mythology and folklore and can be found at various genre and literary spaces including *Lucent Dreaming*, *Mystery Magazine*, *Ram Eye*, and *Space and Time Magazine*.



THOMAS RIONS-MAEHREN

Thomas Rions-Maehren is a bilingual, multicultural poet, novelist, & chemist who explores the dark places of human experience with humor, science, and (at times) tranquility and wisdom. His scientific research has been published in *ACS Nano*, and examples of his Spanish-language prose can be found in his widely published short stories and in his novel *En las Manos de Satanás* (Ápeiron Ediciones, 2022). More writing can be found in a number of journals and anthologies and at his website: tommaehrenpoetry.blogspot.com. He is on X and Instagram [@MaehrenTom](https://www.instagram.com/MaehrenTom).

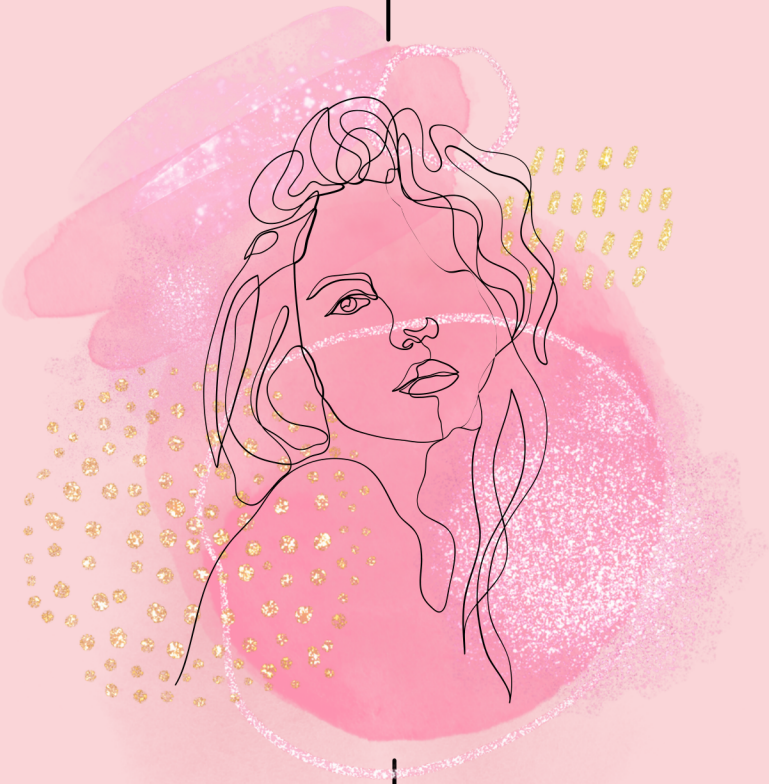
VALERIE HUNTER

Valerie Hunter teaches High School English and has an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her poems have appeared in publications including *Room*, *Other Voices*, *Sylvia*, and *Wizards in Space*, as well as several anthologies.

YELIZAVETA RENFRO

Yelizaveta P. Renfro is the author of a collection of short stories, *A Catalogue of Everything in the World* (Black Lawrence Press), and a collection of essays, *Xylotheque* (University of New Mexico Press). Her fiction and nonfiction have appeared in *North American Review*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Orion*, *Colorado Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *Blue Mesa Review*, *The Fourth River*, *Glimmer Train*, *Witness*, *Reader's Digest*, and elsewhere.





POETRY

POETICA

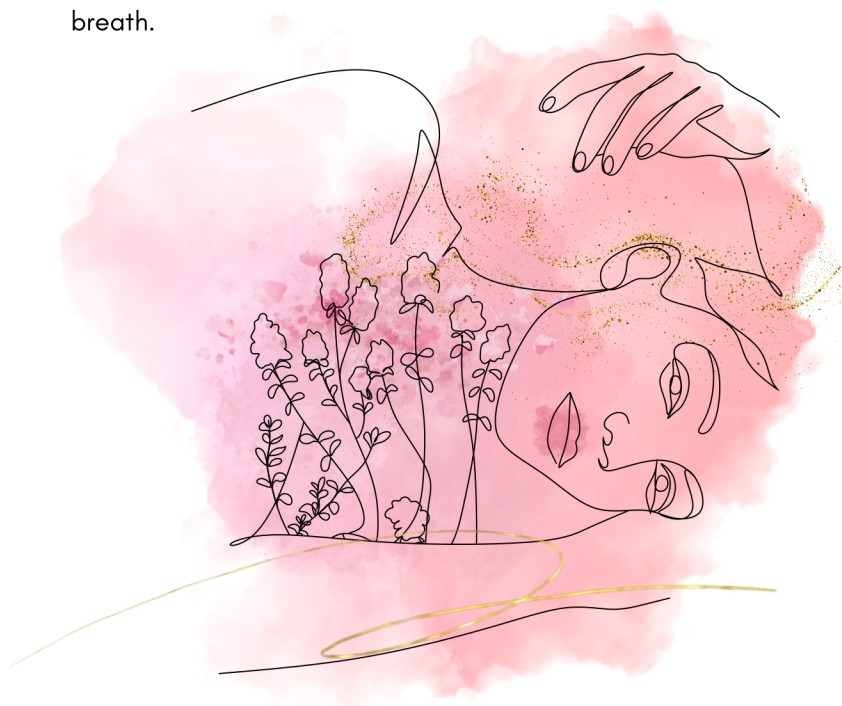
STAGES OF GROWTH

previously published by Nimrod Journal, Issue 4, April 2024

Fibroids sprout in the peach
of my uterus. Two fleshy morel
mushrooms holding court in a garden
of polyps convinced their roots have first
rights. Orchard-red ovaries are fertile ground,
right? *Something must grow here, right?* I pee
at least three times a night. Mulberry trees split
my lower back. Bamboo shoots turn my pelvis
into clamps and forceps. I don't want kids.
I'm 98% sure I am too selfish. I want
to parent the little girl in my weepy
wisteria chest who learned she's
unlovable. Remind the womb
pitching plants in my belly
that she's enough all by
herself. Doesn't need
to grow seven
centimeter
masses
of useless
tissue that
press against
spine and bladder.
She can just be.
When the oncologist mentions
myomectomy, a snake plant slithers
down my throat. I call Dad, drown myself
in Google, question my belly again



and again - *are we sure we don't
want kids?* Decide how I want
to be cut open: horizontally,
hip to hip, or vertically,
mount of Venus
to navel orange.
Sensation doesn't
return where scalpel
meets flesh. Scar
tissue threatens
to tear like lacewing.
Lungs gasp new legs,
and I waltz little me
in the cradle of our
arms with an IV
pole and new-
found baby's
breath.



A MURAL HAS BEEN PAINTED IN THE BATHROOM WHERE I MISCARRIED

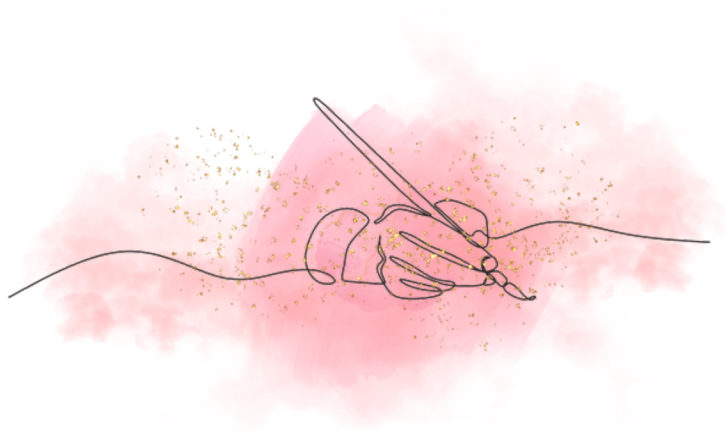
of trouser-green vines, white-veined leaves
big as hammocks, each muscular shoot ending in a flower
huge and round, head-sized, looking a bit like a stuffed olive.
Each vine climbs to the height
of the ceiling fan, so noisy in the dead of that night
that I unplugged it. Now there's a wild, live jungle
in this bathroom, which would have been nice to look at
instead of the bare, dull, red-spotted floor.
The painter of this mural, my friend I'd flown to visit,
wrote me later that she hadn't realized
how bad it must have been until she cleaned,
after I'd gone. Blood splashed under the toilet seat,
blood I'd missed in the exhausted tidying before sleep—
I'd wanted to be a good houseguest.
Now, seven years later, the walls are blooming.

Say not that these are garlands finally hung
in the somber room where someone died.
That place is in my body, unmarked.
That someone was a sketch, a skein of possibilities.
The painter, my friend, is also a mother.
She says there are many ways to bring
something new into the world.



She says what you create can come loose in time,
a brightness for its maker to inhabit always.
After a while the image softens, its vivid existence
no longer news, that surge of feeling as you open the door
fading to familiarity. You paint other paintings.

Yet the first one remains,
ages with you. Remakes the light
in that small, private space
for as long as you live in this house.



NOTES FROM LATE SUMMER

This is the time when butterflies
shed their spots, leaving them
in the fields as mementos
to remind you of a gentler time
when the last light was innocent
like camomile, when the clouds
moved at the pace of a gentle stream,
when a giant oak at the top of the hill
stretched its arms and offered
shade to almost the entire horizon.
This is the time for quiet voices,
for the hushed gospels of cattle
moving across the pastures,
for the rain to shoo itself away
and narrate the landscape in autumn,
for every cracked and chapped heart
to bloom and taste nourishment
as warm and fulfilling as the canary
joy of sunlight in full peak.



VENTING THREE WAYS

previously published by Thimble Literary Magazine, Vol.5, No.3, 2022

We meet for lunch,
sound off about government corruption,
our husbands, our various ailments.
We let loose over our sandwiches,
wedge doors open with torn and tired rags
newly lubricated with yesterday's irritations.
Better to vent than to stuff, we say.

It's midmorning in summer,
the hen next door intrudes
with her water-torture call:
bawk, bawk, bawk, bawk—starts slow,
gets faster, louder—*she's venting too*.
Her egg, wrapped in the tissue of her uterus,
moves through her vent (yes, that's what it's called),
until she pushes it out of her body,
a kind of inside-out trick.

My egg attached to the wall of my uterus,
clung there for nine months,
zygote to egg to fetus to child.
I labored fourteen hours to shunt my son
down the birth canal, ten fingers, ten toes,
nearly turning myself inside-out.
With no push left, they cut and released him.
His blue caul-shell torn, mouth wide to air,
he entered this world without a squawk.

I WISH YOU BLUEBIRDS

it's been july for centuries.

[sunlight fills the apartment like a chorus,
a lace-trimmed ceremony. we are gathered
here today in strawberry flavored smoke and
hot breaths to curl our fingers through each
other's hair. a tenderness like jasmine rice.]

here's the part where i let you peel me back.
here's the part where you let me dig my nails in,
let you break my hands apart
and i'm not supposed to regret it.

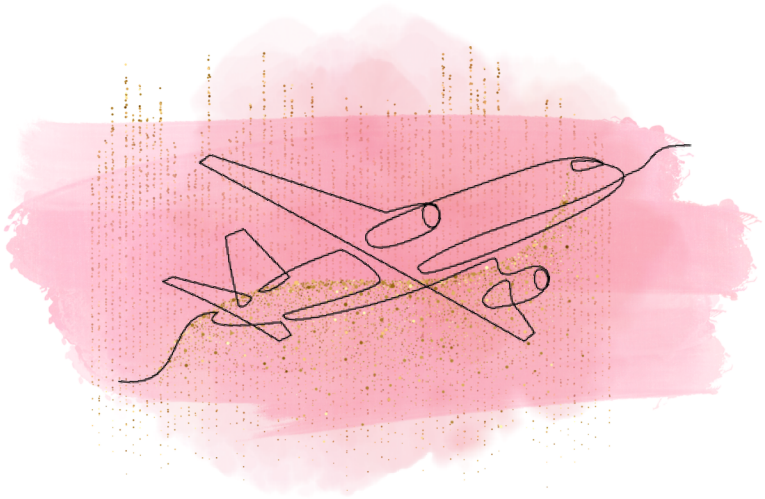
it's the timing. it's because you're carrying
too much. it's because venus is retrograding
and you're a venusian. you know how it is.
it's because you're too good for me. it's
because neither of us like olives. it's because
i want to eat you alive and spit out your
bones and you're terrified of it. it's because i
didn't know you had thoughts and opinions
sometimes.

[mirate,
crimson-filled and drunk, twisting into cherry stems.
breaking under me.]

i'm wishing you flames, springs, and lemons. i'm
wishing you more than anything and everything. i'm
wishing you the latin percussions in the summer, the
one-twos on the linoleum floor, the saltwater curls.

CONCOURSE B

Worrying about packing is as bad as packing,
so she retrieved her bags and got down to it.
But doing so triggered a flashback about
the time she ran into her ex-fiancé
at DFW as he was departing for marriage
and a new life in Europe. After some
reciprocal wishcasting at his gate, they'd parted.
She did not cry but instead skittered into
a stupor of dejection. She missed her flight,
missed her sales call, got fired. This was the day
the music in her head flipped from A-side to B.
Better to have just cried.



TODAY'S DATE

previously published by Sweetycat Press in BEAUTIFUL, 2022

I talked to Yesterday and
told her I loved her,
she recoiled and drew back
as far as the day before.
With two days now gone
I turned toward Tomorrow
and asked if she was
doing anything next Wednesday,
her response took three
weeks so I missed our date.

I think she did that on purpose.

Next Year was standing
alone against the brick wall
coily twirling her weeks
between her fingers,
but I wasn't buying it.
I don't need that
long-term commitment.
Of course there is always Today,
but I take her for granted
because she is there
every day, reliable and faithful,
never cheating around
with that hustler Last Night.
There is something to
be said for Today's beauty—
it is under-appreciated
and worth a dozen Tomorrows.

PRICE OF A TURKEY SANDWICH

A walrus mustache with a Mazda Miata taught me
no combination of blazers and slacks
will stop men from seeing sex

stapled to my body. First job after
graduation. Sticky summer nerves.
He left chocolate on my desk each day

for a year, like I was a hotel pillow
he could cajole into bed. Squeezed
my shoulder at the end of every

meeting. His coffee cup leered.
His emails smirked. Once asked me
to lunch, *We can eat in my car...*

The ellipsis stopped being my favorite
punctuation that day. Pictured him
carving into my thighs, the price

of a turkey sandwich
and just as voiceless.
Churned my belly

and all I could do was smile. No one
said anything about his oily
jokes or laid-back top-down attitude.

Not even me.

No degree
prepared me for a one-person
HR/Accounting department

who signed my paycheck,
cackled at homophobic punch
lines, and sat one cubicle away

while I learned my ideas
looked better
in a tight dress.

Didn't know how to introduce
myself by my first and last name,
only knew how to be *sweetheart*.

Deferred. Demured. Two careers
and three office affairs later,
I finally open his LinkedIn invite.

Erase the reflex pasted
on my cheeks. Adjust
the height of my chair

in meetings so I tower over
men like him. Lean back
into my boundaries.

Decline his invitation
with an exclamation
point. Trace a line

between his chocolates and the years
I sexualized myself to belong.

I'm a manager now.

Last week, a teammate wilted
at the idea of showing her unshaven
calves and armpits at a company

town hall. I grinned, stretching my arms
behind my head with the confidence
of my brothers, and assured her

the thicket of grass on her legs
belongs at the table as much
as she does.



ON/OFF HEDONISM

previously published by *aethen* magazine, Issue 3, 2022

here comes the greek chorus
to twirl around the marble floor and begin the ritual.
the candles have been laid out and lit in whispers
it's me that's the tragedy this time.
peaches swell and blossom out
singers' mouths like full moons. like desire.

[here is god rolling out my tongue and down my chest.
here's my heart sliced open,
here's my ribcage splintered like
wood burning, so you can read the cracks.
here's an offering. it's my teeth, it's my sins,
it's my pomegranate seeds.]

i'm clawing after my youth.
i'm begging to make mistakes again.
artemis, teach me something
the wet moss on the spine of a tree, or dollhouses.
[i want so badly to not chase after opinions and touches
but i want eros lying next to me, television on and
limbs melted. *i want palm trees, crushed grapes, olive
branches, and a blade in my mouth.*]

here's me trying to make homes out of men.
here's me trying to grow laurels out of ruins.
here's me after ten years,
weaving tapestries and kissing my own palms.

the chorus falls. a wine-colored sea rolls.

MODESTO

after George Ella Lyon

I hail from deep hum of thunderstruck
blackout, dead landline. Shimmer
of eggfry asphalt, scent of silenced
grass, lungfuls of almond blossom.
The oak in the front yard
who knew my story by heart.
The ash in the back, long dead.

I come from backroads,
truckstops, twenty-four-hour diners,
the empty space in the spoke of the wheel.
A place of passthrough; all this land
and nowhere to root.

The long stretch of California: green groove
of her belly, no more sea than mountain, fertile
with borrowed drink, blanketed by smog of bay cities.
I am sprung from womb of canal; roadside
stand ripe with soil's bounty, birthed by salted earth.

I was born in an El Camino cruising McHenry Avenue
then running south down the vein of 99.
I am from the backseat of the red Camaro, and
the front seat too; from the tousled twin bed
and the hushed flame of the studio apartment,
where I came to life again, again, and again
until I left. Bathed in fireworks

at John Thurman Field, concerts
at Graceada Park, *Oldies 97.5, KABX.*

I'm from Shanni's backyard, the honey falling warm
from her mother's fried bread. From the sweat
under Kelsey's arm the moment she embraced me,
just after breaking my heart. I emerged from the koi pond
in Lindsay's breezeway, went inside and made myself

college bound, scholarshiped, exceptional
enough to escape. I am from a home I always knew
I would leave—from a place I'll see again
only on my way through—from the center
of so many somewheres, all adding up

to nowhere—



NIGHTHAWKS

previously published by Filter Coffee Zine, Issue 4

after Edward Hopper's oil painting

Take me to that restaurant
on Greenwich Avenue
where those two streets touch.
I want a seat where I will be served
a cup of sonder
and a chunk of tranquility.
Teach me how to not be lonely
when I am alone,
how a seamless wedge of glass
can be a mirror into my own dark corners.
Bask me in fluorescent light,
its eerie glow
a beacon of all my selfish deeds
and missed opportunities.
Infuse me with a narrative of stillness,
inaction,
and timeless quiescence.
I want that impassivity in my vibrating bones
and I want it to be okay to have it.
The nighthawks know nothing
of urban emptiness
or human isolation,
because the restaurant
where those two streets brush
is for the tranquil,
the seamless and the impassive

to meet for five cent coffee
and a peace of mind.



ひきこもり HIKIKOMORI

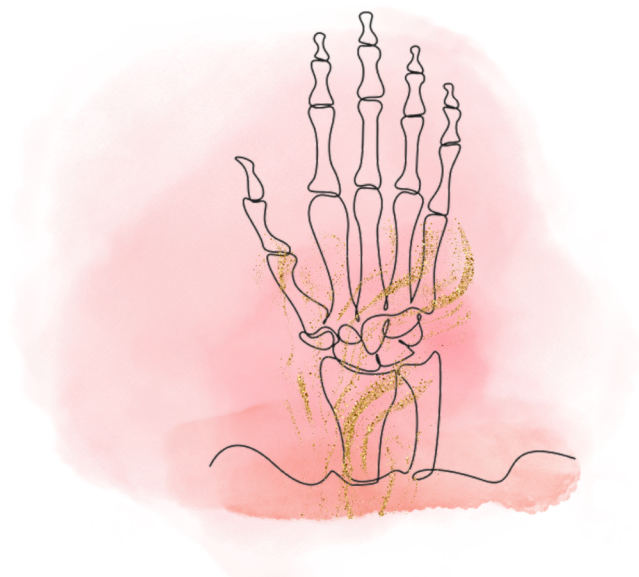
*Noun. A Japanese term meaning: to pull inward
or more commonly, a recluse*

My soul lingers,
hovering in the dusty stratosphere
above the sleepless city,
scattered, stretched out to its ends
like a patient lying on the operating table,
supine, with veins of saline,
breathing, but not breathing,
eyes moving rapidly.
My soul searches for me
but I have meshed
into the heart of the city,
become a capillary,
delicately unraveling,
I travel from vessel to vessel
and to the empty chambers
of my_house ~ home.

Gazing at the mirror
with its piled up dust,
I breathe in rotten flesh and rust,
the thin skin stretches too tight
like a shirt worn too many times.
The hinges in my bones
creak loudly like the stairs
of an old family house;

I'm beginning to lose my nerves,
they fall over the carpet
Like my own dwindling hair follicles
I collect them,
put them back in place
to face another day

But I'm scared of the sun
and its blazing brightness
upon my well-trudged roads.
My city dwelling fellows
have all begun to look like me,
eyes wide, lips parting
speaking nonsensically,
walking endlessly,
skeleton skins
entwining to become this city
that feeds on humanity
and keeps growing through them,
through us,
through me.



AMA

the scrod in the fishtank have accusing eyes.
The doctor's are milky blue, like blind penitents
in Fulci films, but he sees well enough
to write prescriptions, send would-be heroes
on quests for treasure at local apothecaries.

"If you want to walk out," he said, "I can't
stop you. But I guarantee you the desk
will fill these scripts cheaper than your
pharmacy." They hovered in the air,
beelike, his fingers invisible behind them.

I contemplated my insurance. Not bad,
but not the greatest, especially
for someone who worked for a health
insurance company, I contemplated
the Adderall. I contemplated my shoes,

behind the desk, and the laces in them.
I contemplated the fish and their eyes,
the cute redhead in art therapy who saw
aliens, the max-five-minute showers,
and I took the prescriptions and walked out

to get my shoes.



MY DYING MOTHER REQUESTS MIRACLES

My dying mother requests miracles,
she wants her plants to thrive
She consigns a large green fellowship,
Orphaned, underprivileged guests, despondency
On wilted stalks, to me—the chosen one.
An African violet row reveals
Brown-tinged dismay
On fuzzy leaves
Devoid of rosy cheer.
Anemic ivy squints
From hanging cradles,
Droopy with despair.
Witness to agony,
The crown of thorns questions
My late-stage intercession.

Work miracles

her half-shut eyes command. Doubts?
Pursed lips will be a casket for them.

Like Juliet, leaves beckon from the sill,
Insisting—in their ancient argot—

They come in peace, meek seeking nourishment,
Unlike rude, uninvited cancer,
Growth emboldened
Deep roots sealing hope's mouth shut.

Hydration occupies my days.
She darts her dose beneath a squirming tongue.
The plants await the water jar,
Blue-green with vitamins, recovery in sight.

Worming into her worn out cardigan,
Penning a eulogy, my hands perspire.

Fronds dance, partnered with the breeze,
Remind me, in their voiceless joy,

I'm not alone.



PUT THE WAITING ROOM OUTSIDE

He lounges in the shade.
I choose the sun. He laughs and tells me
that I look like I'm seated in a dental chair.

It's true.

My feet are raised and my back
is at that perfect angle for a hygienist
to clean and rinse. It would be so easy

to lay back and let my mouth fall open
out here under mountains, sun, and birdsong.
All dentist chairs should be outside

and all waiting rooms too. Turn off the TV,
cancel the cable subscription. Just sit back,
wait your turn, then take your turn.

Listen.

Listen with an open mouth,
alive with surprise
bursting with strawberry flavored foam.

TROPICAL DEPRESSION

how am i supposed to brood
 in this humidity,
let the anguish i've forged
 harden in this heat?
the sunlight here could melt steel beams;
what hope is there
 for my inner darkness?
I want to rub pineapples on my eyes
& torture myself under the dripping
 teardrops of my air conditioner.
don't talk to me about the beach. there's got
 to be an easier way to get sand in all my
nooks & crannies. this isn't a smile; it's
a wince from salt in my festering, existential claw wound.
i have a maraca migraine & a margarita
 hangover. the ants & mosquitoes & fungi
 eat away at me
 in a way that's usually reserved
for my own nagging dread. in this beautiful oven
i am naked, chapped to hell. no black
jeans. no black shirt. no
black socks. no black shoes. the only
 clothes that promise not to give
me a heatstroke, if i were to choose to use
them, are those pastel shirts
 from my suegra, the ones
that put my sweaty back, chest, & armpits
on full display. the sun's shining.
i'm rotting from the outside in.

DIES IRAE

I.

"It's snowing," I tell you, but what I really mean is: *The world is shifting right now—come and see.* Outside, the windowsill is weighted down like the years, and the house is hunchbacked, cloaked in a white cardigan. "So it is," you say, and rebutton your own cardigan, the threadbare blue-black with a hole in the right hand pocket. Everything of value goes in the left, now, and no one goes very far. It is January, and the year is beyond saving. We look out the windows, ignoring the door. To a flightless bird, all cages look the same.

II.

The seasonal translation of the earth will always be of interest to those who tread upon it.

III.

The gardener insists it is necessary to cut away the rot. To consider
the benefits of amputation.

Looming over the workbench,
I consider also
the tremor
 of your voice just afterward,
 all severed
 into
 bits.

IV.

Sometimes the crater predates the cataclysm.

Sometimes grief insists upon itself.

V.

Cobalt, pearl,
Cobalt, pearl.

There are stripes
where this wallpaper forgot
to repeat itself.

I make soup on the stove
because it is cold.
The blue-and-white carnations curve away from it,
recoiling.

The bowl
waits on the stove all afternoon
while you and I sit around it.
Some things aren't destined for consumption alone.

VI.

My ivy plant died twice.

It's no matter. So did I.

VII.

There is a bridge behind my house that sometimes forgets to be
a bridge. The heap of planks and nails that guards the stream
spends all year waiting to be covered by a great white hand.
Snow does not fall upon the bridge so much as it adorns it. All
the best altars are accidental.

Each fresh snow makes me wonder
how your cardigan is holding up.

VIII.

That winter,
all the dawns were behind us
and we knew it.



HOW TO MAKE VEGETABLE SOUP

With the paring knife that doesn't know the difference between your thumb and the vegetables washed and arrayed on the counter, carefully trim the Brussels sprouts' outer leaves, peel the potatoes like your grandmother showed you, striving to keep the skin intact like a snake coiling around your arm. Cut the spuds into rough cubes, setting a few aside for your wife, who eats them raw the way your mother and her mother used to, then throw the rest on top of the aromatics sizzling in a glisten of oil and butter in the ancient stock pot.

You must never forget to imagine every amazing meal you could have eaten as a child, when instead you turned up your nose at food you hated without even trying it first. Food like these vegetables your own son won't eat, simmering in the pot. Offset that rueful seasoning with fresh, cracked black pepper, corns tucked between a napkin's folds and smashed with your knife's handle—a trick you learned from a chef you loved and drank too much wine with. Stir the pot, spoon up a sip and wonder what you might have forgotten to add.

Dance around the kitchen with your son, dare him to eat just one bite of carrot, just one pea, thawed out and ready to snap between his teeth. When he thinks you're not looking he'll lick the butter, and you keep it secret from his sister and mother for something to laugh at later when they spread it on their bread. Recall the first time you made this soup, a woman

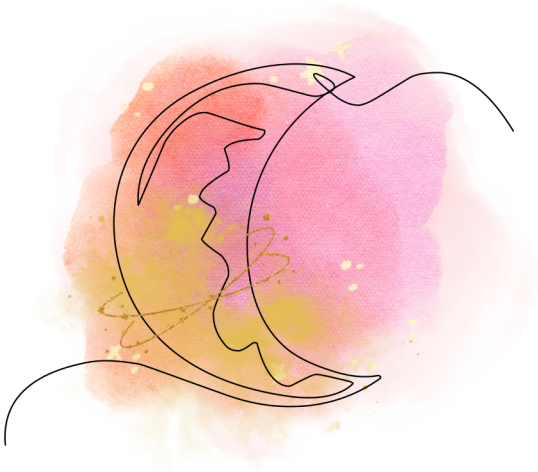
impossible to love ate a bowl of it, and asked for more, and again she asked for more, and after that she ate the marigold garnish on the plate. A story for your son one day, when he's planning his first date.

Remembering all of this, you hope you make a meal no one who tastes it will soon forget, and so you add a sprig of rosemary to brighten the broth, and let your final ingredient be a dash of salt, added by your son who wants so badly to help, and give him some memories to savor out of a bowl of this soup, ladled out years from now, dancing with his own son in some distant kitchen.



ACRE

a parcel of geography held dear, where as a child on late night drives home from supermarkets or grandparents you wake in a half daze and feel the mental constrictions coiling around your heart, imagining the car flying off the road into this lake, through that field, tires catching the shoulder rut and yawning into a ravine, rolling out of control past your driveway down the lawn into the back acre where a soggy creek sucks down the car's weight, yet somehow you always make it home fine, your parents and loved ones safe, though the fear always seeps into that half-conscious state as you race through the dark for that tract of home and hearth in the middle of nowhere, and the total loss of control will only come later, not in a car but in a body running rampant through that long night of life toward a plot of land all your own, a soft earthly embrace holding you dear among the pines and headstones reaching for a moon that doesn't even know they exist



LITTLE THIMBLE

i feel like a little thimble
of a person, like at any moment
a dog could eat me or i could be
flung under a sofa and forgotten,
like i could gather dust. i must
be so super so fragile because
the big wave came and it did
hurt and i am only a little thimble
so i was swept into the surf. i was
caught in the rapids, in ferocious
parts of leaky maw, in the jaws of
a whale. and how i wailed!

little thimble,
with my tiny open mouth.
oh how i did shout! how i pleaded
with the ocean, with the cawing
clam shell on the seafloor because
i did not want to end up treasure.
i was to be used and needed and
up up there, on a finger where a
thimble belongs. if i don't have
thumbs then what am i good for?
eventually the shore,
the water yielding,
letting me go.

the threads of possibility-
perhaps a thimble like me
counts.

DIRGE OF THE SLUGS

previously published by Pure Slush Life Span, Vol. 2, 2021

Sophie is seven,
living at Gram's house
after Dad's death
(Our house
now, too, Mom insists,
but Sophie knows that's not true)
when she meets Michael-next-door.
Gram has told her not to associate
with next door, but Michael shows Sophie
the slugs in his garden,
how to shower them
with a storm of salt
so they shrink and shrivel
and die writhing.

Together she and Michael are superheroes,
so much power in their small,
salty palms, and Sophie is fascinated
by the crusty husks of their victims,
even as Michael flicks them at her.
She dodges silently because Gram
might come out if she shrieks.



But that night alone
in the room that is supposed to be hers
(yet still has all Gram's sewing things,
including the dressmaker's dummy
which hovers over her, a headless nightmare),
Sophie can hear those slugs screaming,
an agonized shrill, and she wonders
if this is how God feels when
he smites someone, if His victims
go on screaming in His head forever after.

Sophie wants to go to Mom,
wants to forget these questions
in the warmth of a snuggle,
but Gram would hear her get up,
intercept her, remind her that little girls
belong in their own beds.
So Sophie stays,
terrified and squirming
in the shadow of the dressmaker's dummy,
listening to the endless dirge of the slugs.

In the morning she sneaks outside
before breakfast, gathers the slug corpses
and pours a cup of water over them,
but though it cleanses them of salt,
it doesn't resurrect them.
She begs a silent apology,
crosses herself, and goes in
to eat the generic, tasteless cereal
that Gram insists is good for her.
Afterwards she washes the dishes
without being asked, but when Gram calls her
a good girl, Sophie longs to contradict her.

SNOWMAN

All night snow shook loose
from the sky's lofty branches.

I remember the first time
I held a snow globe how I

shook it until the world
stopped. The clock on the wall

stopped weeks ago. 5:42.
The hour of winter darkness

morning and night.
I button my son's jacket

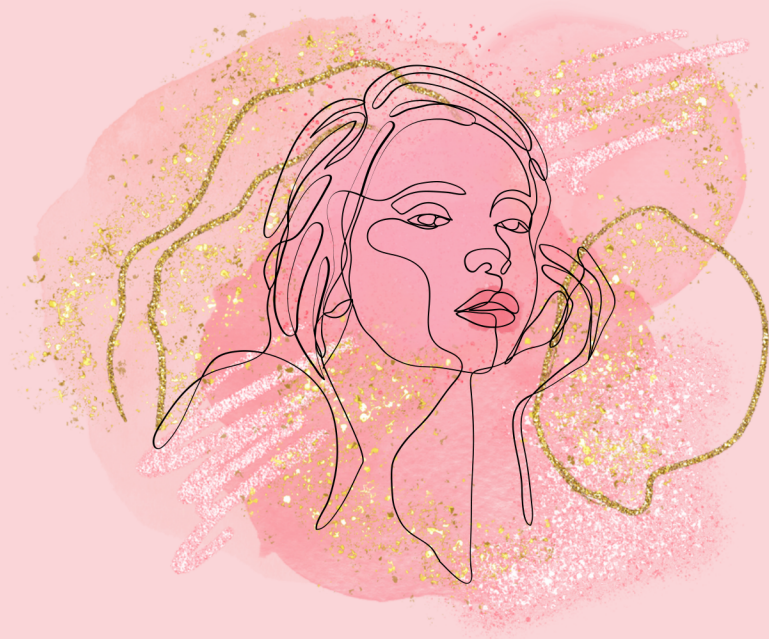
and we walk out onto
the windswept, snow-covered

steps. *Like a snowman dad,*
he says. What do you mean

buddy? *The buttons,* he says
like a snowman. After dark,

alone in the cold I wait
for the dog to take a piss

and watch a child build
a father out of snow.



PROSE

PROSA

MIRACLES ARE OVERRATED

Miracles Are Overrated

"There once was a China doll whose parents couldn't keep her anymore. They hid her in their home and fed her for as long as they could, but soon she grew too big, and they had to give her away to live a better life. Her mother wrapped her in a blanket and placed her in a cardboard box. She took the box to a street corner and set it down when no one was looking. She waited in the shadows and watched the box until a policeman came around. She didn't stop watching until the policeman took the box and walked out of sight. The mother cried as she left, but she knew she did the right thing for her China doll. The policeman took the China doll to the local orphanage. The doll was given the name Lou Zhi, and she was loved by the orphanage's aunties. She didn't have any toys to play with, so she created stories with her hands until she was almost a whole year old. Then, a mother and father from America who couldn't have a baby of their own came to China to bring the China doll home. From the moment they saw her, they knew that she was meant to be theirs, and they gave her the name Lili."

This was the story of my adoption that my mother told me while I was growing up. This was the myth that I believed in like it was my religion. It made me feel safe. Special. Loved.

I had no reason to doubt that my birth parents gave me up because they loved me, or that my adoptive parents flew to China to get me because they loved me. In fact, I had books to prove it. I grew up reading about other kids who were adopted, and each one had a story that showed just how loved they were. My parents bought these books for me before they even met me, because they wanted me to know that I was their miracle.

But growing up Chinese in a white American household taught me that miracles can be overrated.

I was named after my mother's mom, Lillie Mae, because she prayed for me so much during the adoption process. On my birth certificate, my parents changed the spelling to "Lili", because it "looked more Asian" to them. They prided themselves in being so creative, but in reality, they had opened the door to a lifetime of misspellings and mispronunciations. I grew up seeing every other spelling of my name: Lily, Lilly, Lillie, Lilli; as a child, I thought that was the only type of unintentional assumption people would make about my identity.

For my middle name, my parents kept what the Chinese aunties in the orphanage called me, except they smushed the words "Lou Zhi" together into a single word, normalizing it. No, *Americanizing* it. The only Chinese part of my name was crammed between a made-up spelling of a first name and a very Polish last name.

My name is surrounded by whiteness.

My first memory was waking up in my American, Made-in-China crib and wanting to find a way out. My first memory of telling someone that I was adopted was in answer to an old church lady's question: "Where are you from?" My five-year-old self proudly answered "China." My parents approached, and the old lady found out I was adopted.

"That's wonderful!" the lady said when she heard the news.

"Yes, she's our miracle," my mom said.

"Well, you definitely are special, Lili," the old lady told me.

I believed her.

I was so special that I stayed in a bubble, as if I didn't have a strong-enough immune system for the real world. I was so special that I forgot being from China meant being Chinese-American; my parents were convinced that their love for me and the Lord could overshadow any differences between us.

My mother would tell me over and over again, like the Lord's prayer, "Lili, I love you like I grew you in my own womb."

She would say, "You even kind of look like me, Lili. We both have olive skin and brown eyes. I get mine from being part Italian, and you get yours from being oriental." She called me oriental like it was a compliment, and I believed it was until I learned otherwise in my twenties. A college textbook taught me how degrading the term actually was.

When I told my mother that calling me oriental was dehumanizing, she laughed and told me that she was too used to the term to change it now. She's the kind of woman who refuses to wear a seatbelt because the law didn't require it when she was growing up, and now she refuses to adjust.

A few years ago, my mother asked me if I felt different at all when I was growing up.

"No," I immediately replied.

"Oh, thank goodness! That was a fear of mine. I'm so glad you didn't feel that way. That's such a relief."

It took everything for me to not tell my mom that's where the problem was.

That's the gap of time I have trouble thinking about. Not because I don't remember, but because I don't want to remember. I don't like to think about times when I was convinced that I was just like every other white, or even Black, kid at my church and homeschool group. I don't like to think of a time when I wanted to be just like my white, conservative mother—the woman who believed she could transform her China doll into a mini version of herself if she prayed hard enough.

Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born

My mother couldn't have children of her own. She told me that she and my father got married later in life and tried and failed to have a baby. When she was a little girl, she met a family that had adopted a little girl from South Korea. After failing to have a biological child, my mother remembered that moment from her childhood, and it became her dream to adopt an Asian baby.

Once the adoption process had begun, my mom spent her days filling out paperwork and praying on her knees. One day while praying, she felt something. It was heavy, yet wondrous. She could feel it warming her chest like a blanket and calming her ever-anxious mind. She said she had never felt Jesus like that before.

A few weeks later, my parents received a letter from the Chinese government that contained my picture. My mother was certain that I was handpicked for them by God, and that I was picked on the very day she felt Jesus. My parents spent the rest of that year writing out their lives in paperwork, cleaning the house for social worker visits, and preparing to travel further than either of them had ever gone before. Their trip was scheduled over the week of Valentine's Day, 1997.

I was their Valentine, and they were mine.

There was never a time in my life when I was unaware of my adoption and the miracle that I was. Not only did I cling to the stories my mother would tell me, but I also held on to the children's books on adoption that my parents bought me. I read them nearly every night of my childhood; they were my scripture. The book *Tell Me Again About the Night I Was Born* was the first I read on the subject, but it featured a white adopted girl with white adopted parents.

"Tell me again how you carried me like a China doll all the way home, and how you glared at anyone who sneezed," the girl in the book said as she envisioned her white parents carrying her through a chaotic airport.

I never thought too much about how this book was automatically inapplicable to my own life because my parents weren't there on the night I was born. No one I knew was there, except me.

For years, that never bothered me. I spent my childhood looking through that very book, seeing my parents and myself in the zany illustrations. For years, it didn't matter that this story wasn't exactly like mine, but it should have. This story, and all the other ones like it, consumed me so much that I couldn't see that my own adoption story wasn't like their fairytales.

Three years after my parents made their Valentine's Day trip to China, my father molested me. I would jump into my parents' bed every Saturday morning to wake them up, and while my mother slept on her side—or pretended to—my father made me touch him, acting like it was a fun weekend routine for us all. I repressed these memories until my twenties.

I now wonder if this repression came from something else apart from trauma and pain. Did I repress them because the myth of adoption was so ingrained in me? Was it so against my core belief for anything to challenge it? At best, I was in denial—or maybe the lies were so pretty, I had to believe in them.

So much pressure is put on a child when they are told they're special.

I Love You Like Crazy Cakes

"After we got you, I carried you up the Great Wall of China," my mother would say when I was little. "We didn't make it to the top, but your dad went on ahead."

"Why didn't you make it to the top?" I asked, disappointed.

"I was tired, Lili."

I now imagine being carried up the Great Wall. My mother made it only to the halfway point. I think she truly believed it would be okay because that's the kind of mother she was. She would bring me into China and my adoption only to take me out before things got too gory, before we got to the part where my existence was considered illegal because of China's One Child Policy.

My mother continued: "We toured all of the sites. China was like another world. It's nothing like here. Our group stopped at a Buddhist temple. They wanted the monks to bless all of the Chinese babies, but we stayed in the bus. I wasn't about to have my child blessed by a Buddhist monk."

As a child, I felt protected by that story. My parents saved me from whatever demonic curse was sure to come out of a monk's blessing.

But now, I wonder if my life would have been any different if I had received the blessing that the six other girls adopted alongside me had gotten.

I Love You Like Crazy Cakes was the only adoption book I owned that spoke specifically about Chinese adoption. The book called the orphanage “the room.” It stated that my “Chinese mother” couldn’t keep me. There was no mention of China’s One Child Policy. There was no mention of how many fetuses were aborted against the mother’s wishes because it was illegal to have a second child. There was no mention that China had an abundance of baby girls up for adoption because boys were more valuable.

Intrinsically, I always knew what “couldn’t keep me” meant. It meant that I was abandoned because it was illegal for me to be born—but the stories my mother told me sounded so much kinder. If the truth of stories was unbearable for me to think about as a child who never felt worthy, these stories of kindness were easier to believe.

The Seven Chinese Sisters

I was adopted along with six other infants from China. My face was paler than all the other girls. In our first group photo, I am the only one who isn’t crying.

When we were two, *The Virginian-Pilot* published an article that discussed the unique connection we six girls shared with one another: “Further, there is that link the girls have, those days and weeks and months together in an orphanage before their parents ever laid eyes on them.” (*Simpson E1*) I didn’t even know this article existed until I typed my last name into my college library’s reference search engine for a contest. The article was the only item to come up, and I had to request access to read the entire story.

Over the next decade, the seven of us, and our families, remained in touch. Once a year, our families got together for a beach house vacation. I enjoyed my time with the other girls: Amy, Faith, SarahAnn, Chloe, Jennifer, and Annie. We made sandcastles, ate red popsicles, and took pictures of each other and the beach with disposable Kodaks.

During these summer visits, some of the parents tried to incorporate aspects of Asian culture into our activities so that we could learn about our past together. I remember how we decorated plates and painted Chinese characters along the edges, having no idea what the characters meant. They just looked like the outline of boxes within boxes to me.

I remember how my mom frowned the entire time, and I remember what she said the day after we left.

"I just don't feel comfortable around them. They're all Catholic. I don't want you getting close to people who aren't *real* Christians," my mom explained to me as she was attempting to dye her graying brown hair red with henna.

"You're fine, right Lili? You can keep in contact with that one girl, Faith? She's nice. We'll see them all again sometime."

I just said okay.

We didn't see the girls again for ten years.

I was only seven when my mother made that decision, and I didn't think I would be missing out on anything. I didn't even miss them. I didn't question anything—but I should have.

I finally saw them again at eighteen, but by then, it was too late for me. The girls had recently returned from a group trip to China, and that trip had solidified their bond as sisters forever. I heard they visited the Great Wall and the province where we all came from.

As soon as I saw them again, it was almost like I didn't want to be near them. I didn't want to be near someone, anyone, who had just come from my birthplace. It was like they knew a secret about me that I would never be told. I was an outsider to their group, even though we had all started our lives together in that orphanage.

I have no idea what it's like to have a sister, but those six girls were the closest chances to sisterhood I had—and I missed out on all six of them.

Today, I follow two of the girls on social media. They're always smiling and posting pictures with their parents. I wonder if their good luck came from the monk's blessing or from something else entirely.

Seeds of Love

When my father grew tired of having a girl, he told my mom he wanted a son. I was four. He had just come back from a mission trip in Russia, where he helped paint an orphanage. He bonded with the boys in the orphanage so much that, when it was time for him to leave, the boys chased after his bus, begging him to take them with him.

My mom agreed to adopt again, not because she wanted another kid, but because she wanted one for my dad so she could have me all to herself.

My mother read me a book called *Seeds of Love*. It was about a young girl who was about to become a big sister in an unconventional way. Her parents were adopting a baby girl. The mother in the book was explaining adoption and what it would be like to be a big sister.

The book closed. "Lili, your father and I have something to tell you."

My father wasn't there.

"We are going to adopt again, but this time, we're going to Russia!"

I was quick to respond. "I want a sister."

My request was denied, and my parents made their way to Russia right before 9/11. During their trip, I stayed at my grandparents' house and waited for my parents and a new baby brother, just like the girl in the book. They were gone for over two weeks and returned on a train with a bald one-year-old in tow.

This adoption was supposed to complete our family. The Nizankiewicz: Husband. Wife. Daughter. Son.

But instead, there was the husband who never felt loved by his own father because he was "the family accident", an extra kid that no one planned for. He grew up to be a father with a lustful eye and a sporadic temper.

There was the wife who starved herself as a teenager until her feet turned black. Her anorexia destroyed her fertility organs, and to cope, she began to obsess over the Lord. She treated Christian churches and denominations like a fad diet. Once she got tired of one, she moved on to the next, and she kept moving as she forced her belief of the week onto her family.

There was the daughter who had a knack for reading and writing, but her parents had different dreams for her. The mother wanted the daughter to stay at home and wait until she found a man to marry. The father wanted the daughter to be a heart surgeon to make the money that he never could in his line of work.

There was the son who had not cried in more than ten years. As a boy, he was so sensitive that he would sob over horse movies, but the father told him that men don't do that. The world is still waiting to see if the son will ever explode, or if he can keep up this masquerade forever.

Meet the Nizankiewicz. A family like no other. Or, perhaps, we are like everyone else; we were just taught to believe that adoption made us special.

Adoption Is for Always

There is one myth about adoption that I still believe in, and that is the idea that adoption lasts forever.

In 2019, I told my mother everything my father had done to me. That I knew what his penis looked like and what his pre-cum felt like. When she told me that it was all a misunderstanding and asked how “we” could heal from this, I stopped answering my parents’ calls and texts. We haven’t spoken since that October, but it doesn’t matter.

Adoption is for always because they are still my parents. They will always be my parents. Do they have this enduring consequence because they are all I know, or because I still love them?

Does the answer have to be one or the other?

I read *Adoption Is for Always* when I was nine, and that book ended my streak of reading adoption books at night. The girl, Celia, was nine too. After knowing her entire life that she was adopted, it finally hit her at the book's start that she hates being adopted. She wonders why her birth mother gave her up. The girl questions if her birth mother would ever return to get her. By the end of the story, Celia learns that adoption is permanent and that her birth mother must have loved her in order to give her up.

For the first time, I felt conflicted about this adoption book. It was the first time I saw how heavy adoption could be on a child. Even though I found comfort in the concept of adoption being "for always", I was troubled by Celia being sad over hers. I always wondered what there was to be sad about because I believed my life in America was automatically better than if I had stayed in China. I was raised to think that adoption saved me from some horrible fate. It turns out adoption was simply a vehicle that brought me to a different horrible fate.

Adoption does not automatically make a parent a Great Parent. Great parenting is forged in the small moments, the everydayness of life.

Myths are what my parents wanted to be true, because that would make me their little miracle. I was supposed to grow up to be just like them. I was the real girl that the fairy godmother conjured up to grant my parents' dreams of parenthood. They were my miracle—and I, their fairytale.

But miracles and myths are overrated.

ON LANGUAGE, NOMADLAND, AND THE SHIFTING SHAPE OF HOME

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"I'm not homeless. I'm just houseless. Not the same thing, right?" Fern asks in *Nomadland*. A linguistic twist, but also a separating line. It's a building that is missing; a house, not a home. Lacking a house is a less significant absence because something remains. Home has not been lost.

There's no word for "home" in Greek. "My house," we say, simply, and we say that for everything, for flats, houses, hotel rooms. Σπίτι μου (/ˈspiti mu/). The possessive changes the nature of the thing, shifts it so monumentally nothing else needs to be said. It's not the word that you need. You need to truly inhabit the space, make it yours, make into a place. Greek is a language full of possessives: we relate as much as we can to ourselves, we measure so much against our own shape. Greek is a language of dramatics. Still, it recognizes that a possessive is transformative, that it can be enough. I can call something mine and expect it to rearrange itself into its new outlines, if only in my version of the world. Now that it is mine, it is not exactly what it was before. I can look at it and see a changed thing.

I don't miss the word "home" when speaking Greek. That, probably, is not a language issue. I have a complicated relationship with every association with home imaginable: "homeland," "home" as a place, "home" as a stable thing.

"Are you going back home afterwards?" an old woman asked me once on a plane, taking me from Nottingham to Edinburgh, and I was absolutely lost. "Home?" I echoed back to her, expecting her to answer something I haven't answered for myself. I am a child of divorced parents. I am an immigrant. I am suspicious of most certainties.

In the room I am now, in the flat I'll now call home, the light moves in waves. I'm in Edinburgh and so the sky is more changing than the sea and so the room transforms hour by hour, minute by minute. I watch it happen. It's July and night arrives late. There's not much darkness and I am someone who doesn't sleep enough, even in the deepest dark. Insomnia is a thinking place.

I am thinking of this room and all the other rooms, the studios, the flats, a house or two. Although I've moved a lot, I always know where I am when I wake up. I always find my way with the lights off. I have, in all my moving, been so sheltered. I've always had a place to stay. I've always had a warm bed, a kitchen, the safety of a reading lamp. Heaters clicking on and off. I have, in all my moving, learned a thing or two about aloneness, singularity. A whole city where no one knows you. A whole country. Nobody knows where you are. Who you are. How you are. Nobody yet has reason to care. And all your old selves are hanging tidily from the hooks at the back of the door.

"I live in there. It's my home," Fern says of her van. She, as the rest of the nomads, moves from place to place for seasonal work, living in her vehicle; a van she has adapted and embraced, made it so intimately hers that she cannot sleep in a bed, in a room, in a house, but returns to it to rest. It contains objects connected to her late husband. It contains all her choices. Isn't that what a home is for?

Nomadland stretches and spans capitalism, isolation, pride, community, belonging, loss. Fern experiences an obliteration of identity, together with any form of safety, of security. Her husband dies. Then, her entire town in rural Nevada is almost removed from the map, abandoned by everyone. "You know it had an airport, a public pool, a golf course," Fern says of Empire, her disappeared town. All things that we associate with certainty, stability, a "real place". And yet, the movie starts with a title screen reading: "On January 31, 2011, due to a reduced demand for sheetrock, US Gypsum shut down its plant in Empire, Nevada, after 88 years. By July, the Empire zip code, 89405, was discontinued." Fern visits Empire towards the end of the movie and the viewers are faced with the uncanniness of a ghost town, the absolute abandonment of every structure where one would expect life: an empty playground, empty houses, silent roads. The embodiment of nothing.

In *Nomadland*, open space is its own character. Mountains, deserts, roads, landscapes: all expand endlessly around the characters, making them so much smaller in comparison, enveloping them, engulfing them. Fern stands alone in the middle of nowhere, the camera panning out until you get a new notion of what "nowhere" can mean. Sometimes she is found alone in the frame. Sometimes she is accompanied by her van or held within it. Sounds become much louder in the silence, in the openness. They travel outwards since they have nothing to bounce against, nothing to fight them or cover them with other sounds, louder ones. Sounds like Fern singing to herself or the hum of her van's engine. The cityscapes with Fern in them (when and only when she is by herself) look like Edward Hopper paintings, like definitions of aloneness.

The word "homelessness" is not of much use here. It falls so short. Even the word "nomad," used in the title, brought in again and again as a label, a quantifier, only half-fits.

It's used with all the associations it carries in its USA context, and still, it is outgrown, as any single story is in this movie. To get complexity and nuance, you need polyphony. To get polyphony, you get characters coming in, sharing fragments of their stories, of their lives. A veteran for whom living in a van in the wilderness eases the strain of his PTSD, protecting him from the triggers of a city life. A woman dying from cancer, taking a final trip to Alaska, choosing to be outdoors when her time comes, in her way, away from hospital rooms. See these characters in your mind's eye. Try to talk to them about the housing market. Try to talk to them about home.

Close to the end of the movie, one of the characters talks about how the nomadic way of living allows for one more kindness: not saying goodbye to people, saying instead "see you down the road!" A refusal to truly part, whether that is because of distance or of death. Denying all full stops.

When I first moved to Scotland, where I live now, I found that people did not say "goodbye" or even "bye" to me. Everyone, from mailmen, to those I meet in pubs, to people I strike a conversation with during a walk, to those I talk to on the phone, no matter how brief the interaction, no matter how ephemeral, say simply "see you later". No dramatics or partings here.

So, here's what I hope will always be down the road. The exact expression on the face of someone meeting you in an airport after months and months away: home. Late night drinking on a fragile rooftop: home. Giving up your side of the bed: home. Tight hugs: home. Conversations that last for hours: home. Brushing your teeth together in a tiny bathroom, hips or elbows touching: home. You can have those everywhere. "My houses" I could say in Greek, to use the expected possessive, but I prefer to say "my people": these are the structures I live in, every single one of them. Every city that expands around people I love is my city. Every building that has carried people I love is my building. See? It's a magic trick. I'm at home anywhere.

FIREWORKS

Vincent closed his laptop and stared at the wall. The afterglow of an Excel spreadsheet burned across his retinas. He waited for it to fade to black and realised that he couldn't hear Violet, hadn't heard her for over an hour. The TV was silent and that gave him pause. The TV was always on. It was the other parent in the family.

"Violet?"

The lights were off in the hall, in the kitchen... God, he hoped she'd fed herself. The first flicker of panic danced across his chest. Everything was dark and then an enormous *bang* made him jump. It was followed by a long, descending *fizz*. The room filled with pale, white-and-blue light. His chest heaved, and he clutched at the door frame for a moment, and then he remembered the date. Remember Remember the Fifth of November. He'd been so wrapped up in work, it hadn't registered. Had Halloween been and gone already?

He saw the small bulge behind the curtain in the front room and relaxed, even if she was lurking there like a Victorian ghost child. She was standing on her Peppa Pig stool, looking out of the window.

"Ooooh." He heard her sigh.

"Violet? Time for bed," he said, although he wasn't even sure what time it was, only that it was much, much too late.

"Have you finished working, Daddy?"

"Yes, Sweets."

"Did you have any dinner?"

"Yes, Sweets," he lied. "Did you?"

"Weetabix," she said, and Vincent promised himself that he would cook her some vegetables tomorrow. Definitely tomorrow.

"Come on, time for bed."

"The fireworks are pretty. Can we go out and see them?"

"It's bedtime, Sweets."

"Please?"

He told himself he was a terrible father. And because he knew he was a terrible father who forgot to cook his daughter a proper meal and left her to fend for herself between the hours of four and seven, he folded.

Vincent hoisted Violet onto his shoulders and walked into the night. The rows and rows of scruffy little terraced houses were more alive than he'd expected. Cordite hung heavy in the air and stray patches of smoke drifted along the pavement. People came and went, through open doors and into backyards. He was relieved to see there were other kids out. It was hard to know what was appropriate, there was no one giving him pointers. Who knew his neighbourhood had such a sense of community? Six years he had lived there, and he hadn't once made an effort. He was apart, an outsider. And that made Violet an outsider, too. But she could talk to anyone about anything: fossils, earthworms, Maisie from school who was both her best friend and mortal enemy. And people listened. They didn't really have a choice. Once they were pinned by those dimples and her earnestness, they *had* to stay and listen.

So why did the most important person in her world not stay?

The cancer came and the cancer went and came and went, and the last time, it nearly took his wife with it. She'd pulled through, she'd gone into remission, she'd been given the all-clear, and then, like an earthquake opening up a chasm in the centre of his world, she'd said it had given her clarity: life was too short. And she left them. Just like that.

Violet barely seemed to register. It made no impression, yet he was certain that it had done a number on her. It would manifest, sooner or later. He watched out for warning signs, little moments – a full-blown tantrum every now and then would have been reassuring. Instead, she would fuss over him. Only five years old, and she would fuss and ask him if he had his lunch for work and if his shirt was clean. It gave her pleasure, he could see, so he let her care for him in small ways. Let her fix him cereal at breakfast time and fetch his shoes.

The extra work he'd taken on was more than the salary was worth, but he didn't really have a choice. His wife had left them nothing. Vincent didn't know how he would pay the mortgage and he didn't know how he would raise his daughter. When he had first dropped her at nursery, he felt an intense loss greater than anything he'd felt the afternoon his wife walked out. All day at work, he had been useless, existing only for that moment when he could take her back into his arms. Her absence pulled at his heart, tightening a coiled line around it.

"I don't hear any," Violet said, fidgeting on Vincent's shoulders. With every little shuffle, Vincent wavered, and he gripped her ankles to keep her from falling. Violet was oblivious. No matter how erratically she jiggled or how much Vincent lurched to keep their balance, she never seemed concerned with falling.

"Hold still, Sweets. I don't want to drop you."

"You've got me... look!" Violet pointed up the road and Vincent nearly pitched them both head-first into a white van parked on the kerb. Ahead, a group of around twenty people leaned against a low wall. Someone was unloading a square box of cardboard onto the pavement.

"Is that man going to do a firework?" Violet asked.

The inside of the box was divided into squares, each one containing a round tube. A man had set it on the pavement, only feet away from parked cars. Was it even legal to just let them off in the street like that?

There were families, but Vincent only saw the men gathered together, drinking from beer cans. There were four of them and they blocked the pavement with their combined bulk. They were big, scruffy men, covered in dabs of paint or splashes of mud. Fresh from work, just like him, but the similarity ended there. Vincent subconsciously made to adjust his glasses as he approached the blockade, but his hands were still gripping Violet's ankles.

"About ten minutes," one of the men said as they stood aside to let them pass. It may have been directed at him, he wasn't sure. He turned, said something vague and non-committal, but everyone was already waving at him: men, women, children. There was something unnerving about it. He couldn't remember ever exchanging a word with any of them, and here they were, waving and smiling happily. He could feel Violet fidgeting again and it took him a moment to realise they were not waving at him, they were waving back at her.

"Hello!" Violet giggled.

"Hello!" They replied. Vincent laughed.

"Hello!" He said as cheerily as he could muster and then walked on. "We'll go down to the Rec then come back shall we?"

"Will there be a bonfire?"

"I don't know. I doubt it," Vincent said. He thought of hedgehogs and piles of unattended wood and a penny for the guy and considered that all things being equal, the Council had probably decided it wasn't worth the risk.

Back when he was a child living in a small village out in the Kent countryside, they started to build the bonfires weeks before. It would get higher and wider with every day. Under cover of night, his dad would sneak garden waste into its heart. One year, he remembered some of the older boys hiding fireworks inside. He supposed they would always be "older boys" in his mind. He couldn't recall now if the older boys had told him before or if he found out with the rest of the crowd as the bonfire caught and they heard the muffled bangs of the fireworks igniting inside. Did it matter? Most were burned up quickly, but a couple shot out in skittering, drunken parabolas. Like startled pheasants, nine-parts sound and fury. He remembered one zipping a bare foot from the ground, straight at his father, who casually stepped to one side and let it pass between them. Vincent had frozen, watching with wide-eyed wonder as it passed his ankles and detonated in a hedge thirty feet back.

"Bloody idiots," his father had said, but there was no great malice in it. He imagined the same scenario now, him taking his father's place, Violet taking his. He wondered if he would have stayed quite so calm. His school had shown a Public Safety Announcement at assembly the following week that had scarred Vincent for years. There were probably rules against traumatising kids like that now.

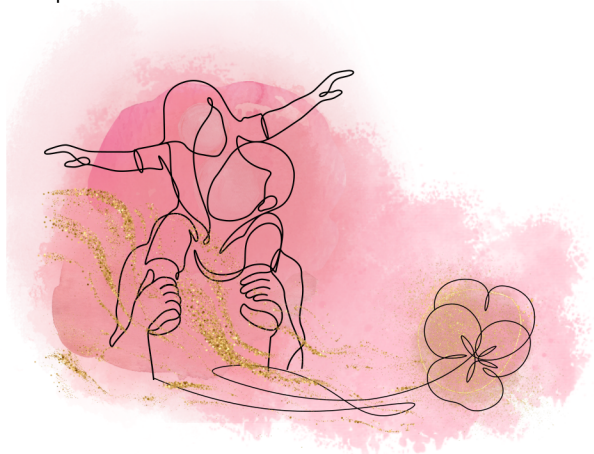
Vincent deposited Violet on the grass when they reached the Rec. She was getting heavy, and his shoulders began to ache. How much longer would he be able to carry her? There was no bonfire and no crowd at the Rec. Just a group of eight teenagers on electric scooters haring around the cycle path that circuited the playing fields.

Vincent turned to go, grumbling. He wondered whether he should call someone about it. Was there a Park Warden?

"Come on," he said, trying to pull Violet away, but she remained rooted as the boys came past—*zip zip zip*—with synchronised regularity. And then the jagged white bloom of sparklers igniting seared across his vision, morphing into long tangerine streaks.

"Wow." Violet's mouth was an O. Vincent didn't know if there had been some secret signal, but it seemed choreographed. At one moment, they had been zipping past one after the other with the little *prrrup-prrrup* of their engines, the next there was a thin circle of living fire weaving its way around the Rec. Eight thin little fireworms chased each other as each rider held a lit sparkler high above their heads.

"Wow," Violet repeated.



"Dangerous," Vincent muttered and put a hand on Violet's shoulder, but he couldn't take his eyes off them. And then one of the kids toppled head-first over his handlebars and the fireworms all *zip zipped* over to the same spot in a laughing, broiling pile of limbs and dying flames. Vincent fumbled for the phone in his pocket, waiting to see if the laughs turned to screams. But the rider was soon up and on his feet.

"Come on," he repeated. Violet broke into a round of applause and let out a heartfelt "*Yeaaaaahhh*" that carried across the playing field. One of the boys raised his hands in the air and smiled.

"That was fun, Dad. But why weren't there any fireworks?"

"I don't know," Vincent replied. He was going to say something about Council cutbacks and Health and Safety but checked himself. "There'll be some around the next corner, I'm sure. Come on, back up on shoulders then."

"Yay!"

They walked on. There was a lull as they circled back home, and then they began to hear the thin crackle of Roman Candles, Fountains, Catherine Wheels kicking into life. Back in the maze of terraces, the first rockets began shooting into the air. But every whoosh into the sky was hidden from view.

The terraces had no front yards; they abutted right up against the pavement, which was a narrow strip cluttered with wheelie bins and cars haphazardly parked half in the road, half out. The streets made long tunnels that opened out briefly where they crossed each other. All around, the fireworks began to pop and crash from back gardens as people came out after their evening meal.

But Vincent only ever saw the last flash of light, the briefly illuminated smoke. An echo. An afterthought. If they walked on the left of the street, then sure enough the fireworks would shoot from the backyards on their side. There would be a quick *pffft-pffft* sound, like miniature scuds. There would be the successive bangs and crackles, but it would all be hidden by a chimney breast. If they crossed the street to get a better look, there would be a long gap, and just when they turned to try another street, it would start up again behind them and they would turn just in time to see the last failing embers of a rocket.

Back on their street, the group leaning against the wall had gone. All that remained were four abandoned cardboard firework cubes and three empty cans of extra-strength lager. Vincent had an urge to lean down and put his hand to the cubes, to see if they were still warm. There were light scorch marks around the rim, and the gaudy blue and yellow lettering along the sides had been ripped, showing the brown card beneath. On his shoulders, Violet sighed. He waited for a sob, a sulk, but there was no further sound. It was getting late. The fireworks dropped to a distant crackle again. Vincent had no doubt they would peak again around ten-thirty when he was trying to sleep. He had no doubt they would wake Violet and she would creep into his bedroom, hovering over him until he woke and let her climb into the side her mother had once occupied.

"Hometime," Vincent said.

"Aw. OK, daddy.

"I'm sorry we kept missing them, Sweets."

"I saw loads, Daddy. It was the best."

"You saw... loads? But we kept missing them, or we were on the wrong side of the street, or there was a tree. I'm sorry. We should have come out earlier, we would have seen more."

"No, Daddy, I saw loads. It was the best."

Vincent frowned. She had been on his shoulders after all. Perhaps she had got a better view? Perhaps the angles worked better a foot or so higher?

"Are you sure? We didn't see a thing."

"My favourite was the pink one that went *whoosh, pa-chow!*" Violet made a soaring motion with her arm and then exploded her little fist into a star. She wobbled on Vincent's shoulders and he clung hard to her ankles again.

"Yeah? You saw that? That sounds awesome, I'm sad I missed it. Come on, down." He put his hands under Violet's armpits and hauled her over his head and to the floor.

"Then there was the rainbow one, it went *vrrp-vrrp-vrrp.*" Violet made pinwheeling circles in the air in front of her.

"Really? But—" Vincent began, but then Violet hugged his legs while he was trying to get the front door open and he dropped his keys. He cursed under his breath.

"Sorry, Daddy," Violet said, and this time Vincent cursed himself.

"Not your fault, Sweets. Now come on, let's get your teeth brushed."

"Can I have a hot chocolate first?"

Vincent stood with the door half-open. Violet looked up at him with guileless, doe-eyes. He didn't even pretend to himself that he wasn't going to break.

"Sure, why not?"

"Best Daddy in the world."

Vincent lifted her into his arms and carried her indoors. Tomorrow, he would cook her something with vegetables.

Tomorrow.



MAIDS

To hire a spider, all you need is a fistful of waivers, good credit and the right amount of cash up-front. The *Member-Arachnid Individualized Disposal Syndicate* (MAIDS) team will meet up with you for a pre-screen and do their best to play matchmaker.

"What kind of mess are you looking to clean up?"

The woman seated at the card table beside mine looks at the floor before answering the interviewer.

"Dishes, mostly. Laundry. Nothing special."

"If it's mostly dishes, we'll probably refer you to DADS."

DADS is an offshoot of MAIDS: *Dog-Assisted Detail Services*.

"It's closer to your price range, as well."

MAIDS is primo, top-of-the-line. You're paying a giant, trained spider to clean up your house and life. This is why I'm here. I need the best-of-the-best.

The woman takes the referral, and the interviewer finishes her paperwork and closes the case. She produces a disposable wipe to clean the table before standing and sauntering to my station.

"How did you find us?" No names, no smiles. All business, I guess.

"A friend of a friend." She frowns.

"We try to keep our web tight-knit. We don't have the Members, resources, or staff to deal with constant tedium cases." She points her pen towards the table where she'd been sitting. "Is this about dishes, laundry, or vacuuming?"

"No, not at all. I'm an adult human." I grin. She doesn't.

"How can we help you?"

"My partner left a few months ago and didn't finish the renovations on the bathroom," she nods, "—or the kitchen," she doesn't make eye contact, "—or the ceiling." I admire the textured tiles above our heads, a majesty of functional lighting.

"So, you're looking for home improvements?" She scribbles notes on her paperwork and x's off tiny boxes that I can't read.

"No, I'm just allergic to the dust and fumes. I can do the repairs, but once the mess is on the back porch, I'm at a loss."

The interviewer listens, writes, and holds out a palm.

"Credit report, signed waivers, cash."

I pull the items from the manila folder on my lap and slide them across the table. Without looking up, the interviewer whips out a highlighter and makes a few quick marks. She counts the money and stands.

"I'll make copies of these and be back."

I take my idle time to peer around at the other interviewees. It's hard to discern what kinds of messes any given person has got hiding back at home. They all seem relatively well-adjusted. New shoes and clean fingernails and all.

"Here's your originals." The interviewer returns and places the documents to my left. "Here's information about Theresi." The pamphlet shows a massive, hairy spider, *Theresi* written in a comically grave font above her head.

"No matchmaking then?" I'm a little disappointed.

"Theresi is the only Member that meets your needs."

I smile, say thanks, and wait to leave until the interviewer has ambled off to the next folding table.

Theresi arrives at my ramshackle house around dawn the next day, slips in through my mail slot, and scares the shit out of me while my arm is elbow-deep in the kitchen plumbing.

"HELLO." The stilted voice that sounds from the communication device on Theresi's head is unfittingly saccharine.

"Oh, hi." I drop the wrench I've got in my exposed hand and pull up my pants a bit.

"I'M THERESI. I AM HERE TO HELP."

I fish my arm from the pipe and turn to greet the spider.

"Do we shake hands?"

"NO." The creature stands still, unblinking. I say nothing.

"I'M THERESI. I AM HERE TO HELP."

"Hi, Theresi." I give up on pleasantries. "I need the junk hauled from my back porch to the dump."

"EXCELLENT." Theresi turns on those eight awful legs and waits at the back door. I stand, meet her, turn the knob, and she scuttles into the trash pile.

"PLEASE LEAVE THIS ENTRANCE OPEN AND UNLOCKED. I WILL EXTERMINATE ANY INSECTS THAT ENTER THE DOMICILE." I nod, and Theresi immediately gets to work.

I watch in wonder for a while as she wraps webs around the broken toilet seat; the busted water heater; the rotted floorboards; one-by-one hauling them two miles along the state road to the dump. I'm up on a ladder when the robot voice shakes me.

"MAY I HAVE SOME WATER."

Again, I drop my hammer, and flinch as it clunks on the floor. Theresi doesn't react.

"Uh, yeah, hold on."

I fill my ex-partner's favorite soup bowl from the tap and place it before Theresi's fangs.

"APPRECIATED."

I watch her drink for a while, terrified and awestruck by her alien form. She finishes the water in minutes.

"WHY IS THERE SO MUCH TRASH?" I'm taken aback by the blunt question asked in such a lilting tone.

"My ex," I shrug and point to the bowl, "liked to start projects and never finish them." Theresi has no eyebrows to raise, no neck to nod her head. Her pincers click as a water droplet forms and falls from her mouth.

"IRRESPONSIBLE." She states. "NOT A GOOD PARTNER."

"No, no, they were great." I wave a hand. "I could've done more myself. Two-to-tango, ya know?"

"NO." Theresi counters, before hustling back out the door and trapping the bathroom sink in her web.

I leave Theresi to her work and finish the kitchen plumbing by dinner time. Through the window I spot her climbing over the backyard fence, returning from the dump, and I meet her on the porch with more water.

"Holy shit, you've cleared it all."

All the trash and debris and broken glass has vanished. I set the soup bowl down on the wooden deck and Theresi swallows the contents.

"YOUR PROXIMITY TO THE DUMP WAS OPTIMAL." She says once she's finished drinking. "THE ITEMS WERE MANAGEABLE AND RELATIVELY SOLID." I cross my arms in dumbstruck amusement.

"Can I offer you dinner?" I hear how stupid the words sound as they tumble out of my mouth, but it's too late. "A drink?"

"NO." Theresi ignores my faux-pas, enters my shambolic kitchen, and waits for me to follow. I close the back door.

"THE FLIES THAT HAVE ENTERED THE DOMICILE WILL SUFFICE."

"Of course." I step aside and follow the protocol as Theresi builds a massive web between my kitchen and the rest of the downstairs.

"KEEP CLEAR OF THE EXTERMINATION ZONE." She reminds me.

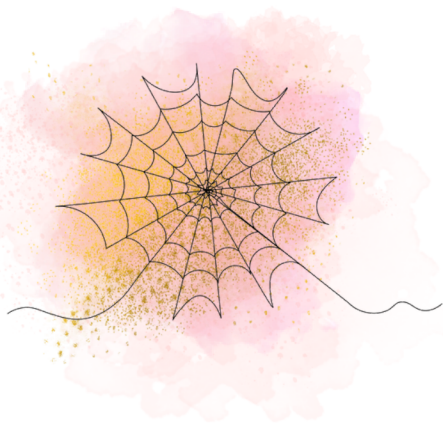
"Will do." I fill the soup bowl one more time before grabbing my beers and snacks and tools and ascending to the second floor.

"Thanks, Theresi."

"MY WORK GIVES ME JOY." She rattles in that deceptively sweet voice. "IF I DO NOT SEE YOU TOMORROW, I WISH YOU THE BEST IN YOUR DOMICILE IMPROVEMENTS."

I smile at her, head upstairs, and drink a few beers as I work on the bathroom lighting. I fall asleep in the bathtub and wake up around noon. The house is silent.

Everything is as I left it, wiring exposed and plumbing freshly-sealed. The fridge is pulled away from the wall and full of alcohol and take-out containers. I look through the murky window and admire the spotless back porch. All the junk is gone. The flies are gone. That stupid soup bowl, I find, is also gone. I ready my tools and steady my ladder and get to work, happily crawling across the open ceiling and catching abandoned cobwebs in my hair. I put the house back together, piece by piece, and watch tiny spiders wander in through the mail slot.



BEGINNINGS, ENDINGS

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It began with us sitting across from one another in a doctor's busy waiting room, two complete strangers not knowing we were about to start seventh grade at the same school. Maybe we even became friends in that long, silent gazing while some child screamed in a nearby room. Why were we even there? It was nothing life threatening, or we would remember. The life-threatening things would come later.

It began when we discovered that we were both crushing on George Michael and we were eldest children and we were born in countries on the other side of the world and spoke another language besides English. It began when we underscored our eyes and ratted our hair and donned acid-washed denim to step into a photo booth.

It began the day we tore a supermarket sheet cake apart with our hands in the parking lot and smashed it into each other's hair and face and clothes because suddenly we had become feral girls, and then we flew into the pizzeria bathroom where we clogged the sink with pink frosting and used up all the paper towels and toilet paper trying to clean ourselves up. We trashed the bathroom, but we couldn't clean ourselves up.

Actually, it began when we started cruising for men at the strip mall outside the pizzeria. We were in ninth grade then, fourteen years old, and we were done being good girls, model big sisters. We were so good at being so good for so long. Now we would be so good at being bad, so bad. Overachievers, the both of us.

It began with your father, or rather, your fear of him, how you would flinch when he appeared in your doorway, when he barked at you in Hebrew. Your father was a plant scientist who studied avocados, which is how you ended up in Riverside. He was doing research at the university. It began with an uneasy feeling in my gut that he was brutal, though he did nothing in my presence that could be called brutality.

It began with my own parents—my mother, really, whose love was cold and intellectual and judgmental. It began with academic success and social failure. It began in self-doubt that bloomed into self-loathing.

It began with discarding our old selves, taking on new ones: Shilah and Camille. We found men who would relieve us of the burden of virginity. Stoners in their early twenties, blue collar, high school dropouts. They listened to metal bands and drank cheap beer and smoked weed, speaking in the slow, raspy drawl of heavy pot users. We were smarter, destined for greater things, but first we were destined for them. We would use them, then discard them.

It ended with a phone call I missed. You were calling from the airport in New York to tell me your parents were sending you back to Israel forever. By the time you called, I was already with the stoners. By the time you called, I already knew you were gone. Tony was there—the stoner you had claimed—and he was weeping. He knew you were only fourteen, but he wanted a life with you. I never liked him, but we drank together to oblivion because we had both lost you. We would never see you again. It was like you had ceased to be.

It ended with further disintegration—harder drugs, razor-shredded skin, blackouts, quitting school, running away. It ended when I decided it had to end. Either that, or I would die. I picked an ending over death. Goodbye, Camille.

It ended with my six-page letter to you, only your parents wouldn't give me your address. It was better for us both, they said, if we never communicated again. They sent you halfway around the world to get away from me. That was March, and by summer your whole family was gone, back to Israel for good. By summer, my mother also tried to save me by taking me out of the country, back to Russia, the deep gloaming of the Soviet Union, where I became witness to the end of my grandparents' long, brutal Soviet lives. It ended in a place where my suffering looked like petty self-indulgence.

It actually ended so many years later, when I sometimes looked for you on the internet. I found your siblings, your mother, but not you.

It ended when I messaged your mom, who then forwarded my email address to you, and finally, you sent out tentative feelers across decades. *It's Tammi. . . . How are you? Long time. . . .* Twenty-seven years later, I placed those six yellowing pages on a flatbed scanner and sent them to you—*All your favorite stoners say "high." Write back, you bitch!!*—and we discovered that we were both married, had two children, were teachers. Our families were mostly fine—except your father, who was ten years dead.

It ended with sixteen emails—*left home very young, you wrote, wandered around and got expelled from school. It took me a long time to find myself*—before we ran out of things to say, before we discovered the chasm was too great, the silence too long, the stolen years irretrievable. Before we discovered we were strangers.

It ended with an email: *it's midnight in Israel, I just remembered the first time I saw you, it was before I went to school in the U.S., we were both waiting for some doctor's appointment or something, and some kid was screaming from inside the room. I remember sitting in front of you and looking at your face. do you remember? everything happened to us together.*

