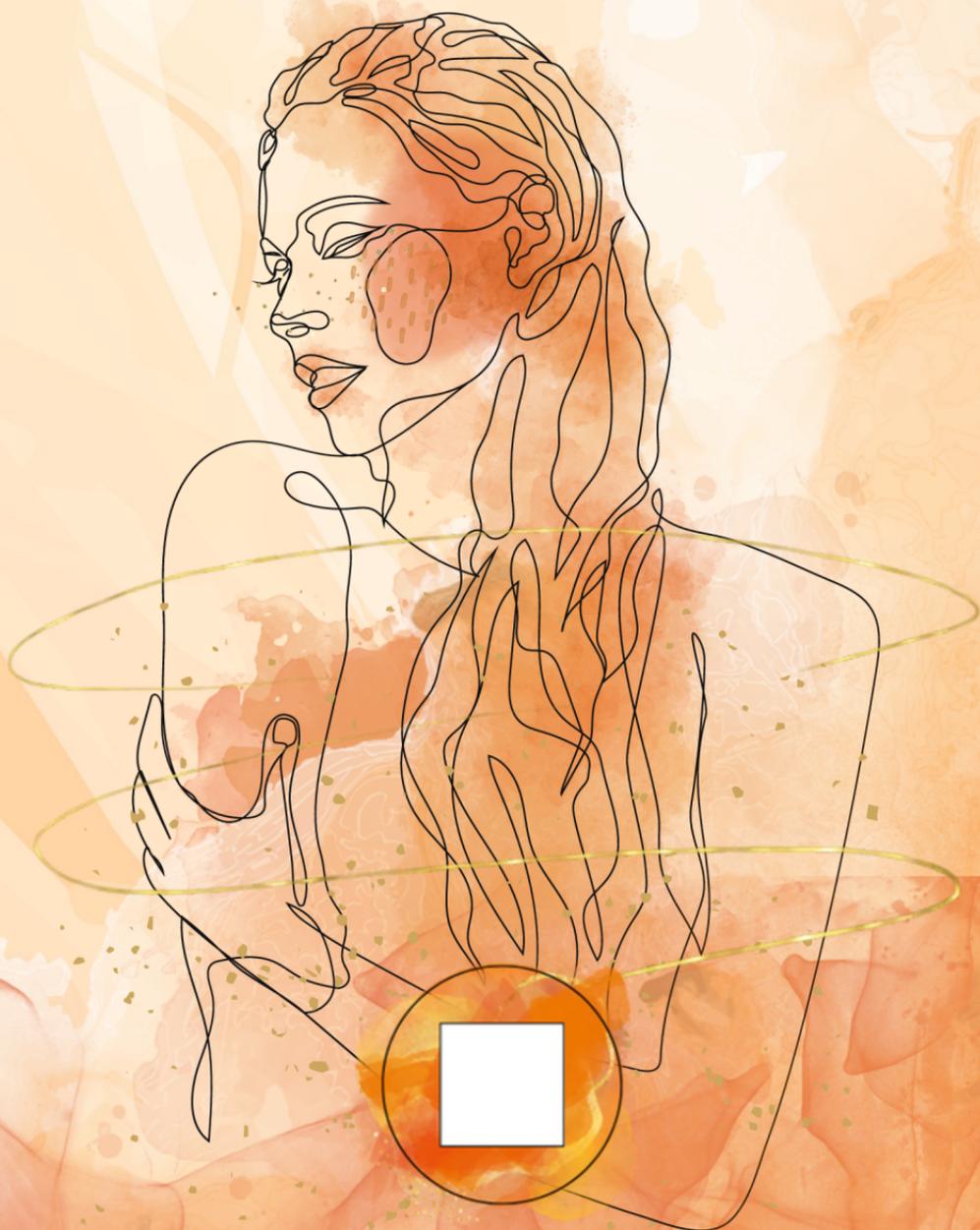


TABULA RASA REVIEW

ISSUE FOUR



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Assistant Editors: Carly Jo Helm, Jess Krahn, Kaila Gallacher, Kaci MoDavis, Andi Myles, Paige Cerulli, Allie Piette

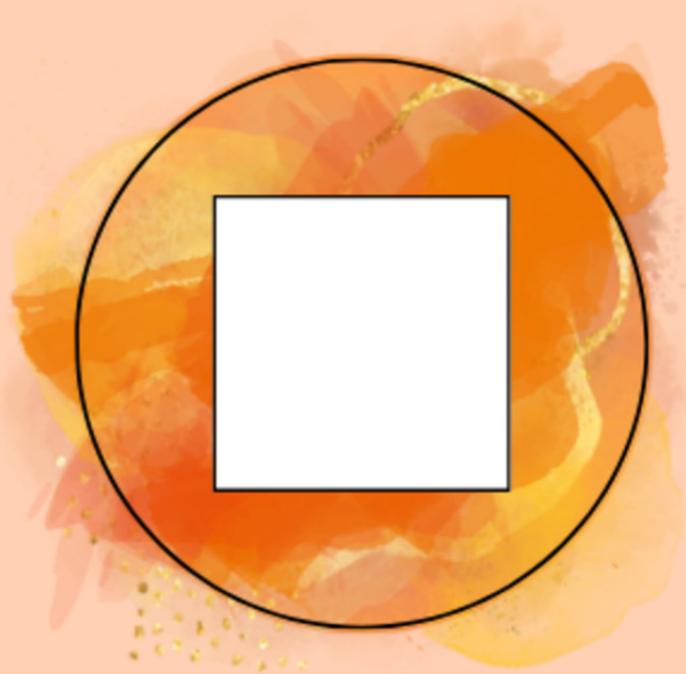
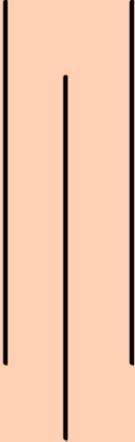
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MASTHEAD

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Assistant Managing Editor



Emma Christensen

Emma (she/her) graduated from the University of Mary Washington with B.A. in Creative Writing and a B.S. in Psychology, along with a minor in Digital Studies. She writes prose that focuses on the intersection of the human condition and chronic illness, a topic that she is all too familiar with. She has publications in journals such as *The Emerson Review*, *Furrow Magazine*, and *Clackamas*, among others. 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 a passionate team. Read her work at emmcnyderwrites.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 and a certificate in Editing from the University of 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 *Parade 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 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 fourth 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.



Rachel Makinson

Rachel is a UK-based writer and editor, with a BA in English Literature with Creative Writing from Newcastle University. Her work has been featured by several magazines and journals, including *Otherwise Engaged Literature and Arts Journal*, *Marrow Magazine*, *Bright Flash Literary Review*, *Tabula Rasa Review*, and the London Independent Story Prize. Rachel joined the *Tabula Rasa Review* editorial team because of her admiration for the inclusive and accessible space it creates for writers.



F.M. Papaz

F.M. 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](https://www.instagram.com/fmpapaz) or fmpapaz.com/ings to find her monthly newsletter about living a creative life.



Carly Jo Helm

Carly (they/she) is a Virginia-based poet, nonfiction writer, and Pisces sun with a strong moon in Gemini from Dallas, Texas. Their writing explores the impacts and intersections of the female experience, trauma, the body, queerness, and sex. In 2019, they published a collection of poetry about growing up queer and quiet in Texas suburbia, *Lady stoneface*. She is currently working on a memoir-in-essays, has trouble choosing a single genre to focus on, and is excited to expand her literary horizons at *Tabula Rasa Review*. Carly can often be found asleep on a picnic blanket at various public parks in Richmond, and is always looking for micro-history book recommendations.



Jess Krahn

Jess is a writer, editor, and YouTuber based in Toronto. She holds a B.A. (hons.) and an M.A. in English. Her criticism has appeared in *The New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *The Malahat Review*, and other venues. Jess's full portfolio is available at www.jessiekrahn.com. Jess joined the team at *Tabula Rasa Review* in the hopes of learning from and assisting emerging writers as they find their voices.



Kaila Gallacher

Kaila (she/her/they) is an artist, writer, and editor based in Quebec, Canada. Her first chapbook, "mo nighean: the universe inside the comma", an exploration of chronic illness and motherhood, was published by *The Soapbox Press* in 2022. Her poetry can be found, most recently, in *The New Quarterly* and *Poet's Pulse*. Kaila is beyond excited to be joining the team at *Tabula Rasa Review* and is looking forward to being a part of such a beautiful and inclusive creative community. She can be found on Instagram at [@thislesthornsandpoetry](https://www.instagram.com/thislesthornsandpoetry).



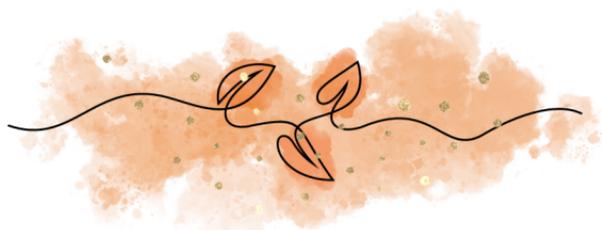
Kaci MoDavis

Kaci graduated with a B.A. in Creative Writing & Sociology from Susquehanna University and she is currently an MFA Candidate in The Writer's Foundry program at St. Joseph's University in Brooklyn, NY. She has short story and poetry publications in *Rivercraft Magazine*, *Sanctuary Magazine*, and *Ink in Thirds*. She admires when writers take charge of the page and leave lasting impressions of an emotional variety. Kaci joined *Tabula Rasa Review* because of her passion for literary connection and for beautiful writing that derives from creative openness.



Andi Myles

Andi is a Washington D.C. area science writer by day, poet in the in-between times. Her favorite space is the fine line between essay and poetry. She earned her MFA from Sarah Lawrence and she is the author of the chapbook *Fractured Symphony* (Cathexis Northwest Press). Her writing has been recognized in The Best American Essays and has appeared in *Chestnut Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Rattle*, and *Tahoma Literary Review*, among others. You can find her at www.andimyles.com or on Instagram @andimyleswriter.





Paige Cerulli

Paige holds a B.A. in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and a B.A. in Music Performance from Westfield State University. Her poetry has appeared in *Chronogram*, *Red Savina Review*, *Wellspring Literary Journal*, and more. Paige works as a freelance content writer, copywriter, and journalist, and lives in Western Massachusetts. Paige is excited to join the *Tabula Rasa Review* because she's a strong believer in writing's ability to heal and transform lives, and she wants to support other writers in their journeys.



Alexandria Piette

Alexandria Piette (she/her/they/them) is a lesbian writer and student based in Mount Pleasant, Michigan. Although they are pursuing their degree in Social Work with a minor in Substance Use with dreams to advocate for harm reduction, creative writing has been their lifelong passion project, carving a pathway of poetry. Her work has been featured in *Sunday Mornings at the River*, *Querencia Press*, *New Words Press*, and *Scavengers*, among others. Through joining the editorial staff at *Tabula Rasa Review*, they aim to uncover the rawness and rarity of the human experience. You can find her on Instagram, [@apbooksart](#).

AUTHOR BIOS

listed alphabetically by first name

A V ANJALI MENON

A V Anjali Menon is a writer and performance artist based in Tallinn. Her written work has been featured in literary magazines including *Fjords Review*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Birdcoat Quarterly*, and others. As a spoken word artist, Anjali has been featured at Super Bloom Music festival Munich, Tallinn Fringe Festival, and Berlin Hiphop and Poetry festival.

AARON LELITO

Aaron Lelito is a writer and editor from Buffalo, NY. His micro-chapbook, *Secret Meetings*, was published by *Ghost City Press* in 2025, and his poetry collection, *The Half Turn*, was published in 2023. His work has also appeared in *Door Is A Jar*, *Stonecoast Review*, *Barzakh*, *SPECTRA Poets*, and *Santa Fe Review*. He is Editor-in-Chief of *Wild Roof Journal*. Instagram: @aaronlelito

ANGELA ACOSTA

Angela Acosta, Ph.D. (she/her) is an Assistant Professor of Spanish at the University of South Carolina. She is a 2022 Dream Foundry Contest for Emerging Writers Finalist and 2015 Rhina P. Espailat Award winner. Her Best of the Net and Pushcart Prize nominated poetry has appeared in *The Acentos Review*, *Radon Journal*, *The Sprawl Mag*, and *StarLine**. She is author of the Elgin-nominated speculative poetry collections *Summoning Space Travelers* (*Hiraeth Publishing*, 2022) and *A Belief in Cosmic Dailiness* (*Red Ogre Review*, 2023).

ANGELA TOWNSEND

Angela Townsend works for a cat sanctuary. She is a five-time Pushcart Prize nominee and the 2024 winner of *West Trade Review's* 704 Prize for Flash Fiction. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Arts & Letters*, *Blackbird*, *Five Points*, *Indiana Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Meridian*, *Pleiades*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, *trampset*, *Witness*, and *World Literature Today*, among others. She graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary and Vassar College. Angela has lived with Type 1 diabetes for over 30 years and laughs with her poet mother every morning.

BARBARA KRASNER

Barbara Krasner holds an MFA from the Vermont College of Fine Arts. The author of three poetry chapbooks, including the ekphrastic *Poems of the Winter Palace* (*Bottlecap Press*, 2025), she is also the author of the full-length ekphrastic collections, *The Night Watch* (*Kelsay Books*, 2025) and *The Wanderers* (*Shanti Arts*, 2026), the forthcoming ekphrastic microchapbook, *Insomnia: Poems after Lee Krasner*, and the short story collection, *The Color of Time and Other Stories* (*Blaze/VOX*, 2025). She lives and teaches in New Jersey.

BETTY STANTON

Betty Stanton (she/her) is a Pushcart nominated writer who lives and works in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in various journals and collections and has been included in various anthologies. She received her MFA from The University of Texas - El Paso and holds a doctorate in Educational Leadership. She is currently on the editorial board of *Ivo Review*.

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D A ANGELO

Shortlisted for the 2023 Manchester Poetry Prize and the 2025 Artemesia Arts Poetry Competition, D A Angelo is a UK-based poet with work in *The Shore*, *The York Literary Review*, *South*, *BarBar*, *The Crank*, and *SurVision*.

DISHA DAHIYA

Disha Dahiya is a history major and poet. The researcher in her digs through archives, and the writer in her weaves grief, resistance, and memory into lyrical threads. She's especially drawn to gender, geopolitics, and stories that blur the line between myth and political truth. Her words have found space in student journals and newsletters, and she has worked across editorial and research roles at LSR and beyond. When she isn't tracing revolutions through syllables, she dreams of witches, women, and worlds that could have been.

E. DOYLE-GILLESPIE

E. Doyle-Gillespie is a long-time Baltimore resident who enjoys writing, reading, and learning as a part of Hampden's creative community. He holds a BA in History from George Washington University, and a Master of Liberal Arts from Johns Hopkins University. He is the author of *Gentrifying the Plague House*, *Father of the Red Grotto Used Bookstore*, *Aerial Act*, and other books. He was 2024's grand prize winner in the Iridescence Award for Horror and SciFi from *Kinsman Quarterly*. He won third place in that year's Westmoreland Arts and Heritage Literary Contest, and an honorable mention in the Rhonda Gail Wiliford Human Rights Poetry Competition. E. Doyle-Gillespie is a teacher of World Literature at the Baltimore Leadership School for Young Women.

EVE MÜLLER

Eve Müller lives in Eugene, Oregon with her sweetheart. She has recently published in *About Place*, *Camas*, *Marrow Magazine*, *Sea Wolf Journal*, *Sequestrum*, and *Timberline Review*, among others. Some of her work has been anthologized, and she has had two books published within the last two years: *Guide to the Ruins* and *Birds and Saints*. She was awarded a PLAYA artists' residency this year, was a winner in the Cirque poetry contest, and her work was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. When Eve is not writing, she bakes, hikes, conducts research on autism, hangs out with her mom and two feral daughters, and skinny-dips whenever/wherever she can.

IVY ALVAREZ

Ivy Alvarez is an inaugural recipient of a 2025 Libraries Tasmania Fellowship for Writing. Born in the Philippines, she lived in Scotland, Ireland, Wales, and New Zealand, before returning to Australia in 2024. ivyalvarez.com

JENNIFER SCHAEFER

Jennifer Schaefer is a Chicago-area writer whose work has appeared in: *North American Review*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Maudlin House*, *Curbside Splendor*, *Barstow & Grand*, anthologies from *Akashic Books* and *Tortoise Books*, and more, including an Honorable Mention from *Glimmer Train*. After earning a Journalism BA at UW-Madison and working as an on-air producer and announcer for Wisconsin Public Radio, Jennifer spent her roaring twenties in London, England, working such odd jobs as financial advisor, actress, model, pub barmaid, and punk rock singer. She is currently seeking publication of two novels, while working on a third. For more, please visit: www.jenschaefer.com.

JILLIAN STACIA

Jillian is a poet from Baltimore, Maryland. She is the author of the upcoming poetry collection, *SET THE BONE*, published by *Arcana Poetry Press*. She was selected as an Honorable Mention for the 2025 Jack McCarthy Book Prize and short-listed for the 2026 Central Avenue Poetry Prize. She has been nominated for several awards, including 2025 Best of Net and the 2025 Pushcart Prize. Her poetry has been featured in several literary magazines and anthologies. Find her online [@jillianstacia](https://twitter.com/jillianstacia) to read more of her work.

JORDAN NISHKIAN

Jordan Nishkian is an Armenian-Portuguese writer based in California. Her prose and poetry explore themes of duality and have been featured in national and international publications. She is a winner of the Rollick Magazine Fiction Prize, and a nominee for the Pushcart Prize, Best American Short Stories, and Best of the Net.

KAREN CLINE-TARDIFF

Karen Cline-Tardiff has been writing as long as she could hold a pen. Her works have appeared in several anthologies and journals, both online and in print. She stays up too late and snoozes her alarm past any reasonable time. Her chapbook *Raccoon* is available everywhere. She is founder and Editor-in-Chief of *Gnashing Teeth Publishing*. Find her at karenthepoet.co.

KERI WITHINGTON

Keri Withington (she/her) is an Appalachian-based poet, educator, and homesteader. Her poems have appeared widely, including in *Constellations of Freckles* (Dancing Girl Press) and *Beckoning from the Waves* (Plan B Press). You can find her at sites.google.com/view/keriwithingtonpoet/home.

KILLIAN MACDONALD

Killian MacDonald is a Meanjin-based writer working on unceded Yugera and Turrbal country. A self-diagnosed love poet, his work delves into heartbreak and healing, queer friendship, family, and loneliness. You can find his work at [@blinkatmepoetry](https://www.blinkatmepoetry.com).

LAURIE KOENSGEN

Laurie Koensgen lives and writes in Ottawa, Canada. Recent publishers include *Blue Moon Review*, *Literary Review of Canada*, *The Ex-Puritan*, *The Madrigal*, *The New Quarterly*, and *Twin Bird Review*. Laurie is a founding member of the Ruby Tuesday Writing Group. Her fourth chapbook, *this clingstone love*, is with *Pinhole Poetry*.

LEONIE ROWLAND

Leonie Rowland is a poet and therapeutic writing practitioner based in Manchester. She is the author of *In Bed with Melon Bread* (2021) and *This Time of Life is Meant for Savages* (2023). You can find her on Instagram [@leoniearowland](https://www.instagram.com/leoniearowland).

LORI CRISPO

Lori Crispo is a former national sports insurance executive turned fiction writer. She is also the mom of two pretty fabulous adult kids, two sweet-faced dogs, and one obnoxious 21-year-old cockatiel. Her fiction has received Honorable Mention from *Writer's Digest*, and her short stories have appeared in *The Write Launch*, *Raven's Perch*, and elsewhere. She is a graduate of Smith College in French and Medieval Studies. Lori is an active member of the WFWA and the NC Writers' Network, where she volunteers with their prisoner outreach program. Find her at www.LoriCrispo.com.

MATT ESCOTT

Matt Escott lives in Toronto with his wife and 7-year-old twins. For the past 10 years he has worked with youth experiencing homelessness, and is currently developing a mentorship program for youth in foster care. He has been published or has work forthcoming in *Ekstasis*, *OneArt*, *Stone Poetry Quarterly*, *The Poetry Lighthouse*, and *Amethyst Review*.

MAYA MARIA

Maya Maria has a Bachelor's in creative writing from the University of Massachusetts Lowell. A piano teacher and nature lover, she writes poetry that explores the past and its influence on identity. Her published works can be found in *Anti-Heroine Chic*, *The Offering*, *Mulberry Literary*, *Echo Review*, and *Naugatuck River Review*. She also placed third in the 2024 Beals Prize for Poetry competition. Currently, she is hard at work on a manuscript of poems.

MEGAN CARTWRIGHT

Megan Cartwright is an Australian poet, based in Canberra. Her writing has featured in journals and magazines including *Contemporary Verse 2*, *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Island Magazine*, and *Mascara Literary Review*, among others. She is the 2025 winner of the Tina Kane Emergent Writer Award.

MELANIE HESS

As a young girl, Melanie was entranced with William Carlos Williams's *The Red Wheelbarrow* and knew she wanted to write poems. Words have power and writing them down helped Melanie find her own voice. Many notebooks and many years later, she began writing again during the COVID-19 pandemic. Melanie writes from British Columbia, Canada. Through imagery and detail, her vignettes explore the internal and external landscapes of life and what it means to be human. Step inside and stay awhile! Her debut poetry book, *Bread and Bone*, is available on Amazon.

N.W. HICKS

N.W. Hicks is a Connecticut-based poet. He is a graduate of UConn and earned his MA from Manhattanville. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Chrysalism*, *Paper Dragon*, *Shot Glass Journal*, *The Passionfruit Review*, and elsewhere. He believes in water but works with dirt and dreams of becoming a river's meander.

RACHEL BEACHY

Rachel Beachy is the author of *Tiny Universe*. Her poetry has also appeared or is forthcoming in *HAD*, *Does It Have Pockets*, *Mulberry Literary*, *ONE ART*, *Rust & Moth*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Thread*, and others. She was nominated for the Best of the Net Anthology 2025 and shortlisted for the Central Avenue Poetry Prize 2026.

SARAH GAMARD

Sarah Gamard is a writer from New Orleans.

THOMAS J. TICE

Thomas J. Tice is a father of two, a writer, and a dual-service veteran from Houston, Texas. His prose and poetry have been recognized for excellence with publication and awards, such as the Lorenzo Thomas Creative Writing Award, and as a winner in The Literary Times poetry contest.

V. BRAY

V. Bray has been a writer since childhood and still has a box filled with her first “books,” usually illustrated with markers and bound with yarn. She writes in many genres, from speculative and historical fiction to poetry. Her work has been published in *About Place Journal*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Multiplicity Magazine*, and *The Writer*. Learn more at authorvbray.com.

VINITA AGRAWAL

Vinita Agrawal lives in Indore, India. She has authored six books of poetry and edited two anthologies on climate change. She is the recipient of the Jayanta Mahapatra National Award for Literature 2024, the Proverse Prize Hongkong 2021, the Rabindranath Tagore Literary Prize 2018, and the Gayatri GaMarsh Memorial Award for Literary Excellence (USA, 2015). She co-edits the Yearbook series of Indian Poetry in English. She was former Poetry Editor with *Usawa Literary Review*. She has been published in *Global South*, *Pratik*, *Mascara Review*, *Indian Literature*, *Asian Cha*, *Voice and Verse*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, and the *Knopf Newsletter*, among others. She is on the advisory board of the Tagore Literary Prize.

www.vinitawords.com





POETRY

POETICA

TENDER

1.

In Rome, the parks are littered with lovers sprawled across green lawns. Wherever I look, the undulating hills and bodies offer up lessons in physical love. I envy the Romans' abandon, unapologetic beneath a sea of tossed clouds.

2.

Rome is different in other ways, too. Lice run riot, and no one cares. Picking nits is just another form of physical love.

3.

Back in America, the school nurse speaks of "outbreaks," wages holy war against the pests. A gruff high priestess with magnifying glass and comb dipped in borax. Boys and girls bow their heads. Little necks exposed, soft as stems of clover. Anyone caught with a louse or eggs is sent home. There are chemical baths and shaving of heads, rare and violent reckonings.

4.

Tonight, the sun sets over Roman rooftops as I comb my daughter's yellow hair. My mind elsewhere, my husband distant. I sense a seething before I see or understand it.

5.

A quick check and we discover all heads but his are teeming with life. Small, wingless insects— they cannot live without our scalps, require frequent blood meals, die quickly if unfed. There is fragility here, and need.

6.

The Roman mothers laugh and say: To rid yourselves of lice, you must spend your evenings running fingers through each other's hair.

7.

I think of chimpanzees and macaques, am oddly eager to explore this new form of intimacy. I tend to my daughters' heads, an ape alert to movement, plucking nymphs from each blonde strand. An exercise in animal tenderness.

8.

My husband is uninterested in picking through my own greying locks, and I am left to fend for myself. The sun goes down, fat and white as a louse egg. I comb my heavy hair and watch from the roof as lights flicker on in others' lives and windows.



LOOKING FOR SIGNS

previously published by *Wild Roof Journal*, Issue #31 (2025)

The summer I was pregnant—the summer I felt her stir within me like a tadpole in a shallow pool—birds kept flying into the kitchen window, a serious thud with its question of life or death rattling my spine. Usually death. He would come home from work and sweep broken wings into the woods out back while I did my best not to look. Not for the first time, I envied the way he doesn't believe in signs. It was this tenuous: a kick count, a window pane, the silence between heartbeats and before a first cry. In August, the baby came out—so human and alive, with legs ready to take flight.



LEGACY

My mother's ancestors came through
Ellis Island, cached coins for a ticket on a
ship to arrive with hollow hands, changed their
names, fixed a home of grit and stone, their sacrifice
a coal-stained blanket barely keeping heat.

My father's ancestors were conquerors,
bejeweled Spaniards that ravaged the
innocent islands, made bloody the forgotten
tribes turned slaves; a generation harboring
the mined gold of privilege.

I am a daughter writing my way
 into the world with a history
 that doesn't agree with me,
 hopeless
 patchwork of origin, a lineage
 of more shades than I'm told.

I may yet change my name
 when the karma tree's thick sap
 finally runs like water. I'll slip away
 in the flood, my salvation a beacon
 seeping through dark torrents of ink.

WASTING

In the vortex of dishwater, I am reminded of
my mother's hands, tough
and wrinkled and too busy for comfort,
gripped by a house that could never be clean
before her husband came home
in a blur of construction dust.
There's nothing worse than a man
who hates his job.

The shadows travel and fade into hours,
and with each plate, I remember my nana
who was raised to nurture,
never to hunger;
who worked thirty-hour trauma shifts-
jaws deep in blood and bile-
to come home and mince garlic. Fold laundry.
Still in her scrubs.

There's a humming down the pipes:
the echoes of unnamed mothers and daughters
who had to birth and marry and
drown
in perfect order
before my body could.

I hear them scrubbing their lives away:
Early mornings into early mornings.
Husbands yelling at pruned wives.
How they slip away unnoticed,
wasting in the vortex, desperate
to scour the past.

DIRTY DISHES

Nobody ever mentions the dirty dishes.
We remember the empty wine bottles,
sometimes, if only to remember the wine -
ethereal, plum-streaked, like light passed through garnet,
not the fingerprints smudged into the stems
or the wine like wax stamped
into the bottom of a glass,
cracked like mud in the sun.

We only remember Sunday's meal on Wednesday,
when water splashes out of a serving spoon:
sockeye salmon, skin seared crisp, curled at the edges,
steaming with citrus, butter, cracked peppercorns -
the asparagus, tender, tossed with zest and parmesan -
spinach, wilted with balsamic,
whole roasted cloves of garlic crushed
and tossed into everything, brown bits and all.

We remember Monday, the way the rain brings a soup to life,
but what about the two pans soaking in the sink
or the pot full of pots, full of silverware,
cutting knives, and wooden spoons peeling with wet?
What about the oil turning stiff since Tuesday
in an empty can of pinto beans?
What about the milk left
in the bottom of a bowl of mini wheats?

I tell myself this is how my mother did it,
but she never dumped the oil or milk down the drain -
she always seemed better at pushing through.

LATTICEWORK

previously published by *Sky Island Journal*, Issue 32 (2025)

Try as I might, I cannot make pie crust from scratch or time. I go looking for it in the pockets of the sundress I borrowed from my mother and never gave back. They are full of small rocks my daughter has handed to me along the way, like pie weights to keep me from shrinking from what's around me—a little bruise of noticing with every step. And there are so many steps, and missteps, and false starts, the way her labor began and began again. I wore a mask into the hospital and wondered what kind of mother I would be as the hours morphed into centimeters and I became her—at some point, I took the mask off. I have been taking the mask off ever since. Here is my bare face, my bare kitchen counters, and nothing to hand down to my daughter but a dress worn thin from the fullness of my attention and a life so rich we can almost taste it.



PASSING IT ON

My mother runs from grief,
from pain,
looking for bright shiny places
in the tropics,
in a stranger's smile
in talking—a way of speed-walking away.

My mother inherited this relay race
from her parents:
displaced, forced to run, to hide, to dig
their way through a new culture.

After my grandfather's death,
when my grandmother finally sat down
and rested, she watched my mother scurry,
not grasping why.

How could she understand that this anguish
coats genes, a chemical mark
inherited, a circumstance
engraved inside?

My grandmother grieved when they fused
her daughter's ankles to keep
her upright, but it did nothing
to keep her from running.

My mother braces against the pain,
passes off the baton to me, leaves
just as my own ankles start to buckle.

"DOES MENTAL ILLNESS RUN IN YOUR FAMILY?"

previously published by *Querencia Press* (Spring 2024)

No, but my great-grandmother taught herself to swim
just so she could scream underwater.

My aunts (three of them) watered down
the world with bourbon—neat, no ice.

My sister washes her hands 17 times,
prays to the moon goddess, dances in the rain barefoot—
a water nymph.

My mother vomits up panic every morning,
kneels in front of porcelain like some kind of backwards
religion, speaks in tongues to a god that does not listen.
She never learned to swim, never found a way
to water down all that rage. It crawls
up her throat every morning.

And now I can't stop screaming.



MERCY

I am hanging from the clothesline
bracing for a vertiginous

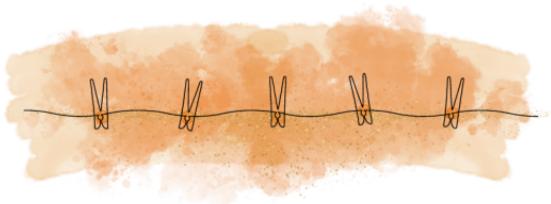
drop

my grimy ankles
are pinned between the towels and jeans
with a hole shaped like Massachusetts

the world is different from this angle:
weeds spread like six point snowflakes
spider webs resemble pin bones
the cat's ears become bat wings

Mama is in the kitchen deadheading an Easter bouquet,
her makeup applied with a surgeon's precision;
she is whispering into the phone,
we have to tell her tonight,
Dad, on the other end of the line,
checks his atomic watch on the 5:40 train

rain taps my skull in morse code:
I a l r e a d y k n o w



FIRST CONFESSIONS

I was sixteen when her mother offered to drive me home,
her name tight around my throat,
the car thick with noxious perfume.
I told myself I was lucky
because the word rape
was alien for a boy like me,
and I, alien to this old country town,
hung like a bloody carcass.
She whispered things in my ear
that sounded like permission,
but the dark,
unfamiliar trees shackled me.

Later, the sun turned my skin to leather.
I carried men on my shoulders
whose names I'd never forget.
Dust in my teeth,
blood in the creases of my palms,
the thrum of helicopters like a ceiling fan
over a deathbed.
When we stacked their rifles in the sand,
the wind sang requiems
through the barrels.

Now I work for the dead.
I zip up polyethylene shrouds,
and lift the slack weight
that used to laugh,
now, only laughs at me.
Death in the morgue is colder
and smells like
stainless steel, formaldehyde, the rotten sweetness
of my sanity, leaving the body
for good.

I dream in three colors:
the red of her lips on my face,
the brown of violent boys like me,
the gray of faces I'll never see alive.
I am stitched together by resilient silences,
my own,
and the ones that follow me home
like stray animals
I can't let in.

THE MELODY OF ANTICIPATION

Driving up New York 17 brings memories
of family trips to the Catskills, of ice skating,
the chlorine of indoor and outdoor pools,

dripping rainbow sherbet in paper cups,
that peculiar smell of kasha varnishkas,
and the comfort of Friday night chicken soup.

But now I drive to my son's at-risk high school
and I'm not aware I'm speeding until a state
trooper pulls me over. I actually thank him

for the ticket. I'm on auto pilot, although I know
that I'll reach a stretch of road
near exit 13 in Wurtsboro

where a view of the mountains
and a body of water makes me gasp, but in a good way
as if I'm connecting to something larger,

it's an artist's date for me to see
the blend of blue sky, green mountain, and water
with a Venus Paradise coloring kit, only this is nature.

I look for it, that moment, the rise up over
the horizon, and there it is
like that angst-filled moment

in the adagio movement
of Rachmaninoff's Symphony No. 2
in E minor, Op. 27, that painful longing

building
building
building

until
it
bursts



into a million sobs,
and I think about all my sobbing the night my son
attempted suicide, the night he was picked up for

burglary, the night he stole my car, the day
he and his friends charged a motorbike to my
credit card. I surrendered both of us to the experts

and I pray now as I drive to join him
in a counseling session that we can find peace.
I'll know it in the way he says, "Hi, Mom."

STROKE

previously published by Proverse Hongkong, #7 (2023)

A morning might begin like this, windows closing to light,
a punch of darkness delivered to the solar plexus of a day.

Your voice barely audible on the phone saying you'd had a fall
that you could barely move, could barely swallow.

I'll be right there. The long, tight grip of rain
on my heart. Six hours of thinking the worst before I reach you.

Kind neighbours have shifted you to the hospital. You're
in the ICU, tubes and wires rudely in and out of your body.

I climb the mountain of the moment. Your eyes brighten when
they spot me. Your gaze mends my fears. Daddy. Our hands
cling.

Tomorrow I'll know a numbness colder than your skin.
A flattening of all things. How will I vocalise the rising rale of
pain?

Loss, a Peepul tree, will take roots inside my chest.
For years it will grow-leaf by leaf.
For years the earth will feel heavier.

A STRANGER YOU USED TO KNOW

Lately, I have started
to visit our old coffee shop,
even though the worry
over running into you has been digging
wrinkles into my brow for years.

They filled in the duck pond out back
and bulldozed the ferns
where we found the old foundation;
you can hardly hear the memory of the blacksmith's anvil
for all of the asphalt they buried it under.
All of the birdhouses have been stripped
from the few elms that remain;
the once-swamp is songless
without the sparrows.

I wonder what I would say to you.

That I am sorry I broke
trying to become something—
how the shrapnel was never meant for you.

That the silver in your hair
suits your worth—
how you always deserved more
than you were given.

That I am visiting places
where I left pieces—
how I am trying to pull myself together.

What do you tell a stranger that you used to know?

Lately, I have been looking
for the statues at the end
of the woods where we used to walk.
Sometimes, I forget to worry
about running into you.

Do you remember the silver arches
crawling up the hill?
Their shadows a child's cloud
cast on the grass.
Magritte's wide smile hanging
between two ash trees?
Do you remember the black swan
readying her wings?

I wonder if you remember me
the same way I remember you.

The way you would laugh
up the hill, running
your fingers over the arches
to see how they moved the sky—
how the clouds could never keep up.

The way you wore a birdhouse
around your neck to keep
a sparrow's song with you—
how the swamp was songless without you.

THE INSTRUMENT

If I could save one thing from a burning building,
your sheet music comes to mind. Notes passed down
from your smoking flat, out the window
and onto the street where they are caught by a fireman,
dutifully, so they can be played again dutifully.
If I could save one thing—the look in your eyes
when you play, like all the songs in the world have come
to you and harmonised, all that noise. Fingerprints
of a human child encased by those of a human man,
layered in the margin—everything I learned from this.
If I could save one thing, it would be the quickest to burn—paper
that has made a person, a composition to remember you by,
now that the instrument is gone.



THE WOMEN'S LOCKER ROOM, 10 AM ON THURSDAY, AFTER WATER AEROBICS

previously published by *Voicemail Poems*

The ladies strut from the shower like it's a locker room catwalk.
Puddles of sagging breast and belly, a generous portion
of doughed and dimpled ass, proud as a freckled brioche in the
bakery window.

This is the lavatorial garden of Eden—who needs a towel?

Over showers and steam, they discuss dinner and dementia.

The rules of pickleball. A recent cancer diagnosis.

The State of the Union.

The conversation follows no clear path, just ebbs and flows
like wisteria.

Like crisp white wine. Like women being women.

I watch this scene unfold from the safety of the toilet stall.

I dress in the shadows of a well-lit room, tighten my corset
of modesty. Like Eve, I ate the apple. I couldn't resist
its siren taste, that seductive sweetness.

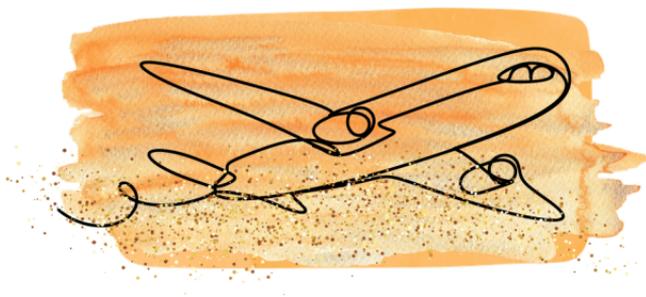
I've been clothed
in shame ever since.

The ladies keep stripping, keep singing, keep sagging
all over the place. And I've been told that getting old
is a death sentence—but damn
if they don't look

alive.

THOUGHTS FROM THE AIRPORT TERMINAL

It's late, and a child is losing his patience, and the father
tries to quell him with a cartoon on a screen, and a woman
talks furiously into her phone, some sort
of passion, the kind of love that sounds like hate
and weighs you, you can tell by the sound alone -
I know nothing else because
she's speaking another language,
and I could have learned other languages,
I could have been a parent, I could have been the girl
sitting across from me with the iron-on patch
that says "Princeton University," or the couple
who brought helmets and ski boots through TSA,
wherever they were going, I am sad to say
I could have been anything I wanted.



TOGETHER

In a southern snowstorm, there are two types
of posts on the neighborhood app. Some
people complain, but more offer to help.
Guys with trucks and snow chains bring people

groceries and firewood. High schoolers
shovel walkways and take siblings sledding.
The family down the street drives
their four wheelers, spread salt and sand.

A woman I follow on Facebook
calls for mutual aid. My feed is full
of GoFundMes, birthday fundraisers,
affirmations. My phone counts my

steps, supports Malala with every mile.
My students Slack constantly, share
Scholarships and pet photos; my friends
send recipes across quarantines, oceans.

My scientist friend shares journal articles.
We breathe the same air in different lungs, influence
weather patterns. We still can't synthesize blood,
so we hold drives on campus.

Students and instructors line up together,
share cookies and coolers of Cokes afterward.
Scars shine on the skin inside my elbow and wrist,
witness to this year's surgeries and infusions.

In the early days of lockdown,
my hometown had a nightly howl;
everyone stepped outside, screaming,
sound echoing across the holler.

First, one free pantry appeared,
then another, two little libraries on our block.
We left out kids' outgrown clothes
on the bench with paint cans, swapped books.

Even when school's canceled, the car coated in ice,
we walk down the greenway, step in shoe
prints already crunched deep in snow, our path
eased by whoever walked this way first.

When it was safest to stay home, we sewed masks
so we could see family, still heard each other every
night, calling all summer across city streets, knowing
the only way to survive is together.



FAMILY JOKE

I dreamed my family spoke Spanish,
that it was all a decades-long joke about
monolingualism supplanting
a rich tamale recipe,
the names of ancestors
rolling off the tongue like troublesome erres,
of corridos and songs from afar,
a rendition of Cielito Lindo
sung at the quinceañera I never had.

I hoped one day you would wake,
and say, *mija*, I knew your pronunciation
was good all along,
take these sounds from my tongue,
use them to grow a dialect.

That dialect would mature,
ripening into rich idioms
about being happy as a worm,
and suddenly I would be, because
we'd be sharing the thing I always wanted.
More than just gossiping about Fulano,
oh, if only English had a brilliant placeholder name,
I greedily asked for a culture that didn't feel borrowed,
like I was sneaking around at my grandparents' house
taking cookies and staring too long at photographs.

Taking the joke farther, we go abroad,
and they think you all speak Spanish,
address you first, fumbling around
until I awkwardly speak up.

This is our order,
we'd like four tickets, please,
we're from the United States,
my family doesn't speak Spanish,
could you say that again,
I'm still adjusting my ears,
and you said something to us in Catalan.

I now become the joke,
going undercover,
wearing Spanish
as if I wore it off the rack,
sometimes rolling up my sleeves
or accidentally staining the new clothing.
But I can walk the streets of Madrid,
happily thinking in English because
the joke hasn't crossed the blood-brain barrier.

PARAKEETS

One Thanksgiving in college, after dessert,
my roommate's grandfather—
a Portuguese man with a smokey
mustache and an old
Toyota—took us to his house
down the street to show me
his backyard of squeaking,
bright birds, smuggled
on planes from other
continents, every color
and sound, darting stars
in mesh cages
by a pool
of sleepy koi fish.
He could not stop smiling
at his own architecture,
his sculpture
of a country, illicit marvels
in the gray Massachusetts cold,
marble faces, citrus beaks, little
songs, back and forth.
They do not know
they are magic.

And every day, among the hoards
of reticent bodies, I try
to be impartial, detached
like Nietzsche and Thoreau, but then
enchanted children like this one, despite
having grown old, show me their deep, skittish
secrets, and I remember
that my heart is quick, full
of sugar, wanting
a menagerie where I can see
through the walls and make nests
from shoelaces, dead branches,
whatever I can find.



NO GREEN FINGERS

Nettles stalk the garden
like a clichéd gumshoe.
The poppy has already
packed up its parachute.
Every dandelion is busy
preparing to hitchhike
elsewhere. What's left?
I open the phone to identify
mallow and sow thistle.
Remnants of bulbs no bigger
than robin chick heads
lie like unexploded mines.
Dug up by hungry squirrels.
We both lust for whatever
the earth can give: some joy,
green and beautiful, strumming
its arpeggios in the warm light.



ILLAROO ROAD

I pass a wombat, legs extended cartoon-stiff.
A red X rendered in spray paint stretches
across its distended stomach, bloated
parody of the mark's meaning: no joey.

The road is lined with corpses, bodies like
upturned side tables, the symbol repeated
down the highway. We have failed this test.
Algebra of decomposition: find for X.

The handbook cautions, *please don't post pictures
of wombats with mange. There is a program.*
No warnings of creatures dropped like stones,
forming craters along the pockmarked road.

I'M MEETING THE EDGE

but there's something
to step over,
to walk around this time—
maybe a street not taken
this time.

I carry one cup
within the rain,
filling—not yet full—
with power and yielding
sometimes help,
sometimes hurt;
the drops that shatter
a creek bed,
the bridge that spans
across its wreck,
the ditch down the road
just a few inches
from overflowing.



FLARE

previously published by *Opt West*, Issue IV (2025)

There's a kind of black
dream that makes everything feel heavy
the sky
the drive
the way I can't recall
the name of my
quote favorite song unquote
the one with the most
gravitational pull.
I floated over
flooded yards over my friends
and landed back
at her house
in some room
alone and waiting to run out
away
no longer floating
waiting to run before someone
finds out I'm here.
And I'll keep running back
over and over
still out of place
still going back there the dream room
to not belong

to not
have the capacity
to remain in my own
expanse where
even the grainy moments
feel full of light
like flashbulbs
finding sunflowers in the backyard
facing each other
sharp in the glow
with just a little shadow
to undistort the sound
of the door shutting behind
and perhaps allow
what is
still
going on
right here
to flare
as color.



INTERCHANGE

My city spread river rock under the overpass,
abandoning fines to dump discomfort and stop
people from camping there.
It didn't work, only prevented
the paramedics from getting their stretchers through on time.
But who's counting? They're ghosts
no one forms tours for, faces pillow creased
by sewer grates, Rorschach blots
arranged in liminal space.
What do you see?
A cardboard sign, and suddenly
you're patting your pockets helplessly
with a mumbled prayer,
There but for some grace go I.

Not really. They wanted to be left behind
(right?), to find their places
where our attention ends,
the closed doorways in dumpster wreathed lanes,
hourly motels with kicked in doors, that space
below the interchange. Driving by
you catch a flash of blue, tied off
tarps and arms protecting against
the elements and remembrance.
Gear grinds tracked arms flexed to catch oblivion
from glass vials that slip to shatter
on that now rocky floor. Be careful
if you find yourself there.
Protect your soles; there's so much here
that pierces.

A CYPRESS TREE REMEMBERS

previously published by Maryland Bards Anthology (2025)

Twists itself up to find
the same shattered sunlight
prisms through the overcast canopy.
Learns to run its roots above
the subsiding soil, still plying
the earth for the richest loam.
Recalls recruiting dense, red rivulets
that ran from its thick middling limb
on the day the white men
brought the accused from town.
They claimed its middle branch
as their own.
Tested it with the full pull-up weight
of a grown, hooded man,
made an oath,
and chose to use baling wire
instead of rope.

WE, THE DEBRIS YOU CAN'T CLASSIFY

They asked me for my documents as my house collapsed. I handed them the silence of the walls, the proof of my queerness in the way my lover and I had hung our photographs inside the cupboard, away from mothers and soldiers. I showed them the broken spine of a Quran next to a copy of Audre Lorde's *Zami*; I showed them the loose floorboard where we kept almond oil, glitter, and grief. I said this was my passport. They said it was debris.

They do not know how to read us when we bleed in more than one language. When I bled, I did so in Arabic and ache, in femme and falafel, in shadow and sudden flare. I bled like a sentence interrupted mid-syntax: "I was—" and then the sirens, then the dust. But the blood remembered the full sentence. The blood always remembers. The algorithm might not, the UN might not, your breaking news might not—but the blood is archiving us. Queer, displaced, and untranslatable.

They call it “regrettable loss.” I call it Tuesday.
They call it “ Hamas hiding among civilians.” I call it
my brother dancing to
Beyoncé while cleaning chickpeas.
They call it “no evidence of genocide.” I call it
waking up to a third WhatsApp
group renamed “Martyrs.”
They call it war. I call it desire interrupted by
debris.
They call it complicated. I call it love.

Do they know what it’s like to kiss someone in a
blackout?

To press your mouth to a body while a drone purrs
like a jealous god above your building?

To bury your face in someone’s chest while
counting, “*One-Mississippi,*
two-Mississippi,” not for the seconds of passion
but for the delay between
missile and impact?

Do they know that we don’t undress anymore—we
evacuate our clothes, like
we evacuate our homes: quickly, quietly, as if
someone might mistake our skin
for resistance?

We, the queers of Gaza, are not allowed to exist—
not in their media, not in their funding appeals,
not in their hashtags. Our love is either erased or
eroticized, depending on the policy paper.

We are too inconvenient to mourn, too complex to name,
too unstrategic to rescue. And yet, we exist. And yet, we
love. And yet, we write poems under siege that taste like
oranges and gasoline.

My friend Rami was a dancer. He used to say the
occupation could take everything, but not the way his
body bent like a question mark asking how much
longer. Rami is dead now. The report said "casualty."
I say limb by limb, dream by dream.
I say: he died with glitter in his lungs
and a TikTok draft unsent.

They do not ask us what gender our ghosts return as.
They do not ask which name we would choose to be
remembered by.
They do not ask what it means to feel safest only in a
body you do not yet have,
inside a nation that does not exist, with a love you have
never spoken aloud.

We are the debris you cannot classify.

We are the future you fear more than rockets.

We are the shame that won't fit in your spreadsheet.

And yes, we are still here.
Yes, we are still loving.
Yes, we are still dangerous.

Laurie Koensgen

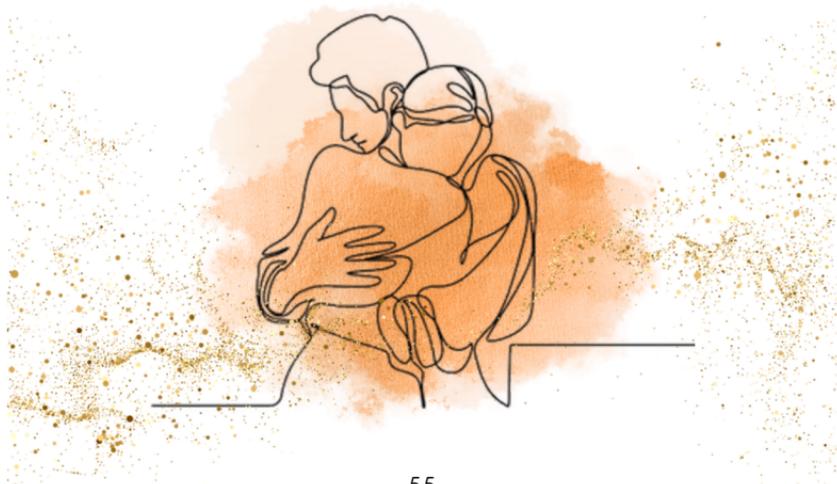
CREED

previously published by *Barren Magazine*, Issue 4 (2018)

We hold
the slender threads we find,
spin and triple-twine them—
mitten strings
from the abandoned nurseries,
tails of ditched kites,
cement-stayed vines.

We take comfort.
We make comforters
of thrift store rags
and bags of broken stone.

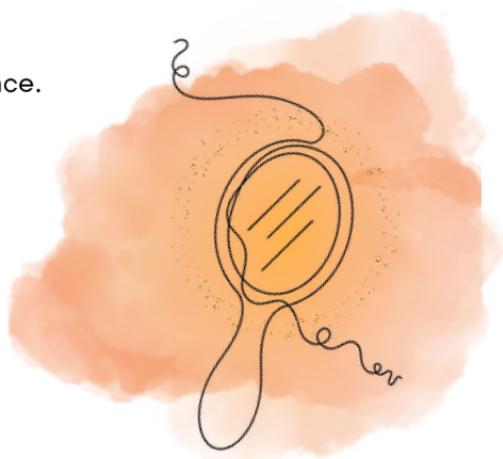
Yet we are doubters, we are debtors
and the silent *bs*
sting our barren arms.



ON NARCISSUS

Skin like spilled milk pooling in a god's palm, a boy carved from river water and glass, all shine and sharp edge and mouth made from swallowing praise. She speaks him into the air until it abandons her, until he hears himself echoed back in her ruin. Voice frays first—peeling at the edges, snapping, a frost-thinned bundle of twigs. Then skin—unspun in trailing curls behind river willows, cracking open in the mouth of a cave. Still praise echoes in wisps on the air, moths spiraling toward light. Her throat is an empty chamber, his body now just cave and bloom. He feasts on reflection, starved cold—the dark hollows of his eyes, the thin reeds of his arms, legs. Still his name falls silent from lips, teeth rattling into the dirt, mute mouthing into mirrors that hear nothing but the shatter of glass. Seven years of lost luck, a hollow edge looking back. Now what is left of the wisps of her lives in every empty thing—drainpipe, cave, canyon, heart, throat.

just the echo
of quiet praise
where her mouth was once.



TO ORCHID (AS IN VERB)

previously published by *The Bombay Literary Review*, Issue 52 (2022)

is to recycle coconut husk
into soil

drink water from vapour
using a stomata straw

live statuesquely
dangling from the ledge of survival

and then, to open up the vortex
of your heart

herald a fine art of apricot tongues
on mauve petals

as though to exhibit colours
was compensation for 'not blooming'

to orchid, is to
mimic narrow, minimal life

yet stay in the game
when roses and violets are wilting

it is to accomplish stunning disclosures
when none are expected

it is to flourish
when nurturers gave you up for dead

to orchid
is to take one by surprise

the way a currency note might
when spotted in a wallet about to be discarded.





PROSE

PROSA

HOW TO EAT LIKE YOU BELONG

previously published by JADE&COMPASS

I. The Velvet Trap

Sitting at the chandelier-lit table, I look down: a silk napkin, too fine for my thrifted skirt, outshining my entire black ensemble. A single stain on that royal cloth could spiral me into panic.

I glance sideways. Colleagues dressed in black are discussing wines that shimmer identically in their glasses. Their voices are smooth, their laughs synchronized. I'm an outlier pretending to round off their curve. I don't understand the joke, but I laugh anyway. I'm trying.

II. The Art of Imitation

"Do you feel the aftertaste, lingering on the back of your tongue?" asks my boss.

"Yes," I lie. "The back of my tongue, yes, I feel it."

I'm tired of wine. Tired of swirling, hoping not to spill.

People are skipping levels across tables, camouflaging strategies, planting promotions.

I'm perspiring under the aircon. I'm new to this, new to this job, new to this country.

I'm starving.



III. Ghosts in the Grains

After toasts and roasts, we progress to actual food. A glimmer of rice catches my hope, something known. Then I see the crab in the center of the table, an unspoken challenge, its claws a threat to decorum, even with the tiny, useless scissors provided. I grew up in a little coastal town in India, and crabs meant the ultimate party. On Sundays, Grandpa would bring them home, alive. We'd play with them for a while, then kill and curry them when we were bored of games. Later, we'd hammer shells on steel plates, excavating the last bit of flesh. A primal joy in the hunt for fresh meat.

At home, I knead rice and yogurt with my right hand into a soft slurry, roll them into little balls, add a bit of pickle for the punch, and pop them into my mouth one by one. I've never learned to eat pretty.

IV. The Masquerade Feast

"Oh, your rice is here," someone says. I shake like I got caught. I don't want to feed the stereotype. So, I don't take the rice. Instead, I reach for the garlic bread. I don't know what to do with garlic bread.

I start adding things to my plate things I don't understand. A spoon of sauce I don't recognize. Something gelatinous. Something cold. Something stiff. Someone looks at my table and says, "That's... interesting."

I carefully avoid the crab. Which is absurd. I love crab. But I don't know how to eat crab pretty.

V. Hunger in the Hollow Room

I try to eat, but the knife and fork slip through my hands. I can't hold on. I can't do this the right way. My food sits untouched. I sit still, trying to swallow the mess I curated to look like someone else. But my stomach knows, it remembers, it's ashamed, not of who I am, but who I wanted to be.

HAT, ID, COMPANION, PEARLS

There are two kinds of people in the world: the ones who make it up as they go along and those who read the instruction manual. I'm definitely an instruction manual kind-of-girl. So, finding that checklist on the clinic's website felt like seeing your middle school schedule for the first time: I may not have wanted to study pre-algebra or Earth science, but at least I knew where to go and what to bring. The clinic's list spells out what you'll need for the procedure, like maxi-pads for the trip home, a heating pad for the discomfort, and Advil or Tylenol for the pain. Maybe a book for the wait and snacks for afterward. Checking off each entry feels like progress. Marking each box brings me closer to being done.

Hat or sunglasses

You may want to bring a hat or sunglasses, the website says, as if I'm planning a beach vacation. When I call the clinic to make the appointment, the scheduler reminds me again about these items. The sidewalk around the facility is public property, she says, and there may be protesters. Protesters. I manage to say thanks, hang up the phone, and slide down the wall to the floor. I am not going to let the threat of people with nothing better to do than walk in circles make me cry.

I've worked too hard over the past few weeks since I took the test for something to go wrong now. I've pushed off the panic rising inside me, stayed upbeat with Ray so he wouldn't change his mind about paying for something I can't afford, and kept my voice steady on the phone with my mother to prevent her scary intuition from kicking in and undermining my plans. I've worked even harder at my job to make sure I can get next Tuesday off.

I accept these constraints of women's work, of the tasks that line up before me like precarious dominoes, ready to teeter and fall at the slightest misstep. But protesters? They have no right to intrude on my plans, my day, my body. There's no room for them to insert more fear or emotion into this process. I remind myself to keep my head down and put one foot in front of the other until this is over.

Still, the woman's words echo in my mind, and a quiet scoff escapes my lips. Pfffft. Hats and sunglasses are for movie stars trying to pass as regular people. They're not for regular people trying to pass as invisible.

Tuesday arrives. My friend Serena drives me to the clinic over an hour away, distracting me with bright chatter as we go. When we pull in, a throng of demonstrators encircles the parking lot, looking like they're ready to pounce. I grab the dash, anxiety flooding my body. They're more frightening in person than in the abstract, and I'm shaken. Serena strokes my hair. She knows we can't sit here discussing options. There are no options—I'm running out of time.

She opens the car door. Their chanting, muffled from inside the sedan, hits us full-on. I wish now I'd brought something, anything, to cover my eyes and block their offensive slogans on handmade signs and the disgusting, graphic photos blown up one thousand percent for maximum, gut-wrenching impact. A man waves a Bible in my face and calls me white trash and other things.

Sunglasses and a hat, the woman said so casually. As if accessories could safeguard me from these people. As if I haven't already armored up enough to shield my soft underbelly from the world's cruelty. I falter. Maybe I can't do this.

Sensing my wobble, Serena pulls me close and steers me toward the entrance. A patient-escort wearing a hi-vis safety vest guides us past the mob. We enter the clinic, and the door closes on the ugly scene behind us. I am here.

Government ID

It's chilly inside, and the smell of burnt coffee is overpowering. It must have been sitting out all day. I am welcomed by the woman at reception, who asks for my photo ID. My hands shake like a cartoon character, and fishing my license from my wallet seems nearly impossible. The wallet is cheap, probably not even real leather, despite the street vendor's assurances, highly offended I would even question him. I should have realized that indignation on his part was not a substitute for the truth. I should have realized a lot of things.

I bought it anyway, this white wallet, on that shimmering summer day in the city with Serena by my side. The sky was so brilliant, with a blue so deep, it was hard to know if you were looking a few hundred feet into the atmosphere or all the way to infinity.

But now it's November, with heavy clouds hovering low over bare trees and the stitching on my wallet unraveling. The white leatherette is dingy, streaked with blue from where I carry it in the pocket of my jeans. You know the way your nails get rimmed with indigo from new denim? You think you must be freezing cold because of those purpling fingertips, then realize you didn't wash before wearing as directed. My wallet looks like a thief who robbed a bank and got a little inky when the money dye activated.

I feel like a bank robber, too, seeing eight hundred-dollar bills fresh from the ATM peeking out of the billfold. I stuffed them in there after Ray handed them to me, quick before he could renege. They look so crisp and out of place in this lousy wallet, distracting me from pulling my license out of the special pocket with its clear plastic window.

The slot is too tight, and the license slips again from my clammy grip. I flash a remorseful smile at the woman behind the desk. She might be more sympathetic if I weren't holding up the line. I wipe the damp from my hands and finally release the ID from its place.

She gives a confirming glance at my picture, making me restate my name, Mattea Harris, and recite other identifiers, my address, and date of birth. For the first time, I notice under *Sex* it shows the letter *F*. Apparently, I have flunked, and now I'm here. Her fingers fly across the keyboard, long painted nails clacking the sum of me into the clinic's computer. One nail tip has broken off, a bare, short misfit among the other fancy ones. I can relate.

Insurance and fees

Longnails asks for my insurance information. My job doesn't offer medical coverage, but even if they did, I wouldn't use insurance for this. I don't need Big Brother knowing my personal business. I tell her I don't have insurance. She gives me a slow blink and says, *That'll be seven hundred and fifty dollars.*

I know the cost from the website, but I count out the bills anyway, in case they have multiplied somehow. Seven-fifty is about what I make in tips during a good month at Fiorella's.

When Ray handed me the money for this fifteen-minute procedure, all I could see was a month's worth of delivering hot plates stacked three deep up my arm, of uncorking countless bottles of wine, of working doubles five days a week. How all that work equates to one visit to the clinic, I can't imagine. But here I am.

I pass the hundreds to Longnails. She gives me a tight smile, then counts the bills in slow motion, doing a shuffle-snap with each one before handing me the change. I jam the crumpled bills into my wallet. One of the twenties is held together by tape that has turned brown, with "Happy Birthday, Stan!" written across the president's face. Jackson. Johnson. I don't care enough to know which one.

A nurse will call me when it's time for the consultation, the woman says. In the corner of the waiting room, I spy Serena with her feet propped on a low table, staking out our territory, and I settle in next to her. If we were in a bar or on a bus, we'd check out the people around us and make up stories about them. But today is not a day for games, and those stories would not be happy ones, no matter how far our imagination could take us. I wrap my coat around me with a shiver and put my head on her shoulder. My empty stomach complains about missing breakfast and lunch. We wait.

Companion to drive you home

If you opt for sedation, you will need a companion present to drive you home. I was surprised to learn I couldn't come here by myself. Not that I'm not happy to have Serena next to me; in fact, I never would have made it through the clinic door without her.

Ray was upfront from the beginning, saying he wouldn't come. He'd pay for it, but sure as hell wasn't going to be present for what I was planning to do. I expected that reaction from him, but part of me wished he were the kind of boyfriend who'd be here holding my hand. I wanted him to be a man who'd scrunch up his eyes, holding back tears of joy, when I told him the news. Instead, Ray winced. It was one of the signs that things between us were going south, signs I ignored because he was fun and funny and didn't treat me poorly. That wince, though—it was trying to tell me something.

In his place, Serena is my companion. I'm grateful for her support, although it's hard not to keep looking for an underlying *I told you so* even though she's being so nice. She's never been a fan of Ray. Still, she has shown up for me today as my best friend, my chauffeur, and my smoother of panicky feelings. If only I could do something special for her. I wish I could be more than a lump sitting here in a daze, but it's taking every bit of my strength just to remain upright.

If all goes well, maybe I'll be entertaining on the way home. Years ago, when I had my wisdom teeth out, the dentist sedated me for the procedure. My teeth were so bad, roots going every which way, the dentist said he had to put me under to properly pull the childhood remains from my mouth. The drugs threw me for such a loop, I don't even remember driving home with my mother—although I wish I did. My mom still loves to tell how I was a total laugh riot, saying all sorts of ridiculous things and waving at every car we passed like an imbecile.

I'd love to feel that kind of giddiness when this is over and make Serena laugh at my antics. But under the weight of this day, I just want drugs that will wipe away every scrap of memory. *How long until it's over*, I ask her. She gives a shrug and a small smile and tells me everything will be just fine.

Ray said the same thing to me almost three months ago, but he was wrong. We went upstate to his friend Billy's house to watch the Perseid meteor shower. The sky was so clear, and I made a wish on every falling star—naïve wishes, hopeful wishes, and some plain stupid wishes. If only I'd known what to really wish for, maybe I wouldn't be in this waiting room now.

His friend's place was cozy and romantic. We drank his wine and sat out all night, wrapped in musty quilts on the dewy grass, staring up at the dome of the sky. When we woke in the morning, I realized I'd forgotten my pills. Ray said not to worry, I could double up the next day when we got home. Everything will be just fine, he said. A few weeks passed, and the next thing I knew, I was late. It was not fine.

Wear comfortable clothing

A nurse calls me to the lab for a blood draw. The sleeves of my sweatshirt are stretched and loose and slide up easily past my elbow. She winds rubber tubing around my arm and ties it off with a snap. Tapping around the crook of my elbow, she sings softly under her breath, *Come out, come out, little veins*. She locates a good one and sticks the needle in. I look the other way, marking time by the clicking of tubes being attached then removed from the line. She undoes the tourniquet, takes out the needle, and wads cotton on the spot, telling me to apply pressure. Yanking off a bit of surgical tape, she secures the cotton ball. This part is done, and I head back to Serena.

After a while, I am called for a consultation with the nurse practitioner. She talks about options, as she is legally obligated to do. I can't listen. I don't want to hear anyone's suggestions, whether well-meaning or state-mandated. She says I'm required to have an ultrasound, intravaginally. I try to expel that word from my head.

In the next room, someone is crying.

Another woman in scrubs takes me for the ultrasound. She gives me a paper cover and, before going out of the room, instructs me to strip from the waist down. My leggings and underwear peel off easily, and I throw them on the chair. I climb on the table and cover myself with the paper, scrunching it around me. When she comes back, I am zoning out, staring at a faded poster of blue sky and puffy clouds affixed to the ceiling. The wand is cold going in, and suddenly, there is a *shhkhah-shhkhah-shhkhah* sound, which, she says, is the heartbeat. It's much faster than my own, although I can feel mine speeding up, whether in panic or recognition, I don't know.

An image appears on the screen, and she asks if I want to look. Can anyone resist? If only I could. Thankfully, the image is grainy and hard to decipher. She lines up four white plus signs in a square and snaps a screenshot. The wand is removed, the plastic covering discarded, and the screen clicked off. She gives me a towelette to clean myself, pulls something off a small printer, and places it, the image from the sonogram, on the counter. *In case you want to keep this*, she says, and leaves the room so I can dress.

How many women cry at this point? How many women rip up the image? How many women are so numb they don't even know what to do? I wonder which woman I am. I pick up the printout with tentative fingers and return to the waiting room. Serena's face crumples when I hand it to her.

An hour or so later, they call my name.

It's time.

My Grandmother's Pearls

Walking down the hallway, I think about what would have happened if I did this at home. There would be no protesters. No hour-long drive, no waiting room, no ultrasound, no doctor or nurse. There would be no one's judgment, just some pills. But for me, those benefits pale in comparison to the surgical efficiency and anesthetic oblivion the clinic offers. I don't want to be alone or awake through it all. I am glad of my choice. I'm glad I have a choice.

I repeat the steps with the leggings, the underwear, and the paper cover. I lie down on the table, and someone pushes up my sleeve to insert the IV. As I count backward, I reach for my grandmother's pearls, the pearls she left me in her will. The checklist warned against bringing valuables, but like the hat, sunglasses, and insurance suggestions, I ignored the advice.

Her pearls are the most valuable thing I own, and I wasn't about to go anywhere without them. They're my talisman and constant reminder of my grandmother's love. I pull them out over the neckband of my sweatshirt so the doctor might see I'm actually a nice girl despite the situation I find myself in.

I start to fall under the spell of sedation, and tears slide out from either side of my eyes. They drip onto the table's paper cover with a magnified plop as Joni Mitchell sings to me from a deep fold inside my brain about being sad and sorry but not ashamed. Everything goes blank.

Matty. Wake up, Matty, a voice repeats. My eyes flutter. Groggy, it takes me a moment to figure out where I am. There are women in old lounge chairs around me, some asleep, some waking up. Someone rubs my arm. It's Serena. *You did great, Sweetie. It's over,* she says. Her words carry no hint of reproach, and I am relieved. Soon, a nurse says we may go.

Serena helps me dress, then cocoons me into my coat. We exit the clinic and cross the empty parking lot just as the streetlights come on in the cold twilight. I assume the protesters have gone home to say grace over their evening meal. At least we don't have to fight our way out of here.

Gratitude washes over me, and I am surprised to feel a lightness in my body. I know now I was never going back to Ray. The cluster of stardust I carried here, tucked gently in my womb, is gone. And in its place, new hope has taken root.



GAZA, WHERE THE SKY IS AN EYELID THAT REFUSES TO SHUT

There exists a strip of land where the ground does not hold bodies—it memorizes them. A place where lullabies are written in rubble, and the alphabet is carved on broken chalkboards with the bluntness of missiles. Gaza is not a name—it is an artery severed mid-prayer. A wound that continues to bleed even when bandaged by silence. It does not ask to be described. It asks to be listened to.

Gaza is a child too tired to cry, too learned to hope. Her hair is made of wire and smoke; her laughter, when it slips out, sounds like shattered minarets. She wears anklets of spent casings and bracelets of torn threads that once were flags. Her dolls have no arms, her alphabet starts and ends with "Ya Shahid." Every street bears her footprints—half-erased, dust-kissed—still running, still running.

If cities were daughters, Gaza would be the one punished for breathing. She does not menstruate; she miscarries dreams. Every month. Beneath her charred pajamas, she conceals a map of scars. Her eyes hold the geography of siege. Her blood type is "O for Occupied." The only milk she receives is from mothers who ration grief in teaspoons. Her lullabies are hummed by women cradling empty blankets. Her toys detonate.

When the world speaks of Gaza, it speaks in diplomatic fog. But Gaza speaks in crescendos. In the thunder of a child's hunger. In the whisper of an unfinished homework still buried under ash. Gaza's language is not Arabic or English—it is breath held under water, it is hands outstretched from rubble, it is ink mixed with dust and bone.

The children of Gaza do not dream like other children do. Their dreams are tactical, weary. They dream of sky holes large enough to let hope fall through, of fathers returning whole. They do not draw suns—they draw exits. A girl named Ayah once drew wings on her back with coal and whispered to her mother, "if I can't leave, maybe I can fly."

Every morning, Gaza braids her dead into her hair and dares to wake up again. The sun rises not out of duty, but out of defiance. The light does not shine—it staggers, it limps. Gaza has no schools with flagpoles—only blackened iron rods piercing the air like accusations. Yet children still show up. With satchels made of stitched tarpaulin, they learn subtraction not as math but as a system of survival: four cousins minus two, equals grief's remainder.

When Gaza prays, her voice is sand-scratched but deliberate. Not upward, but inward—because even heaven seems embargoed. Her children know not to count stars but craters. Not to wish for birthdays but breath. They play not with kites, but with gravity. Their bodies are not resilient—they are rehearsed.

A boy named Samir once told a journalist that the sky is not blue here—it is black, except when it's red. And when it is red, you do not look up. He was eight. He had memorized coordinates. He knew the time lag between the whistle and the collapse.

He could differentiate between the drone's hum and his mother's heartbeat. Samir now lives in photographs. But photographs do not hold warmth.

The sea near Gaza used to be a cradle. Now it returns things. Arms, shoes, pacifiers. It does not soothe; it confesses. And yet, on the shore, children still draw castles with fingers that know what exodus feels like. They crown each turret with a stone—not to adorn, but to remember.

Ask a child in Gaza what freedom is and they will point to silence. Ask what silence is and they will say: what happens when the drones reload. Ask what peace is and they may say: the pause between the blast and the scream. Ask what childhood is and they will not answer. Not because they don't know, but because it has no translation here.

Even the olives refuse to ripen in Gaza without mourning. The trees bow not to the wind, but to absence. The houses here do not fall—they are taught how to kneel. Yet Gaza does not go down without writing her name in the dust, without stitching her children's names into the cloth of the world's conscience.

If Gaza were to write a letter, it would not begin with "dear." It would begin with a siren. It would end with a child's crayon—a red scribble—and the word "here." Just that. Here. She is here. And her children are not just metaphors.

They are witnesses.

They are the living verse.

They are the poem the world is too frightened to write.

STATUE MAKER

previously published by *The Matador Review* (2018)

Best give it a think, says Mum, on the day you can no longer dress yourself: Which shall it be, sitting or lying? Upright or reclining? “Bloody hell, Mum!”—your neck too rigid now to turn your face. But she has a point, hasn’t she? You’d best choose before your body chooses for you, encasing you in stone. It’s the one thing you can control, after all: in which position to solidify. Your second skeleton started forming ten years ago, at age eight, playing statue maker—blimey, the irony—your neighbor Helen flinging you to the ground so hard your arm snapped, the injury triggering your first flare-up. It cemented your tendons in new plates of bone like an inner cast. Doctors, clueless, diagnosed some fluke infection. But two years later, the new lump formed on your back and Mum, reckoning cancer, whisked you straight to hospital. Half your back now a tortoise shell from that bloody, useless biopsy.

So now you must decide how to fossilize—your forever pose. Pros and cons either way. Sitting, of course, is better for attending your sister’s ballet recitals, family weddings and such. But you’ve never been one to sleep sitting up—even with pills—so you’re basically signing up for a lifetime of insomnia.

Crikey, look out the window, there’s that wanker Clive in Helen’s garden, his grubby mitts tickling her tummy. Like he did to you that time he realized: fancy that—her arms are frozen at the waist, ace! Though he’d gotten a good bollocking from his stepdad after, it apparently hasn’t discouraged him from taking his grubby mitts elsewhere.

Might be a relief, truth be told, to just lie down; to say sod all the ballet recitals and weddings, sod being stared at.

You'll ask your friends. Your two best friends who form a human shield when you go out for walks, cushioning you from hurtling skateboarders and cyclists. Your two best friends who smuggle Bacardi into your room and do your nails and hair and dance (oh-so-carefully) your arses off to Beyonce.

"Pity you can't freeze this way," squeals one, smacking her own bum.

"Shame your hands are already stiff," grins the other, "or you could've been like"—jutting her middle finger. The three of you howling (ever-so-gently) your heads off.

And you know you'll still laugh like this one, two, three years from now, when they visit from university, even if through your locked jaw; they'll still bring Bacardi, help you drink it with a straw.

Right, then, Mum; you've decided. No lying down. No sitting up. The lady prefers to stand, thank you very much.

You shall be draped each morning in the trendiest of clothes, stationed in the front window perfectly composed.

Piss off deathbed rigor mortis. Sod you wheelchair insomnia.

You'll metamorphose into a mannequin.

AN IDYLIC LIFE

An unassuming house on a short street. Three large oaks lining the front yard. Grand, welcoming porch. Let's zoom in, behind the closed door and curtained window. Zoom further in still, to the bedroom with the narrow bed. There we see Father. Head bent, kneeling beside the bed. What occurred before this moment? Perhaps he was in prayer, a silent meditation between him and a higher power, the red leather-bound Bible the instigation for this holy moment. Or perhaps it was merely the realization another hangover was coming. Nausea, headache, the usually dulled emotions bubbling to the surface. Whatever occurred beforehand is now irrelevant as we see the tears reach that point on the jaw where they tip under and course down the neck, wetting the collar of his button-up plaid shirt. Now unimportant as he rises from beside the bed and reaches for the doorknob. As he opens the door with renewed purpose.

Watch now as we pan to the family room, Daughter and Son in stocking feet, playing quietly while trying not to disturb Father. We see them, four and five years old, already attuned to the change in atmosphere, to the quiet snick of the door opening, the slight tremble of the wood floors under walking feet. Barbie and G.I. Joe in suspended animation, Daughter and Son turn to see Father in the doorway, tears still streaming. They listen as he promises to stop drinking. He means it this time. Disbelief, hope, fear, every unnamed emotion boiling up inside. They get up and follow as Father pulls bottles from beneath the sink, the cabinet over the stove, the back of the coat closet, the garage refrigerator. It is a parade of three as they ferry whisky and wine to the small bathroom, a small liquor store assembled on the pink tile.

Watch now as Father takes the first bottle, hesitantly at first. In a triumphant upside-down splash, the red wine flows down the tub drain. Daughter and Son awaken from stunned silence and begin to dance. Their stocking feet leave the ground, they float across the tile floor, uncapping bottles, pulling out corks as Father baptizes the pipes in past mistakes, regrets, future promises. Daughter and Son join Father in this jubilation, a moment of redemption baptized in tears of joy. The bathroom becomes a palace of Hope. Father, exhausted and spent, hugs Daughter and Son before returning to his narrow bed.

Watch now, as Mother enters the house from the garage into the family room. Back from the grocery store, the few dollars left in the bank spent on ingredients meant to last until next payday. Maybe she circled the block, giving herself two more minutes of peace, solitude. No radio, no chattering Daughter full of 100 questions, no Son demanding more G.I. Joes for more war games, no Father. No Father. No Father. Perhaps she drove to the park and sat watching the families. Parents watching Children play on the slides, Fathers pushing Daughters *higher! higher!* on the swings, Mothers dusting the sandbox off of Sons.

Zoom in and see tears crest the slim jawline, coat the throat, dampen the collar of her colorful blouse. Zoom in farther and see the pieces of her heart trying to knit back together, the air in her lungs heavy. Only this was before, and we are now. And now we see Daughter and Son dance around Mother, their stocking feet not touching the carpet. Their throats are full of Miracle. Their eyes glistening because they don't have the right words. And Mother begins to scream *noooooo! noooooo!* above the din. It won't take, it never takes hold, this drunk sobriety.

Mother counts the empty bottles and anger mixes with sadness. Her exhaustion mixes with the loss of hope. The money to replace the whisky and wine takes the shape of wings. They fly in front of Mother as she walks through the house, wood floors trembling under feet which move slowly to the bedroom. Hand reaches for the doorknob, door opens. Snores drift all the way to the family room. Daughter and Son cry. Mother cries.

Watch as we zoom out. Give them space to sort through this moment. Let them sit with their various forms of grief. This is not why we are here, voyeuristic vultures. There is no lesson to be learned. No moral to this story. Perhaps there will be a happy ending, a taking hold. Maybe it will end as these things usually do. We close the door behind us as we leave. We watch as the squirrel prances from oak to oak. We enjoy the tranquility of the quiet, short street, the idyllic scene before us.



EIGHT HUNDRED EXQUISITE SQUARE FEET

I live in a condominium the size of an Ellio's pizza box. I am a woman of untold wealth. My mother is still speaking to me. Every morning, we look at each other on the screens of handheld, electronic candy bars. We each hold our phones with one hand and gesture wildly with the other. Every time my mother and I look at each other, all of our Sicilian ancestors gallop down our forearms simultaneously. My condo is big enough for all of them.

I am a woman of untold wealth. I control the guest list. My bed accommodates one woman and two cats who are all thirty feet tall on the inside. We sleep under a washable object that is actually called a "comforter," because sometimes God does not feel like being subtle. It is covered in outrageous begonias. We do not wake with a jolt.

My bathroom is a sovereign nation. No Joint Chiefs sign off on my antiperspirant administration. I am a woman of untold wealth. I spend the money I earn at the cat shelter on cylinders of candy water. Other boudoirs hang thick with Chanel and Tresor. I fancy giggly mists with names like Cupcake Ballerina and Snickerdoodle Fantasy. I am old enough to know how I want to smell.

A man with a twirly mustache still sends me pop psalms. I have not seen him since my church years. His chest pocket bulged with cardboard squares. It was never empty, no matter how many he gave away. He did not know what they said inside until someone popped them open. He did not peek. He does not ask me questions. Sometimes he sends ten pop psalms at a time. This requires significant postage. Sometimes two in a single batch say that goodness and mercy are still speaking to me. I am a woman of untold wealth.

I have my original last name back. I am out of practice pronouncing it, so I say it out loud. Nobody pulls off the comforter. The cats no longer cower. There are no more executive orders against Coconut Whimsy or airtight arguments for why I should not speak to my mother so often. My hair accepted my apology and grew long again. I am a woman of untold wealth. If I post pop psalms on the refrigerator, they will still be there in the morning.

I am not lonely in the pizza box. Generations raft down my veins and stay for dinner. My shrink-wrapped selves return to their full size when I unpack them from storage. They are all still speaking to me. I wear palazzo pants covered in pineapples. I thaw frozen food and eat it in front of the television. Last night, I watched a deaconess from across the ocean declare that my mind is palatial. I am a woman of untold wealth.

LET THE SUN SET

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At around three o'clock in the afternoon, the dogs start to get antsy. Small, short yips drift up from the yard, insistent demands of 'Don't forget us.' If you venture downstairs, paws dance expectantly at the door. The land we live on changes with the seasons, though not with lost leaves and winter clothes. Here, the sugar cane that covers the district as entirely as sunlight is either growing and devouring, or cut, and being devoured. But no matter how long the days are, what time of year it is, no matter that there are fewer of us to see it, there is a moment when this land takes a breath.

Marnie is our old girl, a thirteen-year-old cattle dog with a thick South Australian coat and a face that has long since become soft and grey and startled. She's fallen out of one too many utes to walk without a limp, seen too many winters to be with us much longer, but still she rises from her secluded napping spots, eyes bright and snout pointed as the sun descends. She knows what time it is.

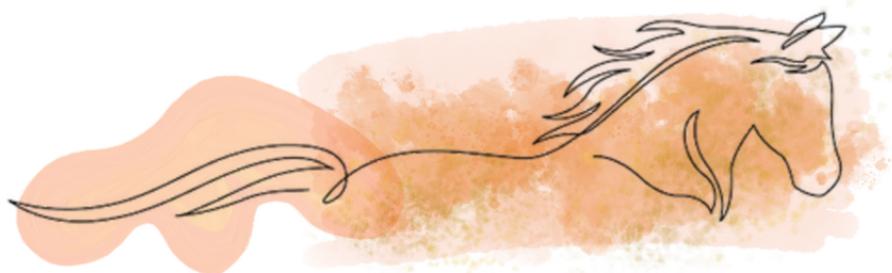
Flash, a kelpie-collie cross, who is two-years-old and entirely insane, wanders around on his running lead; slim, clever, and bossy. A true athlete, his legs and chest are strong, his attention span runs too short for real work. He is a product of a farm without sheep, a hundred years of breeding, and men with soft hearts.

Lulu is another beast onto herself. A kelpie rescued from a town house, she is vigilant, insecure, and devoted. Her introduction demanded a rigidity of routine. She is too high strung for my parents to ever give her enough to do, but is too difficult to be a herder. She is the time keeper, knowing their long day on the lead will soon pay off.

The sun lowers, the heat slowly, sluggishly begins to pack up its things and this, dear reader, is what they are waiting for.

Gumboots are donned, noses twitch with the wind, phones are patted in back pockets, and Flash is off as soon as the leash is unclipped from his collar, the creek his destination. He's well-behaved enough to wait on the bank, but if you call out to say 'In ya get!', you'll hear the mighty splash of a dog obsessed. Lulu is our lifeguard, with some bone-deep hatred of anyone getting in the water, herding Flash away from his sunset dive bombs. Oftentimes, she'll end up in there with him, her disdain washing off a little each time. Marnie will lumber in for one lap and struggle to get up the bank, which is where the gumboots—relics from the time of horses standing on toes—prove useful.

For nine years, alongside the dogs in their multitudes, I could stand on our verandah and call to the horses, my horses, out in the paddocks between the house yard and the road. They'd raise their heads from their grass, wander over if they smelt any apple, wander off if they worried they'd soon be having to do something even closely resembling work.



When my young girl Pure Blonde died of a panicked heart attack, it was a harsh north Queensland spring day, except that spring doesn't exist up here. We had to bury her quickly in the heat. The young stock horse had waited in the paddock for Mum—chest heaving from some unknown and sudden respiratory problem—to show her something was wrong. Blondie was never a modest horse but illness humbled her, quietly confident in the hope that we could fix it. When it became clear that neither my mum nor the vet could, some ancient, instinctual switch flipped inside her. She lay down and died, her body making that final decision for her. I wasn't even home when it happened.

Crouched where she lay amongst the crackling, knee-high grass, trying to keep the ants from climbing on her, I realised this land—the land my father has worked since he was born on it, that his father worked until he died on it—is made for this. For taking us back, once we're done with ourselves.

We threw her headcollar down next to her, where Dad had laid her in the grave, a blanket over her face. 'She was loved,' their placement says, 'and now she is free.' We stood together underneath that cruel, unbearable sun in that unbearable moment that must, inevitably, be borne.

But now, at dusk, the sun is kinder in the fact that it is gone. The sea almonds my mother planted in rows out front of our house a few years before stand like silhouetted angels, 'Do not be afraid!'. The dogs crash through the mulch that sticks to their slowly-drying coats and a simple shout of "Well, where is it?" sends them scurrying off to locate a throwable object. If it is the crushing (the harvest), smoke from the cane fires hangs in the air, dirtying the sunset. Ash lazily spins down from where the breeze has ferried it and sticks it to anything damp. Our winters are warm, but our land is covered in black snow.

The farm, the sheds, are finally quiet. The found ball is flung, caught, dropped, stolen, chewed, and deposited back to us. Lulu has her own toy to keep everything fair, a steadily decaying crocodile which squeals when caught between her teeth. Mum and I will keep them entertained until Dad or my brother Daniel roll in, or the wind carries their voices over from the sheds and the dogs shoot off to circle them instead. They are working dogs by breed and the heavy boots and heavy trucks of our workers mean they take priority, as much as the dogs love us. The mozzies come in and we sit in their company, all together on the tiles of the veranda.

The veranda is routinely occupied during two events: these evening rituals, and the occasional barbeque, when Dad sets up his humble Webber, Great Northern in hand, talking sugar prices or politics with whoever is accompanying him. This used to be mostly my Pumpa, my mum's dad, until cancer took first his prostate and then the rest of him. I must point out that the immediate aftermath of death is not the only type of unbearable moment, but it is the most easily diagnosable. We forget, too often, what comes after, what a horrific thing death is in the rear view mirror. Like when it was both Christmas of 2019 and three months to the day since his passing. It was hot. It was always hot. It was just my brother down drinking beer with Dad, upwind of the smoke and spitting oil of the grill. Upstairs, our lunch table was one of five. I will never again hear Pumpa tell the story of how he and his siblings would corner and ride the half-wild horses in a paddock near the immigration camp they grew up in. How once a stallion jumped clean over their heads to escape.

It was Christmas and he was not there for me to squish into the armchair with. We held hands and said grace and bore the moment, passed the veggies and poured drinks. Daniel sat next to Nana rather than at the end of the table.

One of us told the story about the horses and the siblings, instead. One of us attempted to replicate how Pumpa used to swear in Lithuanian. One of us slipped food to the dogs sitting under the table.

Nana stayed longer because she had no one to go home to. Their landline voicemail was still in Pumpa's voice. I can't remember his voice when I am not listening to it. I remember every steady walk I took with him and how they got slower; how I stood next to his bed in the hospital after they took him off oxygen; how all he wanted was to get up, to drink water, to go home; how I had to keep him in bed; how I could not bear it but did; how all I could do for him was dip a sponge into some lemon water I had squeezed myself, wet his mouth with it, and hold his strong, scarred hands.

My father's hands that are, for now, strong, hurl the ball over and over again amongst the trees. Now and then he will throw a short one for Marnie, and she will scrabble for it and might even catch it like she used to with all of them. Marnie and Flash both wander in and out of the sprinkler, hungry for the cool water on their bellies. Lulu is too pragmatic to revel in such simple joys and demands Dad's eyes upon her. He says he will never get another dog because he cannot bear to lose any more, but I know he could not live without one. Daniel's hands that are, for now, strong, haul Flash onto his shoulders where he is content to stay, a true dog and his master.



From where we are sitting, I can see the sapling Leichardts as they sway over the horses' graves—that will one day give them shade. Two of them rest down there since my old boy, Prince, joined Blondie a few months later. All the Leichhardts I have seen in horse paddocks have the leaves stripped off them as high as a stretched neck can reach, and I'm sure Blondie is spitting that we never planted any for her while she was alive. My mother's hands that are, for now, strong, guide the wheelbarrow between the saplings, or haul the hoses around between them, or point out a new sparrow nest hidden within the branches. Like our grief, the trees are still young; still bending in the wind, which Mum says gives them stronger roots; still learning how to be alive. Unlike our grief, they will one day die.

But, all unbearable moments inevitably lead back to this. This is our dinner table, our nightly Bible reading. Having a drink of whatever alcohol is in the fridge, speaking in and around and over each other as we do. The cane is cut, or lanky; the air is humid or a little less humid; we are fighting, or not; we are happy, or not.

But the dogs are here, and so are we.

INTO THE VOID

previously published by *Indie It Press* (2018)

Despite echoing splashes and the dive team's buzzing chatter, the quiet of the cenote was almost impenetrable. For the past hour, the six had been able to keep their heads above the surface and reserve their air supply, but the deeper they traveled into the underwater cave, the lower the cavern ceiling had become. Now, there was only a foot of space between the clear, abyssal water and crumbling limestone.

Aliyah waited for their lead, Rafael, to instruct them to get ready to submerge for the scuba portion of their expedition. Her sight lined up with the direction they would be continuing down, wondering if her eyes would ever be able to adjust to the darkness.

A flash of light burst from behind her and briefly illuminated the wet, jagged stalactites. Aliyah's chest tightened and she twisted her neck to find the source.

Paloma, the videographer and photographer, was behind her, finger ready on her camera. "Sorry, I was testing the flash," she said.

"You scared me."

"Nervous?" Paloma fidgeted with a few settings. "I thought you did this all the time."

"I'm focused." Aliyah adjusted the neoprene under her chin. "It's definitely my oldest case."

Paloma offered a smile, even though the scuba mask stunted her cheeks from rising. "Everything will be fine," she said. "Just give me good footage and don't break anything."

"Ok, everyone," Rafael's voice boomed against the low, craggy ceiling. "Here's where we all go under. We still have an hour there and back to go, so let's stick together and keep talking at a minimum to conserve our oxygen."

With her hand grazing against the rough rock above her, Aliyah steadied herself as she turned on her oxygen tank. She glanced at the rest of her team, but her eyes couldn't help but notice how the downcast light from Paloma's camera caught the pedaling movement from her fins. Aliyah's eyes followed the path of light straight below them, thinking perhaps she'd see the floor or the glistening scales of fish, but the illuminated stream continued, uninterrupted.

"You good?" Paloma asked.

"Yeah," Aliyah answered. Even in the low light, she could see Paloma's huge brown eyes and where her mascara had caught in her waterline. Her mom was like that too—always wearing eye makeup regardless of the activity.

Rafael's words clicked into their headsets. "Can everyone hear me?"

The team answered into their mics.

"Alright, let's go," he said before plunging his head below the surface.

Aliyah followed suit, letting her underwater scooter propel her forward until she was behind Rafael. She paced herself, pairing her legs to the rhythm of his kicking flippers to stay warm in the chilled water.

Most of her work as an underwater crime scene technician took place retrieving evidence and bodies from lakes and large rivers, but she'd done archaeological dives in the ocean as well. Even in the murkiest, most open water—the kind where only the bubbles from her mask could tell her the direction of the surface—there were still traces of sunlight. This was like pushing through ink, like floating through the dark matter of an unborn universe. She focused on slowing her breath, on feeling the individual muscles working in her legs, and on the loud, continual stream of her thoughts. It would be too easy for her to feel devoured.

As grateful as she was for the opportunity, nerves gripped her belly. She'd signed up for excavations at Yucatan's ancient sinkholes for the quick dives and the chance to study prehistoric animal fossils like sabertooth cats and giant sloths, but the last thing anyone expected was the discovery of an anatomically modern human skeleton by one of the AI diving drones.

"Aliyah," Dr. Burke had approached her last week at her workbench while she was brushing sediment off the lower mandible of what she thought belonged to a short-faced bear. "You have experience excavating human remains?"

"Yes, I've been an underwater crime scene tech for five years and earned my forensic science certification last year," she answered, trying to hide her confusion. As a summer volunteer, Dr. Burke had only spoken to her once or twice before, so all she could manage at that moment was a recitation of her resume.

He nodded. "Good. Could you join me, please?"

Aliyah followed him to his workstation, a canopy tent where four men had gathered around a thick, blocky laptop. "One of the drones found human remains in a remote part of the cenote," Dr. Burke explained, pointing at fuzzy photos pinned to a corkboard. "Female, I think, and presumably around ten thousand years old, give or take—but we won't know for sure until we see it in person. We have a dive team and guide to help you get there, but I was hoping with your experience, you could retrieve the bones."

"Of course" popped out of her mouth before she could process the situation—how she wouldn't get any credit, how dangerous it could be, how she'd traveled here for the summer to specifically get away from handling dead humans.

After a week's worth of preparation and a shaky walk into the cenote this morning, her team of six was ready to embark. Aliyah stared at the overhead opening of the sinkhole while three of her younger, more eager teammates waded into the water. After studying the drone footage, she knew it would be the last bit of sunlight she'd see until they returned. From where she stood, she couldn't see much of what was happening on the surface. There was a rough ridge of shadowed earth, and beyond that was pure blue sky. It made her think of the time her mom took her to the roof of her apartment building to sunbathe.

Dr. Burke's body came into view, silhouetted from the bright sky behind him. She strained her eyes to focus on his weathered face, but all she could make out were the wisps of hair that peeked out from his hat. He gave her a thumbs-up, which she returned, then walked away from the overhead ledge.

Now, a couple of hours later, she was cutting her way through cold, hermetic water where other than the occasional, raspy check-in from Rafael, the only noises Aliyah heard were the flood of bubbles from her apparatus and her all-too-obvious heart rate.

Dr. Burke was expecting a near-complete skeleton, which was why every diver's scooter was equipped with a padded box for safe transport, but Aliyah was unconvinced. The cenote was rife with the skeletons of predators, and any other bones they found had evidence of teeth marks or scraping. What were the chances that all 206 bones had stayed near each other over the course of multiple millennia? Even when she was retrieving relatively recent corpses, intact bodies were few and far between thanks to currents and hungry animals.

Still, it was the first time Aliyah had seen a total absence of marine life. As far as she could tell, she and her teammates were the only living things that had been in this cave network in the past ten thousand years. Without the torches and movement from her team, she thought the cenote's primordial belly would swallow her—that she would lose her light and her air and she'd become another fish in the school of drowned ghosts.

Her heartbeat pounded in her ears and her breath fought its pacing. Keeping her light on Rafael's tank, she tried to ease the muscles she didn't need and allow the jets to do the work.



“Let the bike do the work,” her mom’s voice muffled the sound of her pulse. “You’re pedaling too hard.”

In a vivid flash, her memory of trying to keep up with her mom during that afternoon bike ride rose to the front of her mind. It was her first bike, and despite being eleven, it was only a week after she’d learned to ride it. Her mom paced next to her on the winding park path.

“When you pedal that fast, you can’t feel any resistance anymore, right?”

Aliyah nodded, trying to keep her helmet straight on her head.

“That means you can stop working so hard,” she continued. “That’s as much work as the bike will let you put in, so it’s no use wearing yourself out.”

Aliyah nodded again, slowing her feet and letting the wheels spin. She gripped the handlebars and fought for her balance, but had to smile when her mom said, “Good job!”

Watching her pedal ahead, Aliyah tried to soak in the image of the mid-summer sunlight catching her mother’s hair and the sounds of her teal zip-up flapping behind her. Capturing the memory was worth it, even after she fell and scraped her knee through her jeans moments later. For weeks after, Aliyah fought her grandma when she tried to dab honey on the cuts to keep them from scarring, but eventually, time and sunlight had erased the marks she tried to treasure.

“Halfway mark,” Rafael cut through her thoughts. “One.”

“Two,” Aliyah answered. Paloma followed third, then dive assistants Shelby, Miguel, and Cassandra as fourth, fifth, and sixth.

Memories of her mom didn't come up much anymore, but in the sensory vacuum of the cenote, it was easy for Aliyah's mind to wander toward her. Her mother, Ida, was beautiful with caramel skin and ink-black hair she always kept at waist-length. When Aliyah was younger, she was curious about her father, but after years of being raised by a grandmother who avoided the subject, that curiosity dimmed. She looked so much like the women in her family that there was no doubting where she came from anyway.

Ida was a talented healer, and Aliyah always marveled at her gift for it, even after she realized that the only pain Ida's antidotes could heal were the ones her cutting tongue caused in the first place. She was personified chaos, and loving her was like having to swim into a wave to avoid being toppled. Aliyah pressed her torso into the scooter, thinking of the times she would be lying face down on her bed after Ida's voice finished shaking the walls of her grandma's home. A few minutes of quiet would pass, then the next things Aliyah would hear were the turning of her bedroom doorknob, light footsteps to her bedside, then the creaking of the mattress as Ida sat down beside her. Aliyah always pretended she had slept through her mom and grandma's fighting—that she didn't hear her name get volleyed and flung across the room downstairs. As a seven-year-old, Aliyah wasn't a talented actor, but Ida always played along and rubbed her back until she fell into true sleep, telling her how loved she was and how she would always be there when she needed her.

The latter turned out to be false, but Aliyah never doubted the former, even when her mom's presence would ebb and flow into her life sporadically. Aliyah wasn't surprised that these memories were cropping up—Ida's frequent absence and eventual disappearance were what inspired her career choice in the first place.

"It's been too long," Aliyah reported after months of not hearing from her.

"She has a history of disappearing," a young officer in the police station told her.

"Yes, but she wouldn't miss out on things like this: my birthday, prom, graduation?"

"She has before," her grandmother retorted from her recliner, not looking up from her magazine. "She's only ever done what she wants to do."

"I haven't heard from her at all," she pleaded with a ranger at a national park in the neighboring town. "But I know her boyfriend liked to take her to the lake here."

"When did they last make a trip here?" the khaki-clad man asked while stirring a mug of instant coffee.

"I don't know. She told me he tried to drown her in the bathtub once."

"What's his name?" the officer asked, fingers ready at the keyboard.

"I don't know."

"Why do you think she's in the lake?" The ranger took a sip of his coffee.

"I don't know."

"Why can't you accept that she's gone?" her grandmother challenged, scraping dried rice from a steel pan. "Don't you think you'd be happier if you stopped trying to find out what happened?"

"I don't know."

"When can you start?" her interviewer at the lab asked as she extended her hand.

"Next Monday," Aliyah answered, returning the handshake.

A chill climbed up her leg as Shelby accidentally brushed into her. She had recurring dreams that went like that: she would be searching for her mom along the cloudy bed of the lake, then feel a hard, unforgiving grip on her ankle. The image of her mom's pale, peeling face and the sound coming from her screaming, unhinged jaw would scare her so much that she'd wake up kicking.

Two months after getting her CSI job, Aliyah started spending a few hours every Sunday morning at the ironically named Clearwater Lake in her own scuba gear to comb through seaweed with plastic baggies and a cheap waterproof camera. Ida was legally presumed dead by that point, but Aliyah struggled to accept that her mother's life had an ending that was open to interpretation.

For almost a year, she would return to the sandy banks empty-handed, exhausted, and emotionally depleted, then cross off sections on the grid map she made of the 70-square-mile lake. Her investigative work honed her abilities to swim and identify evidence faster, but handling bloated, decomposing corpses and learning how to identify dismembered body parts through unopened trash bags killed her hopes of finding her mom in a pristine or recognizable condition.

"You'll have plenty of time to miss me after I die," Aliyah's grandma told her once after she saw her scribbled map resting on the passenger seat of her car. "But I'm missing you now." After that, Aliyah's weekly trips to the lake became monthly, and then quarterly. Now, most of their Sunday mornings were spent together at her grandma's favorite pancake diner a few blocks away.

"Finally," Paloma said into her mic. There was a collective shift in energy once the six streams from the divers' torches illuminated a pale limestone wall ahead of them.

"Almost there, team," Rafael's words filled her ears. "Let's descend about ten more meters and we should be able to see it."

Aliyah took in a deep inhale. The waiting and diving were unnerving, but the real pressure was encroaching. The bones were going to be brittle after being submerged for this long, especially the all-important skull.

She stayed focused on Rafael as they all steered their scooters downward. After a few minutes of scanning the ledges and nooks of the wall, Aliyah's eyes caught what were, unmistakably, human bones.

"I see them," Aliyah said. "Headlamps on, everyone. Follow me, but give Paloma space to work."

Smaller lights flicked on as Aliyah shone her torch onto the remains. Paloma swam by, documenting the bones and surrounding area. While she worked, Aliyah looked to the surface. It was a long, long way up.

"We're in a deep gorge of the cenote," Miguel said. "Whoever that person was, they didn't end up here on purpose."

She nodded. The drones had performed a topographic analysis of the site earlier in the week, and after examining that data, she theorized that this prehistoric person had gotten lost in the network and fallen into the gorge. Now, after thousands of years of rising tides and resting in place, they would be seen and touched by another human.

"I'm ready for you, Ali," Paloma said.

She made her way to the bones and Paloma fit her into her camera's frame. "Cassandra, keep your lights over here, please," Aliyah instructed. "Shelby, I'll need your help as I place the bones in your container, and Miguel, I need you to stay below me with your container open in case anything drops."

They all swam to their positions and Aliyah unclenched her hands while surveying the pile and plotting the order of recovery. She was skeptical when Dr. Burke was excited by the prospect of a complete skeleton, but after seeing the bones in person, she was beginning to see it as a possibility too.

When the group was ready, she reached for the right femur. She allowed the water to do most of the work and let the brittle bone rest on her hands as she maneuvered it into the container. She repeated the task for the right tibia and fibula, then the left tibia, fibula, and femur, all while trying not to disturb the smaller tarsal and metatarsal bones. From her quick glances at the femur, she noticed that the growth plates had fused together, a likely sign of them being a teenager or adult.

“Close your container, Shelby, and switch with Cassandra,” Aliyah said. “You’ll head back over when we’re working with the smaller bones in their knees and feet.”

The two switched as Aliyah positioned herself to grab the pelvic bone. Using only her fingertips, she lifted the bone and watched as two pieces fell away from a deep crack in the ilium.

“Paloma, did you get that?” she asked.

“Yes, I’ll zoom in,” she answered.

While waiting for the pieces to settle into the sediment and for Paloma to get the shots she needed, Aliyah studied the pelvic bone. There was no evidence of that crack healing, so it could potentially be what led to their death, which made sense with her falling theory. Judging by the wide subpubic angle, the skeleton was female. Aliyah fixed her eyes on small pockmarks on the inside of the bones—she had given birth.

“We’ve got a Jane Doe,” Aliyah announced while resting the pelvic bone in the bed of the container. “Rafael, did the drones capture any more visual footage lower than this or was that just topographic mapping?”

"Both, why?"

"She gave birth, so we may want to look out for a child or a baby."

"We didn't see anything else, only her," he answered. "But I'll make a note for another sweep just in case."

"Why would someone bring a child in here?" Miguel asked.

"She might not have. She could have been alone," replied Shelby.

"You think she would leave her kid?" Miguel debated.

"Let's save the discussion for when we're not on a limited air supply," Aliyah said. "Cassandra, I'm going to have you carry her scapula and clavicle too."

One by one, she placed the two scapula in Cassandra's container, but as she was reaching for the left clavicle she noticed some bone remodeling. She'd seen injuries like this from past cases. Out of habit, she glanced over to Jane Doe's ribs and forearm, where she saw more remodeling in one of her ulnas.

"Paloma, can you get some close-up shots here?"

Paloma approached, zooming in on the places Aliyah was pointing to on the bones. "What does this mean?" she asked.

"Signs of abuse or some sort of violence, but I can't say for sure."

"That's really tough," she said.

Aliyah nodded and began to work on retrieving the bones again. When she was swimming through the cenote earlier, she was wondering how many animal skeletons were settled on the rocky floors around them. She envisioned Jane seeking shelter in the cavern, then wandering deeper into the network seeking food or water. It was only a theory, but Jane had to have known about all the predators that lived there. Someone or something scared her more than potentially facing a bear or sabertooth cat. Aliyah felt her chest tighten. Jane's situation must have been pretty bad if she thought she had a better chance of surviving in here than out there. The idea of finding her child with her or nearby was beginning to seem less likely.

After clearing some of the larger bones, her hands now had an unobstructed path to Jane's cranium. "Ok, Miguel. Go ahead and bring the skull container to me," Aliyah requested. She closed her eyes as the dive assistants rearranged and prepared themselves.

After she crashed her bike, it took a few minutes for Ida to notice that Aliyah wasn't behind her anymore. Even though it was broad daylight and she was only suffering a scraped-up knee, those moments alone scared her so much that she couldn't find the breath to call out for her mom.

She inspected the slopes and angles of Jane's skull, thinking of what her last seconds must have been like; in pain, in darkness, in silence. The light from her headlamp shone through her eye cavities, and Aliyah could see the intricate web of cranial bones. Holding her breath, she placed her fingers around the skull and lifted her carefully, letting her lower mandible stay behind on the limestone. She could picture deep brown eyes looking back at her as she turned toward Miguel and the box.

By the time Ida rode back to her, it only took a few seconds for her to leap off her bike and scoop Aliyah into her arms. Aliyah didn't start to cry until she could smell Ida's rose-scented lotion, and she remembered curling her body to make herself as small as possible.

"I got you, I got you," Ida whispered, rocking her and placing a hand on Aliyah's helmeted head.

"I got you," Aliyah murmured, letting her palm cradle Jane's delicate temple before laying her onto the container's soft, safe surface. "I got you."



BAIT BERRY

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*a naked seed attached to a berry, the red or orange colour of which
attracts birds to digest and excrete it for dispersal*

You can describe tango's structure as "ABAB" or "ABABC," with C having a different structure than the other sections. Sections can be long or short, and tango dancers must listen for when each section starts and ends.

— "Musical Structure of Argentine Tango", Anita Flejter

"How do you know you're bisexual?" her mother asked.

"In the same way you know you're heterosexual."

*

Accident Report (25 June 2023):

My accident happened during *King Lear*, on the accessibility session day, when patrons got to go up on stage and familiarise themselves with the props. Denis had requested I go to Stage A or B (can't remember which now), and I took the stairwell with my hot chocolate in my right hand.

As I approached the landing on Level 2, I believe I didn't raise my right foot high enough for the next step, so I hit it instead, and then fell, reaching out with my left hand (jarring my injured left shoulder) and struck my right shin, which sustained a bruise and cut soon after.

*

Choosing categories. Men. Then, hesitantly, Women.

Swiping past pictures. 99% No.

Stop. Impossible curve of hip. The line of shoulder and elbow.

Bingbing feels a heated surge, a warm creek running.

"Hello," she types.

*

I walked up to the landing inside the Stage Concierge area. Denis was there, and I told him I'd had an accident. He radioed Bess and told her he'd be delayed. We walked to the office, and he asked me again what had happened, and if I was okay. He radioed Tāne. Max and Adeline were there, and she fetched some ice, wrapped in a cloth, for my bruise, which I also applied to my jarred shoulder. Denis applied a bandage for the small cut on my shin.

All her co-workers are half her age, but think she's the same as them. One said, "I hope I look like you when I'm 49."

And she thinks, *You'd have to live a completely different life, friend.*

*

I rested a little to recover from the shock. I returned to my concierge duties (holding up the sign saying Please Take Your Seats, letting Denis know about patrons' accessibility requirements, arrival of late patrons) until the start of the First Act. Denis and I conferred, and I told him I thought I'd be okay to continue, but wanted to see.

*

Things you'll miss now that you're dead:

- Future Idris Elba movies
- Future Idris Elba TV shows
- Accessories knit with alpaca yarn that I might've made for you
- Chocolate biscuits
- Tango
- Talking shit about Rattle
- Irises
- All the rude memes I was going to send you

*

Before the end of the First Act, I felt I was still in shock, so I spoke with Denis again. We agreed to wait until after the start of Interval.

I checked he didn't need me to stay, and he indicated it was fine for me to go home. I left earlier than my scheduled time.

Yes, I returned for the following shift, to similar lighter duties as after my shoulder injury.

On the map, I try to guess where a police spokesperson said they found your car. Somewhere isolated, so no one could see you or stop you, I bet. Probably night. Somewhere pretty? Near the lookout? Or somewhere where the current was fast-moving and you'd be beyond rescue?

The river is mud-sludge brown as an intestine. Now I'm thinking of your ostomy, your stoma, your colostomy bag. I don't know which it is. I don't really know how to talk about these things.

I track back through our conversations, to where I asked for your address so I can send you the hat I made you. You'd told me you were allergic to sheep's wool. Here, in a country known for its sheep. The daily punishment of school jumpers, red itchy welts on your neck. The princess-like sensitivity to a coat a shop assistant insists is wool-free, but your skin declares otherwise. So I ask, What about yak? Possum? Alpaca?

Alpaca yarn from Paris, I decide. Two colours: an outrageously vibrant magenta, and a more demure, pearly pink. You said it was far too beautiful for you, but I disagree. It took me ten days to knit.

From that address, it would've taken you ten minutes to drive to this suburb I've never been to. You intimated that this part of the country was small, prone to the same jokes of two-headedness and insularity as my own home town, and I can imagine what you mean.

Did you stand, your body slipping free, your soul's dress falling to the water, dampening, collapsing in surrender?

Moonlit skin against grey rock. Brown water. Hidden sharpnesses scouring your sides.

You slide past this bend of earth, that elbow of land. You thread the river's undulations with the needle of your body, mostly easily, sometimes with effort.

You float under a small road, past a toll bridge (the coins of your eyes, unseeing now, long lost of sight).

You bend and bend again. How boneless you are, and slippery.

A twenty-day journey on this river. Sometimes a toe rising out of the water. Sometimes a finger.

Or a brow. A rib. Swimming meatily, messily, occasionally artfully.

A flotilla of fish weaving through your fingers. Eels like muscular bracelets around your wrists and arms. A belt for your waist. The slow canting dance of your body swaying to the rush and gurgle, the belch and bolt of water.

Your nails catch against the floodgates, splinters in the now-bloodless skin.

You wave lazily at the church with the red roof. How pretty it looks in the sun. You can admire it now, at this point beyond religion.

The difficulty of a wending river is how long it takes to tumble through. You want to be filtered, like the water itself. Even if your body is a weighty thing, and of unknown quantity. Your body is still learning to be itself, but not for much longer, and not for much longer will it remain a mystery.

It is a W of a river, a wriggle, a squiggle, a multi-folded thing,
a dark chocolate pastry laminated many times.

You cross State Highway 1, beneath its concrete and
engineering, and the long-gone hands that made it.

Soon after, had I been travelling with you, I would've pointed
to the supermarket—there, over there—and asked if you'd like
to stop and pick up something, would've told you I was
hungry,

it's been nineteen days on the river, and I'm sick of eel.
Maybe you would've relented, and we could've walked in, our
limbs dripping, ignored the stares, picked up some chips for
me, craving the taste of salt. But you would've still been
facing the water, no matter where we were, a sunflower to
the sun, your body a heliotrope now, longing to reach its end.

I could not have delayed you for very long from something
you've waited for so patiently.

One last bend. And now the mouth. And now the beach. The
expanse. The gulls' screams.

The water turns from brown to blue, and you go to it, towards
the wave and roll and tumble. The tumult. An excess of
letting go. Every wave a letting-go and a farewell. A
goodbye crashing on the sand.