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see. hear. heal.



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INTRODUCTION

This issue was originally published in a blog post format and was updated to this format in 2023.

CONTENT WARNING

The following issue contains material on the topic of sexual violence and other topics that readers might find difficult.

The intention behind this content warning is to prepare a reader so they can choose to bravely engage with potentially activating material, even if this doesn't always feel comfortable. May it also serve as a reminder that a reader can pause and take a break from reading. The stories will be here, ready when the reader returns.

For Every Death

I. Grey

All profound love ends.

Or so I've been told. As a child, I thought the most important thing in life was being happy, that one day I would find myself floating on waves of clarity with nothing but truth ahead. But the waves were stilled with doubt. Instead, I learned how important it was to keep my own secrets, to pack up sections of my mind like archives: only seen when searched for. I believed the key to finding and holding onto such an ideal was to know when to bury and when to unearth truth.


The first time I felt genuine fear was in the dark. It was a classroom coat closet that for one afternoon became a cell. It wasn't the first time I was molested, but it was the first time I saw it coming. Even though I always had my clothes on, the perpetrators were my age, and they didn't make me do anything in return, each time it happened, they took a piece. And as I watched that pair of eyes grow cold with the realization that no one would hear me scream, I died a little.

The first time I lived through someone else's death was a few years later. He was another classmate. When he passed I learned what everyone learns from mortality; there's no going back. I had already lost my trust in people, faith in my parents' protection, and belief in a system

that failed. It wasn't a complete waste, though. I was already on my way to perfecting the unique skill that allowed me to tuck thoughts into the far parts of my mind like books in the backs of shelves. It was easy. I was still too naïve to accept the fact that people take what's left unprotected, that we're all just scavengers.

I remember when my father warned me to be sure that if I ever fell in love I should never invest my whole self, as if all relationships were transactions. I suppose they are in a way. Two people come together in exchange for their time. I believed in this creed based on the argument that self-conservation is the reexamination of love. After all, shouldn't the first people we love be ourselves? Shouldn't we worry what it would feel like to lose ourselves, even if that loss is temporary?

It was years before I was alone with a boy again. I was drunk, I was scared, but he never knew. I'm usually scared around the opposite sex. Drugs always make it feel more exciting than scary, but the fear is still there. It wasn't until years after that drunken night that I was molested again. This time, though, unlike the others, I don't remember. After I woke up, I had questions and then the familiar feeling of shame



settled in. I'm no stranger to shame, even when I do remember. I'm no stranger to hallucinogens, uppers, downers, or denial when necessary. But after the significant moments: the first, the transition from having to force the memory down, to trying to force myself to remember anything at all, other pieces go missing. I've died so many times it's surprising I'm still affected by the deaths of others.

When my grandfather got sick years ago, we all thought he was going to die. But he didn't; he just talked about it a lot. So I adjusted my thoughts and somehow convinced myself he never would. When my grandmother got sick, she never talked about it. I knew she was going to die, but I never guessed it would be before him. There is a connection, if you're lucky, between a grandparent and a grandchild that can't be explained in words that illuminate the emotion between them, but it's almost palpable. When it's broken, it doesn't heal; at best it ices over. The sadness is always there, but if you've practiced, it moves into the section behind the classics.

I've fallen in love twice in my life. One was that exciting, volatile, first taste of affection; the other was what I would have considered the final meal. Neither lasted. Both barely began. I've said the

words a few times with the hope of quieting that craving for me to submit. But I've never been an advocate of emotional submission, the kind it takes to come to a crushing end. After being stripped of any physical choice, all that's left is what the mind controls. And I've never devoted myself to anyone. I used to believe in my father's vigilant words, that to accept true love is to tempt the wrath of agony. But now it seems those words were meant for the child I was and not the adult I've become. Calculating the amount you permit yourself to feel is futile and in itself destructive. What I'm left with is one very convoluted imagination of what could have been. I thought I was finished having to hide, having to tell myself to stuff my tears into pockets, having to protect myself from the dark; until my mother told me my parents may be moving, leaving behind my childhood home, the only part of my childhood still standing; until my mother told me my father might be sick. I didn't know which to address first or how to feel. So we waited. For his results, for the house to sell, for them to find another place, the next step if treatment was necessary. So they laughed, sitting at the kitchen table I accidentally scratched with my fork fifteen years ago while we ate dinner, the



table I made my first mixed drink on, the table where I finished a project for school while my grandmother sat by my side, and they told stories as if this life meant nothing. I saw warmth in their eyes, in the eyes of my sister and her children, and I resented them because I couldn't feel it. I laughed, too, numb from the inside, frozen, waiting to break a final time.

I can't say for sure what it means to love profoundly, or the lessons I've come away with when my versions of forever were sliced to pieces. I can say I'm more human than I've been. Sometimes, though, after a shaky night when my eyes unfold into morning, I sigh at the life left in me, exhausted with the thought of love, of digging up truth I've left behind. But I still desire my own terrible ending. Rumbling foundations, bridges burnt to piles of metal and rust. I'm sure there's a volume or two somewhere in the stacks worth reading. Love worth living.

An Apology to His Mother

Jennifer Jussel

I can see you
teaching him to walk.
How his little feet stuttered
How his fingers—unbelievably tiny—
reached eagerly for yours, with your nails
that shined like Christmas.
Maybe it is Christmas.
Maybe you're taking pictures
and laughing and beaming at him
as he tears at the paper around the scooter he always wanted.
I can see you loving him
holding him through the first broken heart
lifting him up when he was rubbing at his eyes
I can see you cheering him on
or telling him he needs to cut that damn hair
or yelling at him about cleaning his room
and then feeling a little bad about it,
and being thankful that he still loves you.
I can see you loving him, loving him, loving him,
crying at his graduation,
reminding him to wear his jacket when he goes out
trying to keep him safe.
I can see you tying his tie today,
wiping the dog's fur from his black suit jacket,
oiling back his hair and then your own from the same jar.
I can see you steadying his hand
telling him to be honest, that justice will prevail, and you

believe every word of it—yours and his.
I can see why you hate me
for hurting him, for even having the audacity to
suggest
that he would betray you so utterly and
completely.

I can see you now, across the room, dressed all in black.


I can see you ignoring me, with the imprints of your sons fingers stamped in black on my skin,
and my legs forever shifting to avoid the tear he made between them.

And I don't blame you.

Because if I were you I would never believe it.

I would never, never believe it.






Jennifer Jussel is a creative writing student at Trinity University in San Antonio, Texas. She has been published most recently in *The Tipton* and *The Trinity Review*, as well as on a smattering of sites online. In her free time, she enjoys traveling, working on her novel, and thinking up stupid names for her future pug.

The Child Deep Inside

Thomas Young

I don't know why I'm here today,
it wasn't in my plan,
but here we are, just you and I,
and I don't understand.
We haven't talked in quite some time,
I just can't find the time,
But I think about you often,
you've been heavy on my mind.
Everyone at home is well,
the kids are doing fine,
I really think that you'd be pleased,
even though they're mine.
I don't know why I took this road,
that led me here to you,
But driving by, I thought I'd stop,
it seemed the thing to do.
Have you noticed the weather here?
Seems that winter just won't go,
It's dark and cold, and March has gone,
I think it's going to snow.
And I find it hard to concentrate,
as gloomy as it's been,
But it isn't just the weather,
maybe that's where we'll begin.
I don't want to bother you,
and I'm not sure what to say,
I had no plan on coming here,






it just ended up this way .
There are some things I'd like to say,
ask some questions if I could,
You don't need to speak, just listen,
until I finish if you would.
Have you had the chance to consider,
those you left back here?
To contemplate your legacy,
because frankly, it's not clear.
The secrets that you kept so safe,
everybody knew,
The only ones that were ever fooled,
were those of us close to you.
The carnage that you left behind,
and the monsters that you shaped,
Still harvest those that are your seed,
because very few escaped.
And as we were taught,
we still pretend that none of this is real,
It hasn't come without a price,
because the wounds can never heal.
We're like the ripples in the pond,
they get larger as they go,
And you're the one who through
the stone that started them to grow.
The difference is, in the pond,
comes a time when they are no more,

And unlike the ripples in the pond,
we just can't find the shore.
There is a child in our house,
I see him here and there,
He has cut off pants, and dirty feet,
and needs to comb his hair.
I know this child only exist,
within the shadows of my soul,
But he seems so real, to me at least,
I just can't let him go.
At times I see him playing,
with toys I haven't seen in years,
I like it when I see him then,
he covers all my fears.
Sometimes when I go to bed,
as I close my eyes to rest,
He'll shut the door to hide the light,
because I like the darkness best.
But then at times I see him in the
basement, hiding beneath the stairs,
And I know what's going to happen,
and I know that no one cares.
And I want to find this child help,
but there's nothing I can do,
I see him now, but it happened then,
and his only hope was you.
There is a child in our house,





that only I can see,
I don't mind him being there,
because I know that child is me
Maybe that's why I'm here today,
to find out straight from you,
That whatever happened in your youth,
did you see these shadows too?
Were you haunted by the ghost,
of the child deep inside?
Were you helpless, as I am,
to find some place to hide?
This is the question that
I ask, but no answer will be found,
Because here I stand, and there
you lay, six feet under ground.

Thomas Young, "I started writing at the age of 12 or 13; it was a way to escape my reality. This remained a secret as I never thought my writing was worth sharing. This has changed recently as I have learned a lot of us survivors write. It is my belief that writing is a gift. A gift that helps restore the joys that were stolen from us as children.

I am 58 years old, married for 32 of those years and have three grown children. Most nights I spend at my farmhouse in West Michigan writing the words that came to me that day. It is a pleasure to be published and I want those like me to never quit doing what brings you comfort.

I truly hope that my poetry will help others such as me if nothing else; we know we are not alone."



Snap Ankle Sandwiches

Eliza Stopps

There's a sound that takes me back to my childhood. I'll save you the guessing, it's not rolling, clapping thunder or tap-tap rain. It's snapping ankles, up the stairs, in the dark. Is that the walls or someone walking? I notice it everywhere I go.

At school, basketball players, white shoes snap ankles, popping up the steps with tired toes.

In my neighborhood as a kid, Uncle Jimmy down the street. He wasn't as scary as he sounded, just lived down the street and popped around from his time in the Service. He gave us peanut butter jelly, snap ankle sandwiches, every Thursday after practice.

At the library, little old ladies climbing up the ladders with socks rolled inches above their old lady sneakers, soft sock snap ankles.

In the grocery store, younger workers hustled by with squeaking carts and grinding metal. They hopped down the concrete steps, taking a 10, smoke break snap ankles.

And there's the reason why I remember it all. I was stupid, younger than I shoulda been, waiting at the top of the soggy wooden steps that led to the door. A shaved head, thick cologne studding boy climbed up them every night, summer love snap ankles.

It wasn't until I started locking the door and his squeaky wet feet snapped up the steps and knocked anyway that I started hearing them everywhere I went.

It was 50 missed calls today, baby I miss you, snap ankles that kept me nervous in the dark. It was the looking over my shoulder, replaying old threats, is that his stinky cologne snap ankles that keep me up at night.

Sit down and listen for it, anticipation laden and suspicion dripping snap ankles soup. Wear your white shoes snap ankles, eat your peanut butter jelly snap ankle sandwiches. Cozy into your soft sock snap ankles and soggy smoke break snap ankles. And feel your heart skip a beat, when summer love snap ankles come knocking. And don't answer when "baby, I miss you," snap ankles come calling. And plug your nose at the stinky cologne snap ankles, or you'll be up all night.

Eliza Stopps is a writer of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Author of the Leslie Kim Serials now Available on Amazon, and lover of poetry. She has been writing poems since before she could turn scribbles into letters and usually eats sunflower seeds while she does it.



Love Trap

Lotte Roy

What magic transpires when in the grip of the puppet-meister...

What sucked me in?

What pulled me tight?

What trapped my mind, believing that this was right...

An escape, my way out...how delicious it tasted,

How susceptible was my spirit to the conundrum awaiting...

The lure, how tempting, I was easy prey.

How lucky for the hunter...this one won't go away...

Weighing me the bounty; another trophy to display.

Stunned like a deer in the headlights bright, my life stood frozen stiff, panicked in total fright. Far beyond my reality, and dangerously so, compelled to meet expectations, I subjugated fully to threats as meted so. How I fell victim to the pressures of his commands, only to please him, my master, they would be set, and off and onward bound.

In my intoxicated state, drunk on the love notes, the promise of escape, I would function like a wind-up doll and operate. At his whim, do what he said unwittingly, without a second's questioning. The chemical reactions stirring within, had altered my ego, and my id. I was acting way beyond my character, and in my altered state, a stage to perform this drama did begin.

How I reveled in this fantasy...I was engaging in an operation, involved with my lover of sorts, partners in crime, what thrill it gave me this interplay. The drive to meet expectations, of dire circumstance no less, that was the achievement, and how I wanted to prove it...that I was capable, a worthy candidate. I was on a mission, and how

fascinating it all seemed, to be part of this quest, ah the intrigue...

The demands were all made via the messenger early, at sunrise, amounts already determined. And like the wind-up doll expressed, on switched the buttons, the functions of the day computed and set. With little sleep from the night before, my mind was entangled in the rapture of the dulcet tones of love, of sweet nothingness only to lighten the blow.

I would awaken next morning to the alarm on my phone reminding me the daylight had come, was I ready to go? Appearing alert, but physically and mentally paying the brunt of this curse, I would set off as usual with my mission firm.


Zombie-like in my mental state, on auto-pilot and charged for the day, the next drop, no room for delay. My head brainwashed into believing this was what was expected of me, my duty of great responsibility. My role understood, my focus clear, my mission outlined and ordered. Strapped with the necessary paraphernalia proving legality of my activities, I would with sure footing head to the station. These addresses I had

never ventured, thanks to Google the ease made it better.

All the while, we would be connected, he, my master, guiding and protecting. Trusting the exchange would take place, he was keen to see the drops completed early within his time frame. I would head to the bank's ATM as soon as the cash dispensers were open, hurry into the corner to withdraw for my services. The limit was sufficient for that day's operation...and off I would go to hunt down the next location.

The frequency of visits, the secession of drops, of demands to be met, raised eyebrows among the local folk. Where was she going they started to ask, among their circles, under the watchful eye. Venturing down more obscure alleyways were these drops to be made. Never before had I been actively involved in the finance of banking; a frequent resort this was not.

Identification all intact, I would walk in confidently and announce my request. Nerves of steel braced my verve I was doing this for him, my love, my beau. And with aplomb I would state quite plainly, this was for Egypt, for India, for



for Africa and for China surely. Here were the details, my next-of kin, my brothers and sisters, what a global union.

They did catch on, these officers here. They sensed the irregularity of my misdeeds. The visitations were too frequent, too closely scheduled, why was she sending so much, all at one time? They started to query further, impending my transaction. The mounting frustration was obvious in my manner; flustered, and fuming, the madam is waiting, I am a *businesswoman*, don't keep me hanging. The computer data was all aflame, bright red across the page. The systems could detect anomalies existing, you were sending this amount where? What was the purpose of this remittance?

Towards the end of this cycle of duties fulfilled, the aversion to such establishments, of my visitations crept on both parties' faces.... The loathing to enter, to handle such requests; the awkwardness of this façade painfully avoiding address... What was she doing with all that money to drop? Had she lost her mind, didn't she realize this was all a hoax?

Closeted from the outside world for far too long, I was not aware of the harsh realities lurking the corridors. News received here was of domestic focus, the rise of the yen, the price of fish at the market. On occasion something of import would be aired, a main event, like the Olympics or World Cup.

A symptom of this country naivety is endemic; of being overly pampered and protected, can be a precarious position to be in. Sadly ill-informed, ignorant to trouble...ah the devilish antics that await beyond the shores of this island. To be aware is to search independently, otherwise *The Bastion of Standards and Compliancy* would not hear of it.

And there lies the crux of the issue, I had never heard of *romance scams*, never knew they existed. Though plenty abounds in the local language and beyond, of finding a partner, of capturing a heart-throb. Had never entertained the thought of seeking a partner online, was never curious about such services, who would be interested in the profile of mine!

Awoken to the world so severe,

Was I willing to be intrepid,

And journey through this canyon?

But I did.

For the dangers, they were beyond my
perception, well past my imagination.

Scams I understood in the conventional sense,
but had never scratched its surface, never sniffed
its menacing stench...

If seeking a niche in society meant cheating your
way, ripping people off, taking advantage of their
innocence, are we all victims to this game...?

Fooling the unaware,

minds,

Coercing their
Corrupting their affairs...robbing their

dignity,

Of not playing fair

Am I supposed to now believe all are knaves, of
fraudulent leanings, craving their next
opportunity? I cannot blame anyone but myself...

Are you going to punish me for being so
gullible...my mind weakened, I was in trouble.
Don't look down on me and feel pity...I have gone
beyond such superficiality.

Wading my way through all of this, I sometimes
stop and wince, how was I so stupid from the
beginning?

A desperate need for love unrequited, I jumped
quickly in that hoop to find a trap well set up, oh
my god, how was I duped!

The bounty at the end was oh so enticing, it was
my ticket to escape, my exit from this hostile
environment I had grown tired of, had learnt to
loathe, even hate. Very little was to sustain me
here other than a few contacts, dear students,
who, on occasion had made me feel, for a brief
moment, normal, real, had extended kindness
generously enough to enable a firmer footing
here.

Self-loathing had crept in, depression had lurked its ugly head, my dignity all shattered like fine-bone china on the concrete slab.

Naturally I was led to think my 'pop-up' to be the solution, the answer to my issues...and I responded. And just like that this smooth talking stranger convinced me to part with everything I had... How corrupted of spirit had I transgressed.

In this transition now visible before me, the prevailing curse kept cached in memory, hidden to those dear in my circle. I was distant and distracted, bound by this other world; of operations, of master threats, who would have known what spheres I was possessed.

Occasionally the phone would ring. In a gravelly voice he would begin:

'You are the one, you are mine,

What are you talking about?

With God's blessing, we will unite.'

You may ask what was the purpose of *that*

handsome sum,
To save a sinking ship, secure loot, gold pieces.
Both literally... no really!

In hindsight it all sounds a bit hyperbolic, in what day and age are we confronted with such diabolical???

A sense of danger approaching the rough seas? A darkening of skies, a foreboding mirage looming?

Where's the money, how much can you drop?

Please believe me my dear this has to stop.

One more deposit, one more exchange,

One more arrow, one more cage.

The façade we uphold, maintaining a story,

Keeping faith on hold...consumed with the drama unfurling...

I could easily block the app and withdraw from view.



Why don't you screams my head? I can't...
persists my heart...there is so much unfinished
business yet, why do I tread?

I have given him my all, what am I dreaming...a
win fall?

I doubt very positively and, with bated breath, I
have more than anticipated the outcome of my
fate.

Just one more drop, one more deal. How do you
think I feel?

I am not your money-bags dear, my earnings are
humble. Do you now want me to turn tricks for
you, so as to keep this end of the deal? An
affront...

I struggle to find solutions while the niggling
lingers.

Hold me strong and don't let go....

Dear God intervene... I am not of substance, and
my nerves are wearing thin....

I indulge him, to keep the channels alight, but at
what cost to this blight?

Am I letting go or standing still, is there any
promise to fulfill? I doubt it.

My circumstances have proven thus far, there is
nothing to gain from this affair.

No delight has transpired from this unpleasant
ride... it has not taken me afar.


Stunted I look for answers and to my dismay,
there is nothing but a vacant stare, dull and
lifeless, but a pallor veneer reflected in vain.

How do I overcome this dilemma?

Cede to the forces and banish forever? What
options are presented, what to hold, life is not
perfect, accept and move on?

Frustratingly, and in vain, I seek an angle,
sometimes bemusing my innermost child...

Temporarily relieving my thoughts racing in my
mind, I then return to the same vicious cycle,



weathered over time. Must I surrender to these
impasses, or do I valiantly proceed without
disaster? The prospects foreboding, the will
disturbed, my mind ever confused...pray be still.

There a sumoyukata-clad, balancing
precariously on his bicycle, he rides past by me
oblivious to the stares. A curiosity for certain, in
what world am I surrounded? Confusion only
blares.

I sit in wonder, where will this lead me, am I
going to carry such a burden for too much
longer? Will he concede and reprieve on the
offer?

Sex in Utopia

Alicen Grey

1.

The face of the desk lamp shined fierce light across my fingers as I typed the finishing touches on an assignment. It was a welcome warmth in an otherwise cold college dormitory. At 1AM I was still up, out of focus, trudging from sentence to sentence, more concerned with meeting a word limit than being coherent. *But the light.* A blend of fatigue, boredom, and fascination lifted my eyes away from the laptop screen and towards this little lamp. I twisted its bendy snake neck to point light at different parts of the room: up at the ceiling (trapping shadows in the pockets where the walls meet), across my wrists (to see the veins, the throbbing), and towards the window (to merge with the lights coming from the city outside). The light teased every detail out of hiding, awakened every fiber of every thing. The word *exposed* came to mind. Then, *naked*. And, well... clothes started coming off. It was just me, and the light – the concept of light, the experience, the sensation. Upon finishing, I basked – reveled – in the knowledge that I’d just tapped into a well of pleasure most people will, unfortunately, never experience. But not because

But not because they can’t – rather, because they won’t ever try.

The few times I’ve confided in trusted friends that I sometimes experience sexual arousal from non-sexual stimuli, I braced myself for the snide question, “What drugs are you on?” But thankfully, I haven’t yet been asked that question. More often, I’ve been met with curiosity.

Once, while hanging out with two friends, I told them about my playlist made up of songs that turn me on just by listening to them. They asked to hear one of the songs, to find out for themselves. As we sat in a triangle on my floor, eating Oreos smothered with peanut butter, the song opened and dived into a breathy decrescendo. At the same moment, all three of us tilted our heads back, eyes half-closed, and moaned. They had found the pleasure.

You’re probably thinking this doesn’t count. Chocolate is an aphrodisiac, after all. I had set them up by telling them how the song made me feel. It was fluke-ish, coincidental, that we experienced a collective “eargasm” at the same

moment. And maybe you're right. But consider my other friend who, upon hearing my accounts, excitedly shared a story of his own: once, after a deeply satisfying platonic conversation with a friend, he excused himself to the restroom and found the evidence of desire manifesting in his boxers.

Ever since these moments of connecting with my friends over our atypical experiences of arousal, I started paying attention. Now, I recognize it everywhere: There's a rising interest in New Age workshops on how to reach orgasm through breathing exercises. I read of a woman who was once so overwhelmed by the beauty of a sunset over the ocean, that she leaned against the nearest wall and breathily, but quietly, came. And haven't we all had mornings when we've woken up at the edge of orgasm, after what seemed like a mundane and incoherent dream?

2.

Consider the world we live in.

In this world, men unquestionably wield more power than women. That power takes the form of

money, land ownership, political representation, media representation, and so on and so on.

In this world, to tell someone "suck my dick" is either a sexual invite or a threat, depending upon context. Similarly, the word "fuck" can mean sex, or it can be an assault to the ear. Fuck you. Fuck off. Fuck yourself. In this world, straight men describe their sexual desires not unlike how they'd describe violence. I'd hit that. I'd tap that. I'd bang her, screw her, nail her, pound her. I'd tear that pussy up. I'd fuck the life out of her.

In this world, you can buy sex the way you can buy a new can opener or pair of sneakers. Typically, it's men who purchase this "sex." And typically, it's a woman or girl who must provide this "service." The vast majority of trafficking hostages are women and children. The vast majority of punters and pimps are men.

In this world, most pornography is created by men, and most regular porn viewers are men. The most sought-after categories of porn include "teen," "facial abuse," and "double penetration." The voyeuristic and "revenge porn" genres are also becoming increasingly popular. This means



every time a woman chooses to have sex, or so much as use a public restroom, she runs the risk of being recorded without her knowledge, then exposed on the Internet for the rest of time.

In this world, 99% of rapists are male. Upwards of 90% of murderers are male. 98% of convicted child molesters are male. Men are the #1 threat to women's physical safety, and men are the #1 cause of women's deaths, globally. In this world, 1 in 6 women will be sexually assaulted by a man in her lifetime. Or was it 1 in 5? 1 in 3? Whatever it is, *it's too many*. And in this world, *too many* women will be victims of intimate partner violence at the hands of a man.

All this is to say, human sexuality is by and large dictated – well, dictated – by men. Women have little say, and little choice, in what sex is, or when and how it's done. Even when we think we're choosing, we are subconsciously guided by the cultural norms in which we have been immersed against our wills.

Yet, despite all this (or because of all this?) the majority of the world's women are attracted to men. Attracted to the very sex class that can, and

harm us.

Women, whether we want to acknowledge it or not, are living in a sexual dystopia.

3.

I've had mind-blowing sex with men. I've had 3-hour multiple orgasms, I've had the screaming kind of orgasms, I've had the it-feels-so-good-I'm-crying kind of orgasms. So don't get me wrong: I know sex can be pleasurable. This is not the writing of some frigid pearl-clutcher who "just hasn't had the right dick yet." But what brings me back to this conversation – this conversation about the abstractions, the strangeness, and the necessity of redefining erotica – is trauma.

I've been traumatized; let's leave it at that. I leave it vague not only to protect myself from invasive probing, but so that I can speak for more than just myself: women who've been harassed, groped, raped, molested; women who've never been violated themselves, but carry the pain of their sisters on their shoulders; women who care, who feel too much. We may not have all

been brutalized in a way that meets an archaic definition of sexual assault, but we have all been degraded to varying degrees, for no other reason than because we are women, and because this world is set up such that men can do with us as they please.

Thus, I arrive at this conversation like many women do: looking for a safe way to resume being sexual, minus the risks. Is that even possible? Sometimes I don't believe it is.

In the initial aftermath of the trauma, I took small steps to start feeling comfortable with sex again. My first instinct was to look for feminist porn – because if any porn would be mindful of my triggers, it would be feminist porn, right? Wrong. Every form of erotica that advertised itself as “feminist” was overflowing with violence. Slapping, choking, spitting, verbal abuse. Pain, punishment, torture. And of course, the puncturing of vaginas with penises, fingers and objects – because sex just isn't sex until you've been repeatedly stabbed in your woman-wound and then marked with semen like you're a plot of territory. When I switched from pornography to erotic literature, thinking the written word would

be easier to stomach, I encountered the same problem there. In a world hijacked by the violent male-ordained sexuality that had traumatized me to begin with, I found myself re-traumatized with almost every attempt to heal from it.

We have been conditioned to replicate the power imbalance between men and women, eroticize that imbalance, then call it progressive. Liberating! Empowering! We are so immersed in this male-ordained paradigm that *we can hardly fathom a version of human sexuality beyond it*. Beyond penis-vagina. Beyond pornography. Beyond pain and power.

I am tired to the point of tears.

This is one of those times when I wish I could speak to animals. I imagine I'd have plenty to talk about with male black widow spiders, or male praying mantids. You know, those bugs that have sex and then get eaten alive for it.

4.

As a collective consciousness, we seem only vaguely aware that there is a problem.



We know sexism is a thing, and that it's bad. The proposed solution is to play with gender. Adopt new pronouns. Dress differently. Walk differently. Identify differently. As if class-based oppression is a matter of presentation. As if we can identify our way out of second-class citizenship.

We know rape is a thing, and that it's bad. The proposed solution is to educate people about consent. As if rapists don't know what no means. As if rape is based on a simple miscommunication.

We know sex is taboo, and that's no fun! The proposed solution is to expose yourself to lots of sex, all kinds of sex, *especially the violent stuff*: gonzo pornography, restraints, gags, clamps. Women being throat-fucked until they vomit, or being anally fucked until their organs fall out of their anuses. While you're at it, prove how open-minded you are by hooking up with strangers! Post nude selfies, #freeyournipple and don't think about the long-term consequences!

Our shallow awareness is alarming enough as it is, but what's worse is our willful ignorance. The signs all point to the probability that our

sexual desires and practices may not be as value-neutral as we'd like them to be:

Suppose it's not a coincidence that a high number of BDSM submissives are survivors of childhood sexual abuse. Suppose it's not a coincidence that many straight male pedophiles report finding adult women "intimidating." Suppose it's not a coincidence that men who buy sex from prostitutes have a perception of women similar to that of rapists. Suppose that when rapists describe breaking boundaries as a sexual thrill, they are pointing us to a truth, uncomfortable as it is: the truth that our sexual practices reflect our beliefs, our fears, our selves. We seek power in our jobs, in our homes, in our relationships. We compete, we cut throats, we strive to conquest. We fuck to hurt, or to be hurt. Suppose it's not a coincidence that the way we fuck each other in the bedroom looks a lot like how we fuck each other over in the world.

Our sexual attitudes do not exist in a vacuum, nor are we necessarily born with them. But we have this incredible ability to deny what's right under our noses. We call sexuality "natural" and "innate" and "instinctual" so we don't have to

acknowledge the truth. So we don't have to change ourselves.

Our reluctance to ask deeper questions is costly, and the children of this up-and-coming generation are paying a higher price than anyone else. Did you know that, as a result of having free and unlimited access to gonzo pornography via their mobile phones, boys are replicating what they see in porn and sending girls to the hospital with anal fissures? Well now you do.

5.

I write this not to take a determined stance on how sex should be done, but to point out that our tepid attempts to heal do not acknowledge the urgency and magnitude of trauma women and girls are experiencing on a global scale. In other words, I am asking an impossible question: what would sex look like in utopia?

The function of utopia is to show us what we're capable of. How we can be better, how we can *heal*. Shoot for the moon and you land among the stars, they say. We used to do this exercise in theater class where, if the director thought we

were underperforming, he'd have us perform wildly exaggerated versions of our characters. Only when we'd crossed the line from "realistic" to "caricatured" were we able to wind back the dial and find the perfect level of performance – not too hot, not too cold. Juuust right. In the same way, we must discuss utopian sex.

Why not, you know? People have written at length about money-less utopias, race-less utopias, war-less gender-less and deathless utopias. So how about a rape-less one? Personally, I imagine that utopia would have no hierarchies – or, the inevitable hierarchies that exist (parent over child, doctor over patient) would not be exploited. In utopia, it would be impossible to derive pleasure from hurting others or holding power over them. So there'd be no racism, no sexism, and no rape. But if there was no rape, and no sexual sadism, how different would basic sex look?

Would utopian sex mean no more physical hierarchies? No one on top or bottom? Sideways sex only? Mutual masturbation? Synchronized orgasms? Equal time reciprocating pleasure, down to the second?



Would utopian sex mean no social hierarchies? Sex only between members of the same social caste – rich with rich, men with men, to avoid even a hint of exploitation or domination?

Would utopian sex mean no pain at all? While physical pain can be avoided with enough care, even the gentlest of sexual encounters can be emotionally painful, particularly for those of us with past traumas. Must pain be part of the process?

Eliminating pain would also mean eliminating fear. That would mean completely ensuring that utopian sex would not result in an unwanted pregnancy. But no birth control method is 100% effective, and some forms of birth control have harmful side effects. Would utopia mean funneling resources into creating the perfect birth control method? Or would certain pregnancy-causing sex acts be avoided altogether?

Another fear we'd have to eliminate in utopia, would be the fear of sexual violence and exploitation. Since rape is almost exclusively committed by males, would utopia be a place

where women wouldn't have sex with men anymore? Would they have sex with women instead? As I mentioned before, there's the issue of other forms of domination: white women can still exploit black women, for instance; abusive behaviors can exist in anyone, regardless of social standing.


Would everyone just masturbate? What would we think about while masturbating?

A friend even posed the question: in utopia, would we still be having sex with our bodies at all? Or, by the time we've evolved enough to make utopia possible, would we have already reached some unfathomable limitlessness? – some state of being where we can find pure and unadulterated pleasure in a song, in a conversation, in a sunset, in the relentless and simple existence of light?

6.

Now, we wind back the dial.

After my shower, I turn off the showerhead, lower myself into the tub, and turn on the



bottom faucet. Of all the ways I know how to climax, water is my favorite. Unlike the numbing harshness of vibrators or the wrist-cramping repetition of using my hand, water orgasms build in one long, drawn out sensation of melting. There is no pain.

As I sink into the feeling, a memory returns to me. A long-term boyfriend and I were having sex for the first time in a while. We had been on an accidental sexual hiatus if you will, because we'd stumbled upon radical literature, and as a result spent countless hours deconstructing the whole concept of sex while not actually having it. Something was changing between us, and we knew it, but we hadn't tested it until now.

The difference was stark and awkward. Before this, I had taken my own liberal perspective on sex for granted. Now, I realized with dread, that perspective had been irreversibly altered. The question was no longer *whether* I consented, but *why* I consented, to certain sex acts. What did it say about me?

I was not ready for this question. I wanted to be blissfully ignorant again, I wanted to

fuckfuckfuck and not-care, not-think, not-change. In a last-ditch effort to pretend everything was normal, I half-heartedly asked him to hurt me, *come on, hurt me*. But he lost his arousal immediately. When I asked what was wrong, his eyes went big and his lip quivered as if scared to disappoint me. Then he said, "I can't do that to you."

There I was below him, naked, spread open: as vulnerable as I could be, giving him full permission to hurt me. Yet, he withdrew. Not only did he refuse to find pleasure in harming me, but his body refused as well. In that moment, I learned that we are not predestined to assume a role of either predator or prey. Rather, we learn our roles... and we can unlearn them. In that moment, I glimpsed utopia.


I turn the memory over and over in my mind as the water continues to flow over me with the gentlest touch. I consider the water, and how she patiently reshapes the most stubborn obstacles. She moves in spaces in which she is not welcome, but somehow finds a way to adapt, to fit, to be. Water carries burdens effortlessly, then sheds them along the path when the time is



right. And all waterways are connected. Indirectly, but ultimately, connected. No matter how dismembered she may feel at times, she always finds her way back to herself. Back to that world of light, of melody, of words and of beauty. Back to The World of No Pain, where one's lust is not inspired by insecurity, or shame, or trauma, or hatred... but by an overwhelming sense of connection to existence, by a boundless appreciation for humanity, and by a limitless love for oneself.

I have only glimpsed this utopia in short, unexpected bursts, and I ache to find it again.

So I ask the water to show me where that world is. Something tells me she would know.



Alicen Grey is an award-winning writer, performance artist and controversy magnet. Best known for her unapologetic writing on women's issues and surviving trauma, Alicen strives to provoke both ruthless self-questioning and deep emotional healing in her audience. When she's not doing writer-ly things, Alicen likes to sing, act, paint her face, ask lots of questions, and stare at the moon for unreasonable lengths of time.

Too Literal (1986)

Melissa Thiringer

“Melissa, where’s your scrunchie?” Mom looked in both pockets of my jacket and on the floor under my booster seat. “I forgot it,” I whispered with a worried ruffle of my forehead. “Oh, that’s okay. We’ll see if your teacher has an extra one.” As I climbed out of the car, my mom scooped me up on her hip. “I can walk, Mom. I’m three and three-quarters.”

“I know, Sweetie, but you already have your ballet slippers on. We don’t want to ruin them by walking on the asphalt.”

After we went in the side door of the pebble-covered office building, Mom set me down on the tile and I ran up the stairs with her following along behind me. I turned left at the top of the stairs and skipped to the door at the end of the hall. I almost had it pulled open enough to fit through when Mom grabbed the edge of the door and helped me pull it the rest of the way. “I almost had it!” I scrunched my nose and pouted for a half a second before darting inside.

Ballet was my whole world. And art, and reading, but ballet made me feel so pretty, even though the other girls had purple leotards and sparkly tutus and I had just a pink leotard and plain white tights. Even though some girls were older and better at it than I was. But I had prettier

hair than anybody. Long blond hair, almost white and down to my waist. I didn’t know if my teacher would let me do ballet without a hair tie. I stood a little bit away from the other girls in class and waited for my mom. They’d never talked to me, so I knew they didn’t like me. She came back with a rubber band, the kind you use to hold pencils together. “See? Nothing to worry about!” she said with a smile as she put my hair in a ponytail.

But I was worried. I wasn’t supposed to use that kind of rubber band in my hair because Mom said that it would pull my hair out when I tried to take it out. I didn’t want to lose the only thing that made me pretty, so I squeezed my eyes shut to hold back my tears. My hair would have to stay in a ponytail forever.

That night, I had a bad dream.

On our way to my ballet class, my parents realized I had forgotten my hair tie so they made a detour. We drove up a spiraling road around a mountain that looked like it belonged in a Dr. Seuss book, a steep cone with jagged cliffs, to a hospital at the tip of the peak. When we arrived at the hospital, my extended family was already there, waiting in the lobby with worried looks on their faces.

My parents walked me to the elevator, up to the fourth floor, and in to a hospital room where a handsome doctor in blue-green scrubs and a surgeon cap was waiting. "Hello, Melissa. I'm going to give you a ponytail so you can go to ballet." My parents left, closing the door behind them, as the doctor lifted me up onto an exam table to look at my hair. "Yep, much too long to do ballet without a ponytail. Hop down." I scooted off the table obediently and he walked me across the bigger-than-necessary room. On the opposite side near a large window was a bed. But it wasn't a hospital bed, it was a metal-frame twin bed with a spring mattress support, and it was tipped on end with the mattress side toward the wall.

The doctor zip-tied my wrists to the springs and turned my head to one side. He then proceeded to sew my hair into a high ponytail with what seemed like a million stitches.

When he was done, he put away the needle, thread, and scissors and came back over to me. "Now, Melissa, I did something nice for you, so you have to do something nice for me," he said, as he untied the drawstring to his scrub pants.

**

A nurse walked me silently back to the lobby where my family was waiting. When they saw me,

relieved looks passed over their faces. My dad took my hand, "Let's go to ballet! Okay, Sweetie?" I'm never gonna get my hair out of this goddamn ponytail.

I awoke to the comforting voice of Peter Cetera on my mom's radio alarm clock:

"I am a man who would fight for your honor

I'll be the hero you're dreaming of..."

Peter Cetera's song "The Glory of Love" topped the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 chart in August of 1986, remaining there for two weeks. It was one of the most popular singles of the year.

<<http://www.billboard.com/archive/charts/1986/hot-100>> Retrieved June 5, 2017.

Melissa (Milly) Thiringer has been diagnosed with schizophrenia and PTSD, and navigates her mental illness with as much honesty as she knows how. She writes to find out who she is because she's sure she's been told wrong. She lives with and loves her family on a rural prairie in North Idaho. Milly is an editor for Filles Vertes Publishing, and you can find more of her writing and art at www.millythiringer.com.



The Dreamer Awakened

Mary McBeth

The dream came again, and I knew what was happening even before I was awake. It was always the same; first the dream, and then the nightmare that was reality; the nimble creepy fingers exploring my inner thighs, and then searching my privates. As a well-trained slave—fully aware of my helplessness and sickening lack of ownership of anything, including my own body—I complied with my stepfather’s wishes, hoping he would be done without talking to me, as fewer things made me feel more disgusting than the gratified whispers uttered from the mouth of the fool – the lover, so pathetically addicted that it actually didn’t matter how I felt.

My mind wandered as I was positioned on my back like a dead person. In fact, I felt as if I were dead, or was I just hoping again, that if he saw what a stone his touch made me, that he would be too ashamed to take that which he could not hope to justify.

A moan and a shudder came from the heap above me.

I lay there, still feigning sleep, waiting for the sound of water to come from the bathroom. When it did, I turned and peered over into the darkness, looking for the sign of life, the only corroborating witness that I was neither a liar,

nor insane. There was nothing. As usual, my stepsister Monica made no sound—no acknowledgment whatsoever. Even though she, the daughter of that beast, was probably first tonight—most every night for that matter—there never was any mention of it. It’s like it was maybe all in my mind.

I dozed off, thinking of the jet-set life of freedom I would someday lead. I was older now, a gorgeous, tall, sophisticated, and terribly important lady. As I arrived from some foreign land, all conversation would cease. Everyone would stop and stare, enraptured, as I swept into our tiny one bedroom Yonkers apartment, smelling like flowers, with fancy matching luggage, and a hat, and gloves and a pretty scarf around my neck. And my name was no longer just plain Mary. The awkward one who could never do anything cool or right, who Monica and the other kids laughed at when the nuns made me wet my pants and walk home from school that way. In fact, I didn’t even know that girl had ever even existed or had ever lived in this apartment. My name was Angelique, and I was a winner and a success.

Mary McBeth is an African-American writer and editor. To date, she has lived and worked in more than 220 cities, in 23 countries. She is currently living in Panama, Central America, where she is hard at work on her first book length memoir entitled, *Where the Heart Is*.



A Reckoning

Michael Gorkin

She had no intention of going to town that day. The rundown colonial buildings, the beggars sprawled in the dusty main plaza, the streets with cobblestones crumbling like an old man's teeth—the entire place made her feel even more uneasy than usual. But Geraldo said he had to make a payment of 100 dollars at the bank by day's end, and he'd be busy with their four sons harvesting the *maiz* right through sunset; so, would she please go there and take care of it, and of course, pick up something nice for herself, a new dress maybe, at the dry goods place.

Reluctantly, she went. She skipped the dry goods place since they hardly ever had anything real pretty there, or if it was pretty enough she couldn't any longer get herself into it; so why make herself miserable by looking into that store mirror that showed you back and front at the same time. Better to just go take care of Geraldo's business at the bank.

She crossed through the main plaza, glanced over at the pockmarked white church where she never entered. She walked by the aproned ladies who were selling fragrant pupusas [tortillas with stuffing] and grilled corn-on-the-cob from smoking pushcarts. Then, just as she was a few steps from the bank, trying to ignore everything

and everyone, she looked up and she saw him. There he was in front of the glass doors of the bank. Erect, as if waiting for some trouble, he was standing there in a blue and brown uniform—different from that other one, the Salvadoran Fuerza Armada one—and now with a shotgun in one hand, and fingering his handlebar moustache with the other hand. The moustache was new, different; before it had been a nasty thin line over his nasty thin mouth. But those pointy ears and the same slick black hair, though a bit grayer now—yes, they were his. And as he said his meaningless welcome in that raspy voice of his, she had no doubt: it was him.

She couldn't look him in the eye. Never could do that. She sensed that he didn't look at her too closely, or if he did, he didn't recognize her. Not surprising, she thought. She had been only 14 years-old then, slim and lovely, and had worn her flowing chestnut hair shoulder-length then, not clipped short like now. Trembling and barely able to breathe, she walked past him. Only with great effort was she able to take care of Geraldo's business. A half-hour later she exited the bank door, relieved to find that some other guy with a shotgun was now standing guard duty.

.....




What was she to do, she kept asking herself as she rode home on the rickety rainbow-colored bus? How deal with this thing? How? Yes, she wanted to tell Geraldo and her older brother Chepe who also lived in the community. But, telling them would have a price. Pleasant and kind as Geraldo was, he just might go after that bastard; that's what he had said years back, just before they got married. And Chepe, he for sure would grab his machete and go hack that son-of-a-whore to pieces, never mind the consequences. So, no, I've got to keep quiet for the moment, she figured, at least until I get this thing figured out.

But that same evening, even though he was tired when he came back from the *milpa* [plot of land], Geraldo sensed that something was wrong with her. "You all right, Carmen?" he asked as he plunked his heavy body down at the wooden bench on their dirt-packed veranda. His broad face with that tender smile was honed in on her as she tried to look away and busy herself by poking the fire and smacking down tortillas onto the homemade cast iron pan. When she didn't answer, he got up and stood silently at her side for a few moments, and then finally said in his soft voice, "Some problem with the bank folks? Or, is it something else. *Que pasa?*"

The four boys were trying not to look at her, and a couple of them went by the cistern and washed their faces. "No problem," she mumbled. She turned toward him, rubbed him gently on his thick shoulder as he flung both arms around her waist. Pulling loose, she said in a way more harsh than she meant, "Mira, Geraldo, you feed the boys tonight." She then stumbled into their dank one-room shanty, covering her sobs with her apron.

Grateful as Carmen was for Geraldo's ways with her, and grateful as she was to her brother Chepe for originally steering his ex-compañero, Geraldo, in her direction, she never could get herself to feel that she deserved their goodness. Nor could she get herself, even on her most hellish days, to talk openly to them about how she felt. They wouldn't understand. Only a woman, and maybe only a woman who had gone through something like she did, could truly fathom how the world had changed for her back when she was 14 years-old; and also, how terrifying it was for her, all these years later, to unexpectedly come upon the one who had forced that change on her; and even more, how confused she now was as to what, if anything,



she should or could do to that bastard, Colonel Montoya.

Luckily for Carmen, within their community of 300 souls, almost all of whom were ex-guerrillas and their families, there were at least two or three women who had suffered similar horrors in their lives. And one of them was the community's healer and fortune-teller, Angelica, a boney, pale and arthritic woman in her seventies who (apart from some teenagers) was the only one in the community who wore lipstick even on weekdays. Nobody knew the full history of Angelica Bonifacia Morales de Cordoba, not even Carmen who adored her. It was general knowledge, however, that she was the wife of a revered former *comandante* of the FMLN guerrillas, but when he died in an ambush in the late 1980s it was his mistress, and not Angelica, who inherited almost all of his worldly goods as well as his sizeable pension. Angelica always proclaimed that she didn't mind this betrayal, which was hard to believe except if one knew (and Carmen was one of the few who did know) that she had long before ceased loving him when he had, out of unimaginable political loyalty, done nothing at all upon discovering that his superior commander had raped her on three consecutive nights when

he, her husband, was off on a training mission in Cuba. Confronted with the indisputable evidence, her husband had said without the slightest shame, "Such are the hazards of war, unfortunately." So, when the news came that her husband had died heroically, she played her part as a bereaved widow, while secretly—and with no shame of her own—welcoming her freedom. And with her new freedom, she left for Spain, where she spent a year studying the arts of healing and fortune-telling. She returned just in time to receive, along with three dozen other families of former FMLN combatants, a small plot of land and a wooden shanty. Promptly, and a bit ostentatiously, she had endeared herself to the new community, as well as several other communities in the area, by predicting almost the exact date of the Peace Accords and, in addition, the general terms of government reparations to the ex-guerrillas and their families.

Now, 20 years hence, Angelica lived in the community's finest house: a two-bedroom cinderblock structure located in the community's upper reaches. From her faded red hammock on her veranda, she could see the 40 or so shanties below, and generally at dawn a soothing,

other-worldly mist rose from the valley and the sugarcane fields and up to the *milpas* just above her.

That drizzly November morning when Carmen finally decided to visit Angelica—after a week of horrendous, repetitive nightmares—she found her friend sitting cross-legged on her hammock, her head covered with a white silk scarf. Slowly rising, Angelica beckoned Carmen to have a seat on an adjacent floor cushion. “I heard you coming up the path and I sense you are carrying quite a load on you. Here, I’ll get you some coffee, *chica*. It’ll calm you.”

“I sure as hell hope so,” Carmen said. Then, even though she fought it for a moment, she began weeping. The two women sat silently for a long minute, and then Carmen said, “My nightmares—they’ve come back.”

“I see...”

“I saw him, Angelica. In town—at the bank.”

“Saw who?”

“The Colonel.”

“You mean the Fuerza Armada guy who during the war, that one who....”

“Yes, him.”

Carmen didn’t need to explain further. Years ago, shortly after she met Angelica in their

newly-established community, the two had shared confidences. Trusting Angelica immediately—an unusual experience for Carmen—she told her in gruesome detail how she had been captured while delivering food supplies to her brother’s FMLN unit in the *monte*, up in Chalatenango. She and three others were captured together, tied up like animals, and transported to a remote army barracks belonging to the Fuerza Armada. Colonel Montoya was the commander there. He came out of his office that day to inspect the four girls, pinching them and fondling them, and then turned the other three over to one of his soldiers and kept Carmen for himself. Later she found out that those poor girls had been gang-raped for a week and then shot in the head and dumped into the garbage pit. As for her, she had been the Colonel’s “little one” for two months, and probably would have suffered the same fate as the other girls if it had not been for a surprise visit from the Red Cross which caught the entire battalion off guard, including the Colonel, and he was compelled by those gringo doctors and nurses to release her to their custody. They fed and clothed her for a few days. Afterwards, they drove her in their shiny white truck back to her hamlet where she

rejoined her family—that is, the few who were not off fighting with the FMLN. Unable to talk about her experience and, in any case, with nobody wanting to hear a word of it, she had kept it a secret until after the war when Chepe, her favorite brother, returned; and then she told him.

“Yes, yes, I remember the whole thing. Of course, I remember.” Angelica shook her head, wincing. She took a deep swallow of her coffee and said, as if to herself, “So that bastard is back in your dreams—your nightmares.” With her smoldering grey eyes focused on Carmen, she said, “Now you’re wondering what to do, aren’t you? I understand. Believe me, I understand. Remember what happened to me? I couldn’t decide, and in the end I did nothing. That was a bad choice. One *must* do something.”

“Like what?”

Angelica started pacing up and down on her veranda. Finally, as if she were a judge bringing in the verdict, Angelica explained that she had learned in Spain how to effect certain curses—curses that would settle the matter with minimum bloodshed. Angelica did not believe in using this wizardry to kill people. “Death sentences are only for God,” she said. “But short of that, we can let him know that we have not

forgotten and not forgiven, and that he will have to pay a penalty—something short of death—for his crime.” Angelica put her arms around Carmen. “Are you willing to follow my instructions?”

“Si, si. I’m ready.”

The plan was rather simple, even though it seemed a bit bizarre to Carmen. Angelica said she had seen it employed on several occasions. But, to make the curse work (Angelica peered into Carmen’s eyes and grasped her hands with surprising force), every detail had to be followed *exactly*. What Carmen had to do was to slaughter a rooster, cut off its cockscomb and place it in a plastic bag together with a half-cup of the rooster’s blood, and then add into this bloody mix a pair of Carmen’s most sexy underwear. Once she had this plastic bag prepared, she needed to place it inside a brown paper bag on which she had written her tormentor’s name. Then, within the following twenty-four hours, she had to deposit the bag with her own hand (nobody else could do it for her!) either in front of her tormentor’s home or at his place of work. After that, all she needed to do was go home and wait patiently: it would take

about a month. Since it was now near the end of November, Angelica said, by Christmas time the curse will have taken effect.

With these instructions firmly in mind, Carmen returned to her shanty. True, she had her doubts that such magic could work. But with her deep belief in Angelica, she was determined to try it. Anyway, what did she have to lose?

Fortunately, that afternoon her four sons were in school, and now that the harvest was over Geraldo was busy with several other men in the community repairing the potholed road that led from the community to the main street. The only beings that would see her doing these strange things were the two cows, the three dozen chickens, their dog Fidel, and of course, the rooster. As she went into the house to fetch Geraldo's machete, she realized that killing the rooster would be the easy part. After all, she'd been slaughtering chickens and roosters ever since she was seven years-old. But, the underwear part of this plan, just thinking about it, filled her with disgust. Besides, what was "sexy" about her underwear—those miserable, half-torn things she had worn for years? As she went to the trunk to fetch a couple of these things, much to her surprise, she suddenly remembered that at

the bottom and covered by a sheet of plywood, she had hidden those pink panties and matching brassiere that Geraldo had bought her shortly after they married. She had screamed at him back then, swore that she would never wear those things, and buried them away at the bottom of the trunk. Now, at last, she had found a use for them.

A half-hour later, blood still on her hands, she had a plastic bag filled with the necessary items. She was sitting there on the veranda, now writing the name of her tormentor with a red crayon in large letters on the paper bag when she heard Geraldo's footsteps entering their yard. A wave of nausea rose from the pit of her stomach as she bolted into the shanty with the two bags in hand. Geraldo, who was seldom flustered by anything, gazed at his fleeing wife, then saw the decapitated rooster lying on the veranda floor; and he, too, felt his stomach turn. "Hey, Carmen," he called after her, but did not enter the shanty. "What's going on here?"

"Nothing's going on," came the answer from inside the shanty.

"Like hell it isn't." Geraldo removed his muddy boots and slowly walked inside. There, sitting on their cot, the two bags still grasped tightly in her



hands, Carmen was shaking and moaning. Without saying a word, she held out the two bags to Geraldo and, in a mixture of anguish and embarrassment, she revealed to him the whole story. Geraldo listened patiently, biting his lips as she talked. When she finished, he said to her with all the calmness he could muster, “And this is what you are going to do?”

“I feel I must.”

“There are other ways, you know.”

“No, Geraldo, don’t!” She grabbed him by his shoulders. “Please, let me do it my way. I trust Angelica.”

“And when are you going to do this?”

“Tomorrow. At dawn. Before the bank opens and before Montoya arrives. I’m going to put the stuff next to the door where he stands. I’ve got it figured out, Geraldo. Please, leave it to me. You must!”

The following morning, as the first rays of the sun were slashing through the banana and papaya trees next to the veranda, Carmen, dressed in her frayed blue Sunday clothes, was ready to go. She had hardly slept that night. The bestial face of the Colonel kept reappearing in her mind and she felt queasy with each reappearance. But she also felt

something else now. She imagined the bloody concoction she was planning to deliver, and disgusting as it was, it also gave her a sense of strength and a vague feeling of hopefulness. Still, she was scared. What if someone noticed what she was placing there in front of the bank? Would she run? And what if the Colonel himself caught her doing it? What would she say or do then? Unsettled by these last-minute thoughts, she didn’t bother grabbing her breakfast of tortillas and beans. Nor did she stop to clean up the mess she made yesterday—the blood, the feathers, and the rooster’s castrated head. Geraldo would pick up the mess, she figured. She just wanted to be on her way and get it over with.


An hour later, she found herself pushing her way out of the bus at the town’s already-crowded main plaza. The scent of smoking wood and fresh-made tortillas perfumed the damp morning air; she wanted to go get a couple of those tortillas but decided to wait. Walking across the plaza toward the bank, she glanced at the hovering white church, and for the first time in years she felt a longing to go in and pray; but that too would have to wait. She continued heading towards the bank which was not due to open for another half-hour and, *Gracias a Dios*,

nobody was lined up outside and the Colonel was nowhere in sight. Wasting not another second, she went up the stairs leading to the bank's glass doors, sat down for a moment as if she were a customer, and with a quick hand she deposited her bag just to the left of the doors. She continued to sit for a few more minutes, sweating now and her feet almost numb. No customers yet, no Colonel, and nobody watching her. Unhurriedly, she pulled herself up and casually strolled over to one of the tortilla stands and bought herself two *pupusas* with cheese along with a cup of coffee. But, hungry as she was, she could barely eat. Instead, she continued over to the sole coconut palm in the plaza, sat down, and as inconspicuously as possible kept a watch on the bank's front door.

Sure enough, at eight o'clock sharp, according to the clock perched high on the church's outer wall, the bank doors swung open and out stepped her enemy in his starched uniform and with his shotgun in his hand. A few customers had lined up, and one by one he welcomed them with that phony smile of his. Soon they were all inside and he shifted his stance slightly, looked up at the cloudless sky and then down at the ground. At once he noticed the package. He picked it up, at

first not looking at it closely, but then the writing on the brown bag seemed to surprise him. A few more customers passed by and he hardly welcomed them. He walked a few paces away from the front doors, quickly peeked inside the brown bag, and began removing the plastic pouch. From her perch under the coconut tree, her enemy seemed to shudder when he saw the contents. To her surprise, he then disappeared back inside the bank; and even more to her surprise, five minutes later a second guard came out of the bank and took up the Colonel's position. Carmen waited where she was for a long time, still unable to eat her *pupusas*. Eager as she was to get home, she felt stuck to that patch under the coconut tree, and she could not take her eyes off of the bank. She took a swig of her coffee, enjoyed the warm flow down her throat, and then from her mouth came a sound that she hardly recognized as her own; not quite a laugh, more a cackle; and for the first time in days, she almost felt good.

As Carmen was there in town delivering her witch's brew, Geraldo was back at their shanty's kitchen making lopsided tortillas for his sons and getting them ready for school. The boys were not



bothered by their mother's unusual early disappearance. Only Geraldo was bothered—and for reasons his sons, of course, could not imagine. Geraldo was supposed to work that day with the other guys on repairing the road, but he decided to stay at home. Normally he enjoyed that communal work which wasn't very hard, and often enough was fun—bullshitting, having a good laugh. But today he felt like being alone. He felt confused and he felt angry. Shouldn't he have gone with his wife, no matter what she said? What if there had been a confrontation and he wasn't there to protect her? He should have gone.

Not able to sit still, he went over to the woodpile, grabbed his axe and began splitting logs. That, at least, felt good. He wasn't singing now as he usually did when he worked. He was splitting the logs in a quiet fury, his massive arms driving the axe through the pine blocks in one swift downswing. The sweat pouring down his face, down his torso, drenching his pants and shirt, gave him some relief from his thoughts. He surely would have continued for the whole morning if it weren't for a sudden and unexpected visit from his brother-in-law. Grinning as he removed his straw sombrero from his bald head, Chepe was walking in a jaunty,

mocking way towards him. "Well, well, here I figured you were sick or something and that's why you weren't with us working on the road. You sure as hell don't look sick to me!"

"No, I'm not sick," Geraldo answered, looking away from Chepe.

Chepe glanced around the yard and back at the shanty. "Where's Carmen, today?"

"She's out."

"I can see that."

"She had some business in town."

"Must have been pretty serious business," said Chepe. "The place looks a mess. That's not like her. Rooster feathers, blood on the veranda, even a head lying over there. What the hell is going on? You two have a fight or something?"

"No, not really."

"Shit, Geraldo. You know you can tell me. I know Carmen can be a pain in the ass sometimes. What is it?"

Geraldo put down the axe, walked over to the cistern and dumped a pail of water over his head, and then wiped himself off with the towel hanging on a branch of the papaya tree. He wasn't at all sure that it was wise to tell Chepe what had happened. Carmen definitely wouldn't want that. But he had his own need, and he felt



he wanted to say something. So he motioned for Chepe to come sit on a pine stump next to him, and he filled him in on some of what was happening.

Chepe sat there listening silently for several minutes, stroking the stubble on his angular face and fixing his unblinking dark eyes on Geraldo. The muscles in his forearms were sliding like snakes as he rubbed his enormous calloused hands together. Geraldo had seen this face of Chepe's, this look of his, in the *monte* during the war, and he was always glad back then that Chepe was on his side. Finally, gazing around at the mess in front of him, Geraldo shrugged and ended his story with a comment that felt lame and even unmanly. "Out of respect for your sister, my wife, I felt I had to let her do it her way."

"Do it her way?" Chepe snarled. "What the fuck does that girl know about defending herself?"

"I know, I know," said Geraldo. "But out of respect..."


"What the hell kind of respect is that? And where the hell is your respect for me? And for yourself?" There was silence for a few moments, though it felt longer, and then Chepe continued, "I've been waiting for 20 years to catch up with Montoya. Twenty years, I've been

waiting to find him—to cut off his balls, to let him know who the fuck he was messing with. And now, Geraldo, you tell me he's right there in town, standing in front of the bank, and you're sitting here doing nothing because my sister is trying to punish this guy with some kind of witch's brew? Is that what you're telling me?"

"All I said," Geraldo responded slowly, sadly, "is that Carmen trusts Angelica. You know that as well as I do. And I agreed she should try that stuff out. Look, Chepe, she may be your sister, but she's my wife. You know damn well—yes, you do—that despite everything, I've always treated her with respect. Now is no different. You understand?"

Chepe rose from the stump, gave Geraldo a thump on the shoulder and said, "I understand, my friend. But I also understand that there's no way that son-of-a-whore Montoya is going to still be standing there in the future. *That* I can promise you." And Chepe walked briskly away, as Geraldo followed him with his eyes, wondering what Chepe would do next, and much to his own surprise, not sorry that he had told him about Montoya.

It was still a few days before Christmas. As a



rule, Carmen and Geraldo did not do much to celebrate the holidays: no tree, no decorations, and only a few gifts for the boys and sometimes for each other. To get the gifts, they needed to go to town. At Carmen's insistence neither of them had been there for weeks, nor had they spoken of Montoya since that day when Carmen had delivered her fateful package and returned in the afternoon to announce in her perfunctory way, "I did it. I think the curse is already working." At that, Geraldo had squeezed out a smile and answered, "Well done, Carmen."

In the meantime, Geraldo naturally had had other thoughts as to what might have happened. But from Chepe, he learned nothing. The two men had spent the past few weeks continuing to work on the road. They didn't say much to each other for a couple of days, but soon enough they were chatting and joking again along with the other guys. It wasn't until the final day of the roadwork, as each was heading home, that Chepe gave any indication of what had happened. "Time to enjoy the holidays, Geraldo," he said amiably, and then he winked—or so it seemed to Geraldo—as he sauntered off. That wink, if it really was a wink, felt like an icicle going down Geraldo's back. It was the same wink that he'd sometimes

see from his brother-in-law when Chepe returned from some mission as a sniper in the guerrillas, and it meant only one thing: the target had been hit. So what was Chepe saying now, he wondered? Was Montoya a dead man? Yet, if that were true, surely rumors would have wafted out to the community, since the Colonel's reputation was known to all of the war generation.

What was sure, as far as Geraldo could tell, was that Carmen seemed calmer now. What Geraldo did not know is that Carmen's nightmares had not completely disappeared. She didn't tell him this. As best she could, she was quietly trying to dispel this ghoul of her dreams with a brief incantation that Angelica had suggested. Angelica had insisted it would work: over time, she said, the ghost of Montoya would fade into his own satanic darkness. With all her heart, Carmen wanted to believe this. But in recent days, just before they were about to go to town again she had the sharp sense that Colonel Montoya would always be with her: no matter where he was in this world or the next, he was destined to reappear, and she would, at those moments, remain his 14 year-old prey.

Yet, ready or not, it was soon to be Christmas,



and there were a few gifts to be bought, and Geraldo had to go back to the bank and make his monthly payment of 100 dollars. As they walked through the sugarcane fields to the bus stop, they did not speak, though uncharacteristically they held each other's hand. They did not speak while on the bus either. It was only when the bus unloaded on the far side of the plaza that Carmen, her voice shaking, said that she would be going over to the market and dry goods store while Geraldo took care of his business at the bank. Geraldo nodded amenably and agreed to meet her in a half-hour or so in the plaza next to the twenty-foot high Christmas tree there.

His mouth felt dry, so half-way to the bank Geraldo stopped and bought a coconut from one of the stands in the park. While he slowly sipped the juice, he tried to peek through the scrawny trees that stood like lost refugees randomly located in dusty patches. From where he stood he could only see the bank's upper façade. Then, approaching slowly, as if he were stalking an enemy, he could see the guard at the front door of the bank. With a mixture of relief and concern, he could see it was not Montoya. It was a young man, tall and thin and with a neatly trimmed reddish beard. Geraldo tipped his straw sombrero

to the young guard and walked into the bank.

Moments later he was seated in one of the bank's cubicles, pleasantly chatting with Señora Suarez, the woman who handled his loan. Even though there were a couple of other customers waiting outside, Señora Suarez took her time since she was fond of Geraldo and admired his gentlemanly manner. "So how goes it with the harvest this year?" she asked, offering Geraldo a Marlboro.

"A good year, muy bien," he answered, as she lit the cigarette for him with a pearl-colored lighter. "One more good harvest, and I'll pay off the entire loan, I reckon."

"No rush, Geraldo, we're always here for you if you need us. No change there. Same as always."

Geraldo took a deep drag of his cigarette, as if filling some empty spot in himself. Pretending the thought had just come to him, he said, "I did notice one small change when I came in, though."


"What's that?" she said, smiling.

"You've got a new guard out front, I noticed. A pity. I used to like chatting with Señor Montoya when I came here."

"Yes, right. Edmundo Montoya is gone."

"He retire?"

"Oh no," she said. "I wish it had happened that



way.” She motioned for Geraldo to move his chair closer, and she lowered her voice. “He got mugged a few weeks back. Told us that he had a nasty fall, but nobody believed him. His nose was broken and his arm too. We figured he got robbed by some thugs in the neighborhood. Especially because he told us that he’s leaving the area. And can you imagine—to the United States.”

“Lucky him,” said Geraldo, trying not to sound too interested.

“Yes, I suppose,” Señora Suarez said. “I wish I had relatives up there like he does. Two sisters in California, and a brother in Texas, an ex-army officer like Edmundo.” Señora Suarez looked around to see if anyone was listening, and then in a whisper she said, “I’ll tell you something, between you and me. I’ve heard that his brother got quietly relieved of his army duties for some... well, some misdeeds. Anyway, at the end of the war, the gringos offered them all a way out—gave them all lifetime visas. I reckon Edmundo has decided to use his now, maybe join some of his family. My guess, that’s all.” Señora Suarez again looked about her, took a quick puff of her cigarette, returned her cigarette lighter to her purse, and extended a firm hand to Geraldo. “Bueno, I better get on with the customers

outside now. Always nice chatting with you, Geraldo. And, by the way, *Feliz Navidades!*”

“The same to you, Señora Suarez!” Geraldo tipped his sombrero in her direction, backed out of her cubicle and for a moment had trouble placing the sombrero back on his head. He walked over to the water cooler and almost forgot to remove the cigarette from his mouth as he bent to drink. Exiting the bank, he went over to a bench near the plaza’s Christmas tree. He was glad that Carmen was not there yet. What the hell should he tell her, he wondered? The truth? He could hardly grasp the truth himself. Had Chepe beat up Montoya—the wrong Montoya? And what should he tell Chepe?

As Geraldo sat there dazed and mulling over what to do, a group of cheery teenage girls passed by. They were wearing blue-and-white school uniforms and some of them were carrying Christmas tree decorations. They began placing the decorations—bright colored balls and white wooden figurines—on the tree, and at the same time they started singing Christmas carols. Geraldo listened, looked at these sweet kids singing and laughing, and without expecting it, tears began flowing down his cheeks. He suddenly had this strange feeling—something like

what he had felt at the end of the war, some river of relief and regret at the same time. Now, as these tears rushed out of him, he found himself thinking that what he had just heard about Montoya—all the Montoyas—was information he probably ought not tell Carmen or Chepe. For the good of everyone, shouldn't he just keep it to himself? As this thought was passing through his mind, he looked up and saw Carmen approaching him.

"You're crying?" she said, puzzled, as she tenderly stroked his arm.

"Beautiful kids, beautiful songs, no?"

"Si, si....That's why the tears?"

"I guess so," he said.

Carmen forced a smile, then turned abruptly toward the bank. "And what did you see over there? He's gone, isn't he?"

Geraldo re-gathered himself. "Oh, yes. Gone—never coming back."

"Never?"

"Gone to the United States, they say. He had some kind of *susto*, a terrible fright, and he took off."

"Well, that's good," Carmen said flatly.

"You don't seem....well, you don't look all that happy about it. Or even surprised."

"Surprised, no." Carmen paused. "Happy....si, si, you could call it that." She grabbed Geraldo's hand to pull him up from the bench. "Got the kids their presents, and also a nice surprise for you."

"And what about for you?"


"*Hombre, no!* I was over at the dry goods store and they had nothing that fits me right."

"Not even now? Not even Christmas time?"

"Next Christmas. Let's just go home now."

And they strolled slowly over to the bus stop, holding hands tightly, in a silence that felt comfortable enough to each of them.





Michael Gorkin: I am a psychologist and writer.

Among the six books I have written or co-authored are, “From Grandmother to Granddaughter–Salvadoran Women’s Stories”, (University of California Press, 2001), and “From Beneath the Volcano–The Story of a Salvadoran Campesino and His Family”, (University of Arizona Press, 2011; co-author with Marta Evelyn Pineda).

Mine*Kelsey Anne Rankin*

My skin has traveled. I've walked with her under the guidance of many hands and through the meadows of many sinking, breathing bodies. I learned her name there; how far she stretched and where we – her and I – began.

I've been young and I have sprouted into my body. I have been bluntly sewn. "Don't tell your family," in my head before I knew I could bleed for the sake of being fertile, lush.

My hips found their way into hands as my mind threw itself further away from the whole of my flesh. It was the hands of men who kept me from her. "You're beautiful."

I do not blame them.

Sometimes they took my skin and wore it for themselves. Sometimes I showered them in every inch of her because, "I love you."

I do not hate them.

It's been many years that I spent beside her – my skin. Until the day that I decided to shut myself up, become small. Become a point, a wrinkle. So

small my bones turned to dust and my breath was all but silence.

It was the same day that sunlight first truly hit me and sank into my pores and made me feel something like home. I stood up that day.

I said hello to her, my skin, and she smiled. Now, I know her; I love her.

What a heavy love she is to bear, my skin.



Eviction Notice

Beverly James

"See me," I whisper. "See me! See me!"

I am startled by the screams that come from outside of my body, and I am surprised to find that my hands have balled up into fists at my side.

"Do you see me?! Do you know who I am?! Do you remember me?! See me, Goddamnit! See me!"

I think it is someone else screaming the words, someone else's spittle flecking the old man's creased face. Leaning into his wheelchair, I try not to retch at the stench coming off him. He reeks of piss and shit and old beer. He hasn't bathed in months, slumping in his wheelchair like a relic from the '70s with his fucked up, matted afro and his tattered dashiki.

I feel the scratching in my throat, the words becoming hoarse mumbles that make no sense. Glimpsing my face in the mirror, I am confounded by the fury that twists my features into something unrecognizable. My eyes are wide, pupils darting from one side to the other, taking in the familiar dark wood dresser, the urine stained mattress, the jar of Vaseline on the nightstand.

It's the jar of Vaseline that snaps my head back in shock and slams me back onto that bed, my plaid schoolgirl skirt pulled up to my waist as he tries to push into my seven-year-old body.

He slathers himself with Vaseline first, careful to wipe the globs of grease on every inch of his penis. I stare up at the ceiling, wondering what will come next. Will he split my body in two?

How badly will it hurt? Will my mother beat me if she finds out? Am I being a bad girl? He smiles at me as he struggles to fit his giant organ into my tiny body. I cry out in pain.

"Shush now. Just try to relax, and remember, this is our secret. You'll get in trouble if you tell your mother." But my cries grow louder.

Frustrated, he climbs off me and wipes my tears. I pull up my yellow cotton panties, pull down my red and navy-blue skirt and try to steady my trembling legs. I stare at the Vaseline and feel a churning in my gut. I vomit across the floor and slide in the mixture of tater tots, ketchup and chocolate milk as I try to run to the bathroom. He sucks his teeth and grabs a towel to clean up the mess that I have made. I am silent, wondering if I will have to play this game again tomorrow.

His sister skips down the attic stairs, my brother dragging his feet behind her. He is tiny for a six year old and is often mistaken for a preschooler. His head hangs low, and his hands are shoved into his pants pockets.

"What happened? Did you do it?"

"Couldn't. I used the Vaseline and everything. But it wouldn't go in. She's too small; I'll wait."

Brother peeks up at me, our shame reaching across the room to unite us in our babysitter's house. I want to help him, to save him from the games they make us play. But they'll beat us if we don't submit. So, I stare back at him, willing him to be quiet and keep our secret. A beating from Mother would be so much worse. She would blame me, as the oldest.

I suck in air, willing myself back in the room with him, the man who has lived in my head for more than forty years. My black, patent-leather pumps make clicking noises on the hardwood floor as I walk over to a worn, brown upholstered chair. Easing down into the seat, I feel a spring push against my buttocks, forcing me to shift to one side.

"Motherfucker, do you know who I am? I bet there have been so many of us. You wouldn't remember me."

His head lolls back before settling at an upright position. He glares at me, his rheumy eyes locking onto mine.

"I ain't do nothing to you girl. What's this about

anyway?"

His head rolls back and nestles on the side of the wheelchair. He might be napping; he might be faking. I can't tell.

"Old man, you and me are gonna have a 'come to Jesus.' you tried to fuck me when I was a little girl," I snap, pulling my black suit jacket closed. "You and your sister babysat me and my little brother. You did terrible things to us." My voice trails off. "Terrible things I can't forget."

He lifts his head, focusing past my shoulder to the bright sunlight piercing through the sooty window.

"You little girls always come up in here actin' all fast and shit. Actin' like you don't know what you doin'." He shifts his body and reaches down to better position his foot on the wheelchair.

"You knew what you was doin'. You knew. Lil bitches. Didn't tell you mama, though. You knew what you was doin'."

His voice trails off again, his chin coming to rest on his chest. The sun is beaming right on him, highlighting the beads of sweat forming on his greasy face. I have always wondered how much my mother knew.

We were crossing the street from the grocery store, headed to our Brooklyn walk-up. The cold

air felt good, even if my vagina still throbbed from the latest game. Outside, in the street with my mother holding my hand, I could pretend that I was safe. She looked back at me, noticing my awkward gait.

“What’s wrong with you? You hurt your leg at school or something?”

“No Mami, my cuca hurts.”

She was silent the rest of way, then stopped abruptly at our gate and turned to face me.

Don’t ever take your panties off for anybody, you hear me? They gonna have to peel me off of you if I find out you let somebody mess with you.”

He is snoring now, his head slumped all the way down and his chest moving rhythmically. The room grows hot as the sun bears down on the small apartment. The jar of Vaseline is open, it’s lid lying beside it on the nightstand. I stare at it for a few minutes, lost in memories that I have never been able to shake.

“You’re letting him rent room in your head for free,” I hear my therapist say. “What do you need to do to evict him?”

His coughs bring my attention back to the wheelchair and the old man who caused me so much pain. I think I am done, but the anger flares up again.

“I fucked people I didn’t even like because I thought I was garbage!”

I am pacing now, watching the sun cast shadows on my reflection in the mirror.

“I hated myself because of what you did to me. Do you understand that? The damage you did?”

“Ask for forgiveness, motherfucker!”

But the old man keeps sleeping and I stop pacing. I gather my purse, brush off my pleated skirt and start walking toward the bedroom door. Picking up the jar of Vaseline, I hurl it at him and watch it bounce off the top of his head. He never stirs.

“Hey, do you have a cigarette or not? Girl, you must be on the beach in Costa Rica or something, because you haven’t heard a word I said.”

I swing back toward my desk and gather my purse and lunch bag.

“You leaving without giving me a smoke?”

“Nah, you can have one.” I fish around in my pocketbook and grab the pack of Newports. I toss one toward my co-worker before heading for the door.

“Amen! I need this right about now. You alright?”

“Yeah, just got a lot of things on my mind. But I’m better now.”

“Where did you go at lunchtime?”

“To a funeral,” I reply, swinging open the exit door.

“Whose?”

“Mine.”

Beverly James has more than 28 years of experience as a journalist, public relations manager and creative writer. She obtained a bachelor's degree in journalism from Howard University, and a master's in professional writing from Kennesaw State University. In her spare time, Beverly enjoys writing young adult fiction and is working on a memoir.



Thief of Night

Eugenia Smith

Thief of Night

BCE: *In Greek mythology, night is a woman.*

Nyx, the powerful and voluptuous goddess of the night, is also mother to Hypnos (sleep), Thanatos (death), Charon (ferryman of the dead), Nemesis (retribution), Moros (doom), and Apatē (deceit).

These fearsome night dwellers lurk in shadows, stalk the perimeters of night, and dare women to enter. Women who trespass do so at their peril. In fable and lore, as in life, night favors thieves, murderers, and rapists. Nyx's dominion is women's nemesis.

7 p.m., December 1, 1977: She'd rather stay home, but she promised Frieda. So she pulls on her clunky, heavy-soled hiking boots, wraps Jack's old grey muffler around her neck, and hollers goodbye. Swaddled in layers of wool and down, she's ready for her four-block walk to Frieda's house—for her Ph.D. celebration. The only thing she's left uncovered is her head. She doesn't want hat hair. She wants to be beautiful for Frieda.

She heads out the back door and into the cold, hunkering down against the wind-chill, clutching a bottle of champagne in a paper bag. She eases herself down the slippery slope of the driveway toward the deserted street, then turns toward

Riverside and away from Jack, who calls to her from the doorway.

"You're crazy to go out on a night like this. Let me drive you!"

"I'll be fine!" she protests. "I can take care of myself! Back in a few hours!"

The clock on the Riverside Bank reads 7:01; temperature, 12 degrees F., not factoring in the bitter wind. No wonder the West Bank streets are empty. It's colder than she thought.

Even the Viking Bar seems unusually quiet as she passes, no thumping bass notes, no loud, funky guitar licks—too blustery and bitter, she thinks, for any but fools to venture out. She inhales the familiar stink of piss and smoke, reek of mildew and fried onions and stale beer, rotted wood and human wreckage, all of it wafting through the seedy bar's vent into the night air.

She's repelled but comforted by the derelict grittiness of it all. This is her neighborhood. It's home. It's where she feels safe.

She hustles past and crosses to the other side of the street, where a solitary streetlight illuminates her path. A shout startles her, then a door-slam. Probably a rowdy being ejected from the bar.

She picks up her pace to avoid being accosted.

She's used to being hassled by unruly drunks. She can handle herself. But it's freezing, and she's in a hurry.

Something shifts. Brisk footsteps. Crunch of snow under a boot. An arm around her waist, another circling her neck in a stranglehold. Hot, boozy breath on her neck. Her mouth agape in a silent scream. Fist in her mouth, choking her. Taste of unwashed flesh, nicotine, beef jerky. Salt and sour.

She flails. His grip tightens. "Don't move, bitch."

1594 AD: Shakespeare's Lucrece is raped in her own bedchamber, by "lust-breathed Tarquin," her husband's comrade, who comes to her in "the dead of night,/When heavy sleep had closed up mortal eyes:/No comfortable star did lend his light." Night itself is asleep on the job, lids closed over starlight, and is complicit in the crime.

Tarquin will be banished for his offense (a light sentence, considering); but Lucrece bears the heavier burden; "she hath lost a dearer thing than life"—her chastity, a cherished prize coveted by many but to be given and taken without sin only in Holy Wedlock. She implores the night to conceal her dishonor: "O hateful, vaporous, and foggy Night!/Since thou art guilty of my cureless

crime,/Muster thy mists to meet the eastern light,/Make war against proportion'd course of time."

Of course, night does break into day, revealing the stain of the "cureless crime," showing in her mien "the story of sweet chastity's decay,/The impious breach of holy wedlock vow."

Tellingly, the blood she sheds when she later stabs herself—releasing her soul from "that polluted prison where it breathed"—is black. The crime is hers. She must pay for what's been stolen from her.

Women of the night: In the 1970s, women take to the streets en masse to Take Back the Night. "Women, united, can never be defeated!" they chant, giddy with their strength in numbers. And after the march, they tuck fugitive pieces of the night into their pockets and purses and go home feeling indomitable.

Some return to homes they share with life partners, some to men who are their allies. Others return to men who will berate or batter and rape them, dousing their beloveds with their rage to put their feminist fires out. And some of them will, whatever their circumstances, meet their undoing on the streets or in bars, at bus stops, in public bathrooms, in parking ramps, in

workplaces....

Today, women still march, still link arms to steal a few hours of night in solidarity. They still don't walk alone after dark, or even in daylight, with impunity. They still startle reflexively at footsteps, all systems on high alert, adrenaline pumping, whistles and pepper spray at the ready, fists and feet poised for fight or flight. The night doesn't belong to them.

The night they seek to own still belongs to others—to sundry strangers, friends and acquaintances, bosses and coworkers, and men who profess their love. And when the unthinkable happens, they still ask themselves: *Why me?* What did I do to deserve this? And the answers come back to them in age-old finger-pointing questions: How many sexual partners have you had? What were you wearing? What were you doing out alone at that hour? Why didn't you fight harder?

Did you ask for it? Did you like it?

They wonder: *Is it my fault? What did I do wrong?*

December 1, 1977: She screams, but there's no sound, just the thunder of her heartbeat, blood surging to her head, ka-thump ka-thump. Wind-scorched cheeks flame and flash-freeze. Fire and

ice. Baritone growl of his voice.

"Shut up or I'll kill you, bitch. I've got a knife."

His fist unfurls. Fingernails scrape across her tongue, scratch her cheeks; grimy fingers stab her tonsils. She gags, and he squeezes her tighter, tugs on her blue down jacket with his free hand. The jacket rips, sighs, exhales flakes of down.

"Fucking cunt—stop your squirming."

Her soul leaves her body and floats skyward like a pale rogue moon, guardian and voyeur, snow angel rising to hover, shine its candle, bear witness. Her body goes limp, and he relaxes his grip.

"You gonna cooperate, bitch?"

She can see him now, in shadow. He's tall, swarthy, slight of build but wiry, strong. She can't see his face, only his eyes, flaring above a tightly wound wool scarf. Does she know him? Has he been watching her? Does he know her name, know where she lives? She inhales him—rank reek of dank cellars, cheap booze, BO, fried food, nicotine.

She gags, swallows to keep from vomiting. If she vomits, he'll probably kill her.

In the world beyond, lamplight and the faint, bluish flicker of TV screens glimmer through

curtained windows. Exhaust rises from chimneys. People are inside. Warm. Safe. Oblivious. If she screams, they won't hear. It's winter, time to close out the world.

He drags her into the alley, shoves her against a garage. A garbage can tips, clatters, spills its refuse. He laughs, a rasp over her flesh. *Haha*. A dog barks. She falls to her knees, frozen in place, his supplicant.

His crotch is at eye level. A gloved hand grips her shoulder, pushing her down. Glint of fury in his eyes.

He grabs her by the hair, pulls her toward him. "Take off your jeans. Lie down. On your back. Slowly. Now! Or I'll do it for you." He shoves her again, and she lands spread-eagle across a crusty snow bank. She unbuttons, fumbles with the zipper.

"Hurry up, bitch."

He leans over to untie her boots, yank them off, toss them aside. "Can I keep my jeans on partway?" she asks. Polite. Deferential. He lifts her legs and tugs off her jeans, flings them aside. Her underpants dangle from one leg, a limp flag of resistance flying at half-mast. She whimpers, or maybe she cries out. "Stupid cunt," he mutters. "Keep your fucking mouth

shut." Fog, or maybe smoke, swirls from between his lips. He descends in slow motion toward her frozen body, as if to do pushups. Grunting.

He grasps her wrists and pins her arms above her head. He's hard, his weapon unsheathed and rising, his body a clenched fist. She's a stone, hurtling over the precipice, sinking into a trance. She's drowning, vortex roaring in her head.

The weight of him crushes her into the snow bank. He moves on top of her, inside of her. Thrashing. Ramming. Pump and grind. Short guttural breaths. Bile in her throat. She writhes, moans. Flexes her vaginal muscles. She knows the moves.

Dead weight. Frosty miasma of foul breath.

Hurry. Make him come. Get it over with. Squeeze. Thrust. Pump. Flex. Scrape. Bone against bone against ice. Soul on ice. Freezing on contact.


Her body on autopilot, faking it. Doing what it's trained to do. Muscle memory.

Let him mistake her terror for passion. That might save her.

She moans. "Hey, baby, you likin' it, huh?"

"Mmm," she says. She's not there. She's left her body.

Later, she'll remember—remember trying to



pretend that this is just some guy she met in a bar after a few too many beers, gruff and mean but harmless. Maybe he won't kill her if she just gives him what he wants. She can deal. She'll be OK. This isn't really happening.

She's always been a lousy liar.

Five minutes. Ten. Twenty. Tick tock. All feeling gone. Everything shut down. Frozen. Numb. Snow angel drifts away, candle flickers out. Dark gets darker, night's eyelids close. Stars wink and disappear. If only he'd just get it over with. Maybe she'll die here. He'll be the last person she ever sees.

She's awake. A dark figure looms over her. He yanks her up, jerks her face toward his open fly. Bile in her throat. No. Please. Anything but that. She clenches her teeth.

Waning crescent moon, blinkered stars, spangled ice-crystal haze. In the house across the alley, a light goes off in one room, then on in another. No one looks out. A truck clatters by, and a car groans to life down the block. She's dying under an indifferent sky, and the life around her is heedless.

She's still on her back, naked from the waist down. She feels dismantled, as if her limbs might be strewn about waiting to be reattached, her

whole body needing reassembly. He's walking away from the wreckage. He turns back toward her. The scarf has fallen around his neck, but she can't see his face. He's backlit by a streetlight—he's a silhouette, a hideous Rorschach blot.

"Hey babe, got any cash? A joint? How about a cigarette? Here. Put these on and get lost. And keep your fucking mouth shut."

A bundle tossed in her lap. Jeans crusty with snow. Stinging wetness between her legs. Cum on her thighs, lips, cheeks. Salt, sour, bitter. Slime, blood, ice. Boots gone—over there, by the trash.

He's done with her. He strides away back toward the Viking, lighting her Merit 100, shoving her nearly full pack and a few bucks into his pocket. Humming tunelessly, swaying to a beat in his head. As if nothing happened. As if he hasn't just left her in ruins, plundered and stranded, exiled from her self. Dead.

A brown paper bag is tucked under his arm—the champagne.

She struggles into her jeans, pulls herself up, grabs her boots and jacket, runs, slips, falls, retches. Her lip is swollen and bleeding, and her cheeks are lacquered with mucus. Her teeth shiver and collide like castanets. Clickety-clack.



She's too exhausted to keep going. I could just stay here, she thinks. Let them find my body in the morning. But I'm alive. Just one block to Frieda's. Yes, Frieda. Her celebration. She'll be wondering where I am.

When the police arrive at Frieda's, she's swaddled in layers of blankets but still shivering, her body wracked with shudders. She's led to a chair, where she collapses. Geoff, Frieda's partner, barrels through the front door, shouting, "I'll kill that sonofabitch!" Geoff, who wouldn't hurt a fly.

Nothing seems real, not this house, not her friends, not her arms or legs, which seem to belong to someone else. She has no idea what time it is. She picks at a hangnail, wishes she could wash her hands. She curls her fingers into fists, her body into a coil. Impenetrable, but combustible.

She reeks of him. She feels his hardness impaling her, hacking her open. She hears a wail. It's coming from her, from her core, but no one else can hear it.

Cops are in the room. They begin to question her, and suddenly Jack is standing behind them, framed by the doorway, out of breath, disheveled, wearing his old green Army surplus parka.

"Who's this?" one cop asks, wary.

"It's OK, he's her boyfriend," Frieda assures them.

They let Jack through. He slumps into a chair about three feet from her and leans toward her. His eyes gleam with tears, but he seems unable to touch her, even to move closer, as if he's afraid she, or he, might break.

"What did he look like?"

"Sort of like him," she says, pointing at Jack. "The same jacket, same hair." Jack looks stunned, and she laughs, all the pent-up agony of the past few hours erupting into a wild burst of hysteria.

Nobody moves. The cops stare. "Um, do you mean to say...?"

"Omigod, no, no! He's my—Oh, Jack, I'm so sorry..." And she finally cries, enfolded in Jack's arms, still shivering.

"I'm so sorry, so sorry," she says. He tightens his hold, and she wriggles away, finds Frieda's waiting arms.

December 2, 1977, 1 a.m.: She's in the examining room, waiting for the doctor. She was instructed by the police not to wash or change clothes. Her blue down jacket, filthy with oil, alley dirt, and him, is draped over a chair. Her other clothes are gone—to the lab. Jack has

brought fresh underwear, jeans, and a sweater.

“Some birthday, huh?” she says to no one.

She’s alone in the room.

She’s been photographed, prepped, asked lots of questions she can’t remember about details she’s already erased. They’ve taken her vitals and samples of fluids. Her throat aches, and she’s still shivering, even though she’s wrapped in heated blankets. The nurses tell her she’s in shock—that’s why she has the shakes.

Jack and Frieda wait in the hall; she’s not allowed “visitors.” The doctor finally arrives, carrying some kind of instrument. Why is this strange man in her room... with a weapon? She stiffens, grips the cold metal sides of the examining table.

“It’s OK,” he says. “I’m a doctor. I’m not going to hurt you. Now could you please scoot back and lie down? Put your heels in the stirrups?” He seems weary, impatient. He’s here to save lives. She’s not dying—she’s just another rape victim.

She asks for a nurse, a woman, who stays in the room for the examination, holding her hand, soothing her. When the cold speculum meets with dry resistance, the doctor instructs her to relax. “I need to collect evidence. I can’t examine you if you fidget,” he says—brusque, without pity.

As his lubricated finger slides into her vagina, she feels the lacerating burn all over again, the violation, the fear. She squeezes, tightens her grip on his finger. He sighs and pulls out.

She vows never again to let anything inside her. That violated space is hers, sacred. But first she’ll have to disinfect it.

What she remembers most about that night in the days that follow: his body’s excretions, clammy and rancid and sour—sweat, boozy breath, must and rot, spittle and cum. Percussive chafe and lunge, stinging afterburn. Astringent sting of wind and snow. Warm lights in windows against bone-chilling dark. Antiseptic fluorescent glare of the examining room. Cold prick of the speculum, the doctor’s slimy, impatient, glove-clad fingers. The burn.

And the cold, always the cold. She can’t stop shivering. She won’t stop for days.

She takes long, hot, soapy baths twice a day, trying to warm up, trying to wash away the stain and the stench. No matter what she does, she can still smell him. She’s a rancid sponge. She has absorbed him.

Mid-December: The neighborhood weekly newspaper reports on the front page that “a woman, age 32, was raped on 19th Avenue South

around 8 p.m. The perpetrator is still at large. Anyone with information....” She reads it over and over without recognition, letting the bare facts sink in, with the odd, detached awareness that she is that woman, naked and nameless, stripped of her self. A cipher.

December 4 or 5: She’s at the downtown Minneapolis police station paging through huge three-ring notebooks of mug shots, scanning the faces: boys next door, choirboys, cherubs, greasers, punks, devils, blank slates. What they have in common: they’re male, under 40, medium to olive skin, dark eyes, longish dark hair, about 6 feet tall, maybe 160-175 pounds. They’re known rapists who roughly fit the description she has managed to construct from the phantasmagoria in her brain.

She wonders out loud why she’s here—after all, she never really saw anything but his eyes, those hot coals burning into her. She won’t recognize him.

“Maybe you’ll see something,” says the lieutenant. “Something you forgot. Something that rings a bell. His MO tells me this guy’s a pro; he’s done it before, and he’ll do it again. I know he’s in this book somewhere.”

“I didn’t fight hard enough.”

“You survived. That’s what matters.”

“But I shouldn’t have let him do... what he did!”

“You didn’t *let* him. He *forced* you.”

“But I ... cooperated! I moved—I moved my hips... you know, to get him off... I just wanted it to be over! I did what he wanted! I feel so ashamed, so dirty....” Her throat burns with bile, and she chokes back a sob.

The lieutenant leans toward her, smiles. A gentle smile, fatherly. He isn’t supposed to touch her, but she almost wishes he would. Maybe his hand is warm. Maybe he could make her stop shivering.

He hands her a jacket—his. She shakes it off. It smells like him. Male.

“You did what you had to do. You just might have saved your life.”

“But I should have fought harder.”

“Look. I can show you some pretty grisly photos of women who thought they could fight back and win. They lost. You can walk out of here and go back to your life. Be thankful for that.”

“What kind of life am I going back to? I’m afraid of my own shadow.”

“But you’re alive, with no serious injuries.”

“I’m not so sure about that.”

Late December: She returns to her campus

job. She even walks alone across the Washington Avenue Bridge—after sunrise, when lots of students are about. But every man she sees spooks her. Was it him? Or him?

A man in her office who's been putting moves on her cheerfully welcomes her back, as if she's been on vacation. She doesn't like the look of him. Was he the one? He's about the right size, could be the same voice. No, it can't be. She walks away, trembling.

She's heading for the women's bathroom and a burly man emerges carrying a wrench. A plumber. She catches a whiff of him—sour and moist. Shaking, she dashes back to her office to call Jack and ask him to pick her up. As she's leaving, Barbara, her boss, says, "Isn't it about time you got over this? You have work to catch up on, and you've used up your sick time. You'll have to fill out a vacation slip."

So much for sisterhood.

Late January 1978: It's 3 in the afternoon, and she's standing in line at Riverside Bank, a block from her house. Someone steps up behind her, brushing her shoulder. She gags on the smell. Booze and smoke on the breath. Testosterone. Must and sweat. She whirls around, meets the sharp gaze of a scruffy man in a hooded parka, a

dirty scarf around his neck. She flees, her heart pounding.

Is he the one? Did he recognize her? Did he follow her? Does he know where she lives?

Jack is waiting for her at home. He scoops her up, bundles her in his arms. "Shhh.... Calm down, it's OK. You're safe. I'll go with you next time, I promise." He nuzzles her neck, and she pulls away, shivering. He's wearing an old flannel shirt, and he smells musty and sour. Male.

Spring 1978: Patti, an old friend, calls to invite her for a walk by the river. "I don't think so," she says. "It's getting dark, and... Jack's not home, and ... well, I just don't really feel safe, not yet. I'm sorry—I know I'm a pain in the neck...."

"Shouldn't you be moving on? You can't lean on Jack forever, you know."

She hangs up. It will be a long while before they speak again.

Maybe Patti's right. Maybe she just needs to get over it. Sure, she's been leaning—on Jack, on her sister, on any warm and sturdy support beam she can find. Jack is loving and patient in his solicitude, but she knows she's become a burden. This has to stop.

One day she asks, "Jack, aren't you sick of me needing you so much? Aren't you just getting sick

and tired of me?”

“Of course not!”

“So, I need to ask you something. Why didn’t you ever get angry, *really* angry? Didn’t you want to kill him?”

“So is that what you want? Heroics? Revenge?”

“No, but I did want you to fly into a rage, be a tough guy. I wanted you to *want* revenge, to show how much you care, even if you didn’t actually hunt him down and kill him. The funny thing is, if you were that kind of macho guy, I wouldn’t love you. I wouldn’t be here.”

When they finally part a year later, she wonders whether he’s relieved that it’s over. He doesn’t have to protect her any more, or endure her remoteness, her moodiness, her neediness, her grimaces, her shrinking from his touch. She can’t remember the last time she let him full-mouth kiss her. Hugs are okay, but sex is out of the question. The very thought of it makes her recoil.

1978: She begins speaking out, sharing her story. She writes polemics and letters to the editor. She speaks to women’s groups. She bears witness.

She worries that she’s just an exhibitionist, seeking attention and sympathy. But no, she just

wants everyone to know: Rape is about power and dominance, not sexual desire. If you’re attacked, your goal is to survive, not to protect your virtue. And if you don’t believe that, you’re buying into all of the mythology about mothers/whores, good girls/bad girls, the sacred feminine/*vagina dentata*.

Chastity is *not* the better part of valor; survival is. Getting raped beats dying. *I’m a survivor. I am woman, hear me roar.*

The trouble is, she can’t shake the feeling that she was chosen for this crime. She’s still captive to the myths. The crime against her confirms it; she’s a slut. And partly what she’s doing now is rationalizing, and seeking vindication. *I was completely covered, no skin showing. I didn’t ask for it. Really I didn’t. I didn’t! He said he had a knife. No, I didn’t see it, but he said he had one. I fought like crazy. I’m a good girl. Really I am. He overpowered me! I did what I had to do to survive.*

It wasn’t my fault! (Or was it?)

Summer 1979: About a half mile from her house, she’s accosted by a truckload of men. *Hey, sweetheart, looking for a good time? Want a dick sandwich?* She pretends not to notice, but they persist. *What’s the matter, bitch? You don’t like cock?* They pull up beside her and the driver flicks



his tongue. She ducks into a storefront office. She wants to hurt those men. Instead, she has a panic attack, the first of many to come.

She tells the story to a women's group at a church. A man in the back row, a stranger to the group, maybe a voyeur, asks, "If you don't want that kind of attention, why are you out walking the streets alone? Don't you think you need to take some responsibility?"

All forty women turn in unison and glare. "Why the hell are you even here?" one woman asks. "Haven't you heard a single word she's said?" "Misogynist asshole!" another shouts. He doesn't even flinch. On their way out, one by one the women hug her, leaving their tears and lip prints and mingled scents on her cheeks. The man remains seated, watching, scowling.

Maybe it's him. She flees, running for her life.

1980: Joseph Ture scowls at her in black and white from the front page of the *Minneapolis Tribune*. He's on trial for raping and murdering Diane Edwards, a young waitress, on a West St. Paul street. She returns his ferocious gaze and feels a tremor deep in her gut. There's something about those eyes. It's him.

Weeks later, when Ture is convicted and sentenced, she feels relieved, elated. She's safe

now. He's off the streets. He can't hurt her again.

1981: She has a flare-up of herpes—her indelible stain, his legacy and calling card. The virus he deposited in her has been hiding out in her basal ganglia. It will lie in wait there for the rest of her life, skulking about in the shadows then rising up periodically to strike without warning, to make sure she never forgets. Lucrece was right. There is no end to this cureless crime.

2004: Joseph Ture, while serving his sentence for Diane's rape and murder, is sentenced to four consecutive life sentences for murders he committed in 1974. When the story comes out, she learns that in the 1970s he was a suspect in several rapes, attempted rapes, and murders—but was never charged. She now knows he is not the man who raped her. Her name was not on the rape hit list that was found in his car all those years ago. And in 1977, he was living in another town.

"Her" rapist might still be out there. He could be anywhere. She wonders: How many other women carry his stain?

December 1, 2013: I don't think much any more about "my rape." And I rarely tell my story. Why talk about it? It's done.

But as old memories surface, and as I



recognize more and more how deeply embedded are the shocks and dislocations of that night, how intrinsic to who I am, I realize that I need to own it and write it—*my story, my rape, my rapist*. Make him a character in my story, and I can banish him.

So this is my testament, my manifesto, my writerly exorcism. But I've written it in third person, as if it happened to someone else. After all these years, that feels right.

It did happen to someone else, in a way. It happened to that nameless 32-year-old woman in the newspaper. But that woman is still inside of me. She's the grown-up version of a little girl who lay awake night after night terrified and watchful, waiting for the devil to show up and drag her off to hell. She's me.


I try to take good care of her. But I also need to get some distance from her. If I don't, she might rise up and overpower me, just as he once did, when the night's thousand eyes were asleep.

Afterword

According to the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network, one in six women will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime. In the U.S, someone is sexually assaulted every two minutes. And only six percent of rapists will spend even a single day in jail.

In what's called "blitz sexual assault," a stranger appears out of nowhere to attack his prey, usually at night in a public place. That's my story. There are so many others.

Decades later, I'm still marching with those women, stashing away pieces of night on the installment plan. The goddess willing, maybe one day we'll pay off our debt and claim the deed of ownership. The night will belong to us.



Eugenia Smith: I am a retired university communications professional who is spending her retirement catching up on her own writing—poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. As a woman, daughter, sister, spouse, ex-spouse, survivor, teacher, and mentor, and student and citizen of a troubled world, I have many stories to tell.



Inferno

Anne McMullen Peffer

The author wishes to note that this poem was inspired by *Litany*, by Mahogany L. Browne

INFERNO

Today I am a Mormon Woman in New England
& I am singing pioneer trail songs like lullabies.

They sound like:

The mothers walked in thick and heavy skirts —
babies on their hips and in their wombs,
birthed and left in shallow graves.

Tears along that old trail: the walk to the West.

Each child a duty left behind from the rape,
the lovemaking, the apathy,
and each, a flesh cut from the mothers' hearts.

Today I am a Mormon woman in a hopeful state.

I will not meet with any bishop nor ask for any aid
with this mouth that dares spit real truths in poems instead.

I will tell the angels that I know no god exists who teaches
Mormon women

to be exactly what the brethren happen to think their
god wants.

I will beg for no forgiveness nor wash
any feet.

I will not wait or want for blessing male hands to rest
upon any "little" heads.

Today I am a Mormon woman in a body of strength.

I am burning and the brethren are learning the power of the name — Woman.

I will spew our fury, I will speak our better fate,
 I will tell the brethren to remind that god
 to whom they pray that there is an industry called
 sex trafficking.

They say their god is omniscient,
 but I say they are their own god
 and that in their egocentric ease, they forget
 and women and children pay.

I will teach that our sons are not sinners:

I will preach that the lasciviousness of pornography
 is not in its viewing but
 in the hurt that comes to models in its pictures.

The say their god knows everything,
 but I say their god forgets what they forget.

I will use media to force the brethren to take notice that women and children are listening
 and that what hoary and decrepit authority proclaims from podiums sometimes hurts.

I love like this loudly and not too loudly, some Mormons
 think I am unforgiving and bitter.

I tell them they are right and that I should be —
 and that they should be too.

Today, I am a bold New England, a storm
 beyond brewing, a deep Utah red rock heat wave of a woman wearing
 sleeveless shirts with no hidden temple garments to the pyre of my church.

Today, I am a mother & Mormonism is burning

I have helped stoke the fire and taught my children to
 turn their backs on its flames and live.

— I'm too in awe of how beautiful they look
 free from this inferno and the ashes I am scattering.

Anne McMullin Peffer is a sixth-generation Mormon who no longer self-identifies as Mormon and who does what she can about sexual violence and harassment within Mormon communities. She is a survivor, an activist, and an all-around supporter of LGBT Mormons and Mormon women.



That Thing with Teeth

Lexi A. Schwartz

The first morning after, you stripped his bed and took the sheets home. Where you had been folded in on yourself there was the shape of something—a dahlia, maybe—in dark red. He held a hand around your neck and pushed your face towards it.

You called your mother to ask about cleaning stains. You asked if it ever smells like an acid rain to her.

If what smells like an acid rain?

Everything.

Come visit soon, she says.

You would, but your mother lived a world away. She still prayed to the old god.

In the clinic you prayed on the exam table. You asked them to hold you down, to strap your legs in.

The nurse shook her head. *No one's forcing you to be here.*

So you held your hands down beneath your back. When the metal dipped between your legs, you bucked your hips.

The old god, slouching in the corner of the room, looked away.

The nurse prescribed a pill that made your spleen ache and an ointment you were supposed to apply twice daily, *insert and extract.*

You couldn't bring yourself to *insert and extract.*

She said you had to stop scratching. She traced the raised lines of your skin.

You screamed to the old god in your mind while she examined you. *Do you want to tell my mother? Do you want to tell her what you saw?*

When you brought his sheets back he said *you're okay.*

See, when you were living in your mother's house, she would wrap you up in bamboo sheets and blow on your forehead. She would wave her hands over you and promise to come back, just to be sure you were still there. She would use her finger to outline shapes against your shoulders, around your ears. She would take your hands against her lips, whispering into them, *I'm gonna love you so much.*

What was there to do? You knelt before him like your mother taught you, pressed your forehead to his knee. If you say something enough, it becomes the way it happened: *I'm okay.*

So you agreed to stop keeping track. One day you were at the top of his stairs and then found yourself at the bottom.

Be brave, he said, pouring tequila into your



into your mouth and wiping your lips with the back of his hand.

You were always waiting for the door to burst open, for your mother to come tearing inside. You imagined her cradling you to her chest, expelling him from you. You imagined the old god stripping those sheets and burning them. Burning you clean.

You knew she wasn't coming. Still.

There was a night later on when his hands held you down and he repeated, over and over, *you're fine*. He cradled your feet, your waist, your legs, opening you.

He had you kneel in the tub while he scrubbed. Your head hit the wall after the first wave of water. The old god whispered it beside you: *be brave, be brave, be brave*.

The last night, when you wouldn't stop bleeding, he took you to the hospital. The nurse made him stay in the waiting room and asked if you needed help.

What to say? This was a man who slept with a seven-inch hunting knife beside his bed. A man who had asked you not to make him do this.

They put sutures into your skin and plaster against your arm and called a taxi to take you home. He had left.

By that fall the rain made your collarbone ache where he chipped it. Your hand stroked the spot even while you slept.

When you slept.

You told yourself so much of this was normal: the screaming, the smell of blood. The way your stomach turned at the sound of your name.

You woke up shivering, sweating, whispering *be brave*. You recited it like a prayer in scalding showers, strangers' beds, in the skin you used to live in.

When the old god came back to sit on your floor, you were trying to remember the smell of your mother's kitchen, of anything clean.

You used to be a person, it said.


That's when you decided. You tightened your muscles and pressed the button on your phone, one hand around your throat.

He was laughing into the receiver, saying how glad he was you called. He said he *never felt like it was over*. He said he'd be home soon.

And you took the train like a phantom limb: the platform to the steps, advancing on his door.

He threw you over his shoulder and carried you into a room you never left.

When he fell onto the bed, pulling you toward him, you tumbled away. Your hips snapped open,



letting you fall through them and back onto your feet. He watched you move, laughing, for as long as it took you to reach the bedside table. He asked what you were doing.

You had a new god now, one sheathed in leather. A god made from seven inches of sharpened metal.

You moved quickly, taking his hips between your legs like he liked it. And you carved out his heart with your hands.

Later you peeled your clothes off. You kicked them aside. No one was watching. Even the new god had gone back to sleep, tucked away.

You called your mother again. *Something happened*, you said.

What is it? Are you okay?

Do you remember how afraid I used to be of the dark? Do you remember the monster under my bed?

What are you talking about? You were scaring her.

You looked back at the sheets, now a field of dahlias. You know the one I mean. That thing with teeth.

Lexi Schwartz is a writer and engineer based out of Boulder, Colorado. Her work has most recently won the Thompson Writing Award for graduate fiction through the Center of the American West, and has been published in *The Thought Erotic* and the *Boulder Weekly*.



filler words*Sophie Mindes*

When he assaulted me, —
but that is the wrong word

Assault

is what they do in video
games,

when the men shoot a
volley of arrows into
the sea of the goblin army
Assault rifle.

No, it is not the right word

But neither is rape. Not
for this. Not for me.

I cannot bear the baggage
of that word. Not
here.

So what I'll say is that

he took from me

It was a theft that
left me blind

He put me temporarily
in darkness


I had to claw my way
out, clutching my
ribs

He tore out stitches

He chewed me up and
spit the bones out into




stale Manhattan air
I walked home in a hoodie
and could only think one
thought
He took. He took.
I slept in my hoodie
zipped all the way up
as if it could sew up the
pieces he had ripped out
like a bad stitch.
I kept my hoodie zipped
because underneath it
he had rent a hole
a rip in me that
left an emptiness
a black sky void of stars
I'd walk through the city
but now the air went
right through me
I'd try to fill myself up
with reading
and school
and exercise
and sex
and paninis
But it all got swallowed
He stole from me and left



a negative, all-consuming
nothingness
I was the whole black
universe and still something
was missing
I don't remember when he
took it
Somewhere in the
nanoseconds between
when he held my face
to kiss me
and when he held my
wrists down on the mattress
I only knew when I saw his
eyes darken with an
absolution
A hunger I never saw before
I won't say rape
I will only use these words
like a loose brick to
strike your cheek
To let fly
your teeth from their
deep roots
To leave you with
gaping sores
These words are only bullets

to pepper and season
your breast, if only
to see the hunger leave
your eyes
But your body is an imposition
I cannot figure out how to
destroy you
And so I am left with only
words
To drain you of your
physical might
So that I can go back in
time
and drain the muscle from
your arms that held me
down
enfeeble the thighs that
stole my thighs
I am left with only words
to fill up the space
and reclaim, remember
what you took.





Sophie Mindes: I am a 23-year-old woman from the suburbs of Maryland, having previously lived in New York for university. I have studied in the fields of English literature, creative writing, special needs, and mental health. The stigma of sexual violence and mental illness is a deeply-rooted issue in today's society, and literary organizations like this are a pathway to acceptance and healing. My experiences come from a place of pain and loss, a sense of stolen identity. I write about these things to grow, to live in dignity, and to hopefully connect with others who have endured, with the ones who have persevered, with the ones who continue to struggle and battle through every day.

Watching for the Man

Tam Francis

I wake to a man crouching by my bed in the dark.

His body hunches between the two twin mattresses, each bed pushed against opposite walls on the floor, futon style.

I'd told myself the arrangement was groovy and cool, plus I didn't have money for box springs and frames. I pictured my apartment Turkish or Asian Zen style with the fans and rattan weavings I'd snagged from my childhood room when I'd left home at eighteen.

It's still a work in progress.

The second mattress was supposed to be for my roommate Ella. We met at the department store where we worked hawking over-priced dresses to women who couldn't afford Nordstrom's, but acted like they did—upperclass-wannabes, looking down their noses at us. Ella's voice hinted at a foreign accent. Her high cheekbones and blue-black skin were exotic and she liked to read, like me.

Tonight her bed is empty, which it will remain. The day of Ella's move-in her mother came to help and rebuked our living arrangement in her thick Haitian accent, "No, no, Ella. I am sorry, but you cannot live with this girl. She has a spirit who follows her." That was the end of my roommate

Ella.

I am alone. A man is crouching by my bed and I am alone.

I sit up and wipe the sleep out of my eyes. The covers fall to my waist. My loose blue tank top hangs across my chest. My perfectly petite breasts—as one boyfriend described them—feel naked and exposed below the thin fabric. I shiver and my nipples tighten. Cold. Not good.

Ed? What's Ed doing here?

Ed, my on-again-off-again-boyfriend who I'd followed to the University of Arizona after meeting him at the ice cream parlor where I worked after school each day. My grades and lack of funding wouldn't have offered any out-of-state choices, anyway.

His blond hair falls across his forehead. Light, from the hole where the string runs through the blinds, dots his face. A faux gaslamp glows outside the window, my apartment situated next to the pool. Pale light edges through the sides of the blinds. I can just make out a tattoo on his bare right shoulder.

Wait. Ed doesn't have a tattoo on his right shoulder. Or any tattoos at all. Shit.

My brain scrambles. *Shit oh shit oh shit oh shit. This is it. This is the big scary. This is fucked. I'm*

fucked. He's here to rape me. I know as sure as my legs are bare under the covers, he's here to rape me.

I breathe in through my nose and slowly out through my mouth. Be calm. Be calm. You can figure a way out. Psychology. Psychology class, upper division. What the hell did the professor say about rapists? *Does the creep hate his mother? Control? Something about control. Don't act scared. Don't give him power.*

"So, hey whadaya doing here?" I ask in a casual, almost flirty voice, or I try to inflect that tone. At the same time, I edge toward the bottom of my bed so I can get a look out my bedroom door. I can just see through the living room to the front door. The bolt is turned vertical, not horizontal. Locked.

Shit. Can I make it to the door? Unlock it and get out before he grabs me.

"Shhhhhh, shhhhhh. I don't want to hurt you. I just want to look," he says. I notice his bare torso, bare legs, boxer shorts.

Yeah right. Just want to look, my ass. My heart thumps. I swear it pounds so hard it moves my shirt. It doesn't really. Door. Freedom. Get yourself there.

How'd you get in here?" Pops into my head and

out of my mouth. *Humanize yourself. You're a real person. Not an object. Not a thing. Not to be conquered.* I chant in my head.

"Came in through the side door. It was unlocked," he replies.

Shit. Right. I'd grilled a small steak in the broiler. Opened the door to clear the smoke. *Did I forget to lock the door?*

"Oh," I reply. "What do you want?"

"You have a real nice ass. Now I want to see your tits."

Shit NO. Tears build behind my eyes. They burn. Spiders crawl through my veins. I'm hot and cold. My mind races. My eyes dart around the room, trying not to be obvious. The phone is between the two beds, between him and the wall. *Can I get to it and dial 911 in time?*

Something is wrong. It's right there on the edge of my vision. Edge of my thoughts. There it is. The cord. It's unplugged from the wall. *Shit. What did he say? He wants to see my tits? No. No. No. This is bad. I swallow hard. My mouth is dry.*

"Um well, I don't know you and you don't know me. It's kind of awkward don't you think? You should go."

"What?" he answers.

Good. I've confused him. I look him in the eyes as I scoot down the bed. The path to the door is clearer. *I think I can make it. Show no fear.* I look back at him and smile. Now that I really look at him, he looks nothing like my Ed, except for the blond hair. His face is older, rougher, unshaven, eyes too close together, nose too small, inbred hamster face.

"I'll think about leaving if you let me see your tits." His words are stronger, louder, hopeful, yet commanding.

Must change conversation. Steer away from anything sexual. Must get past him.

"I'm uh, thirsty. You want a drink?" I start to rise. "Let me get you something."

I bolt upright, and run past him. He shoots up off his haunches. I don't look back, but I feel his breath on my hair. Everything moves in slow motion, yet happens all at once. Air rushes across my legs and the space between my tiny tank-top and bikini panties. His fingers brush the back of my hair, but it's newly short and he can't get a hold. I cross the bedroom, out the door, sprinting across the living/dining room. The front door seems to move away as I run towards it like a crazy dream in a horror movie. I don't know if anyone actually has those dreams, but I'm not


dreaming. This is real.

I leap toward the door, my hands turn the lock and knob, using one hand for each. He catches me. His hand runs down the back of my shirt, finds flesh, and digs in. His fingernails scrape into the space between my shirt and panties. He has me. His hand clutches the top of my underwear, yanking me backwards.

I lunge forward, grappling for the door knob. The fabric tears. The ripping sound reverberates like gunfire. I run. I run out of my underwear. The elastic and cotton tear and fall from my body. I'm exposed. I turn the knob and fling the door open, grabbing a sweatshirt from the coatrack by the door and run, covering my front, my white ass bare and exposed. *I can't think about it. I won't. Must run.*

"Fire! Fire!" I scream. Not rape. Nobody cares. Nobody wants to get involved if you're being raped. "FIRE!" That's what you're supposed to scream. People care if they're in danger.

A pair of blue jeans lay in a heap outside my door on the cement sidewalk. The pool of yellow night grays everything into monochromatic tones. I make a mental note and keep running. I run twenty endless steps to my friend's apartment. Pound on the door.



Now the tears come. Judy's boyfriend, Sam, opens the door. I practically fall in. Before I do, a man emerges behind me backlit by the yellow lights, a dark silhouette, shirtless but wearing faded jeans.

"Where's the fire?" the man asks.

I cover my naked butt with my hands, pulling the sweatshirt tighter around my pelvis and back into Judy's apartment.

It's him. My mind screams at me. No. Don't do this. You're going to think every guy is him. Don't do this to yourself. You are NOT a victim. You will never be a victim. I refuse to let this taint me. I have always been fearless.

"There's no fire. Tell the man there's no fire. I was almost..." I can't say the word *raped*. I wasn't. It didn't happen. My friend, Judy, pulls me into her room and gives me a pair of yoga pants to put on. They're warm and feel good against my bare skin. I pull my sweatshirt over my head but still shiver uncontrollably. I'm cold and something else. Disconnected. I feel disconnected, a veil between me and everything else in the world.

"Can I have a blanket? Water?"

"Sure." She looks at me as if I will break. I don't like that look, but I do feel fragile. I don't want to be alone. I follow her to the kitchen. She stops

abruptly to turn and ask me something and I almost run into her.

"Why don't you sit on the couch?" She puts her arm around me and guides me to the plush sofa. She pulls the folded afghan from the back, opens it, and spreads it over me. I curl into a ball and lay my head on the cushioned edge.

I don't know how much time has passed. Events move slow then fast and all of them blurry. Police come and question me. I answer best I can.

"Do you want to press charges?" the officer asks.

"On who?"

"The man who was first on the scene fits the description you gave us."

"Uh. I'm not sure. It was dark. I don't want to falsely accuse anyone."

"Okay, if you change your mind." I nod. He hands me a card. The paper is foreign and awkward in my hand. I just want to sleep, but I'm afraid to sleep. Afraid to dream, afraid not to be in control.

Eventually I fall asleep. I wake to a banging on the door. Sam answers. A woman's face peeps through the crack. Her eyes find mine. They're big and round, scared, shifty eyes.

"I just want to talk to her," the woman says.

"What do you want?" Sam asks.

"I'm scared," she says. "Just let me talk to her."

Sam looks back at me. I shake my head. I don't want to talk to her or anyone else. I just want to sleep, but I want to know what she wants. Curiosity gets the best of me. I cross and stand behind Sam, craning my neck around his protective stance.

"What? What do you want? Why are you bothering me?"

"My boyfriend," she looks around and lowers her voice, "wasn't in the bed next to me when I heard you scream FIRE."

"Oh." I don't know what else to say.

"I'm scared."

"Hey, babe," a man says from behind her. She and I jump at the same time. "What are you doing over here?"

"Just checking on the girl. You know she ran right past our apartment. Woke me up."

"You mean she woke us up."

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"Let's go," the man says.

Her eyes meet mine, pleading. I don't know what to do or say. My head hurts and I'm dizzy.

Sam closes the door. "That was odd."


"Yeah." I shake my head, it doesn't help the dizziness. I unclench my fist. The policeman's card is rolled and damp in my palm. "I'll call him."

Hours turn into days, into a week. I try to go back to my apartment. The phone, door, and many surfaces are dusted with black fingerprint powder. The apartment seems too big. Too many windows. Too many doors. I can't stay here. I have to move. The apartment complex doesn't want to let me out of my lease. I show them a copy of the police report. They don't care. I've signed a lease. I will not stay here and I will not be bullied for the lease balance. I threaten to call a local television station, giving them the name of the newscaster and telephone number. They grudgingly release me from my contract.

I move. It's done. That chapter of my life over. I survived. I'm safe. Aren't I? Not done.

A couple weeks later the police contact me and tell me another woman is raped and killed a mile from my old apartment. Same time of night, strangled with an unplugged phone cord. The man and the girlfriend have disappeared from my old apartment complex.

I hang up the phone and sink to the floor, leaning my head against the kitchen cabinets.



Tears rush down my face. My stomach burns with acid. I taste guilt. *Is it my fault? Should I have pressed charges?* I thought I was being strong. Now, I don't know.

I retreat. I call into work, take two weeks off, using up all my vacation days, and buy a bus ticket to Phoenix. My friend Mikey, from work, asks if he can stay at my place while I'm gone, maybe have a few friends over—he lives at home and would like a taste of freedom. Sure, no problem. I hand over my keys when he drops me at the bus depot.

I spend a week and a half playing with my niece and nephews, sleeping a lot on my mom's couch, hanging out with my aunts and uncle. It's like Christmas in March. I wrap my family around me and stuff their love inside, pushing down the fears and doubts until I feel like me again. Strong. Independent. Fearless.

I'm a girl who goes after it. Whatever it is. I'm the gal who rock climbs in bare feet in the rain. The one who's not afraid to tell you how she feels. Who's loyal and a defender of those I love. The first woman in my family to ever go to college. The one who moved out with a hundred dollars in her pocket, an acceptance letter to college, and her grandmother's cookbook. I'm the gal who

worked three jobs and went to college, lived in a studio apartment and drove a second-hand scooter to get around town to classes and work. Not married. Not pregnant. Not dependent on anyone. Not afraid of life. Not afraid of men.

Or I wasn't afraid. Or I don't want to be. I try to keep my independent visions in the forefront of my mind as I return to my city, job, and college.

When I arrive at my one-bedroom cottage apartment, the screen door is cock-eyed and the front door handle looser than I remember. I retrieve the key from under the flower pot and step inside. The 1930s cottage smells sun-baked, with a hint of ammonia and dried onion. Everything looks to be in its place. No stains on the cushions of the white wicker outdoor furniture I use indoors. No pictures knocked off the wall, TV still intact, stack of videos next to it. No sign of the party Mikey said he'd had.

Something doesn't feel right.

I turn the corner to my room. The ammonia smell is stronger and reminds me of homes with cats, litterboxes inside. The bed is made, dresser drawers closed, curtains fine. I walk around to the other side of my bed—the twin mattresses traded for a full size, contributed by my mom at



the last move.

“What the hell!” I say aloud.

In the corner, is a pile of my lingerie: bras, panties, teddies, nighties, stockings, camisoles, everything silky and sexy that I own, in a heap in the corner. I don’t want to touch them. I back out of the room and find the phone. The cord is unplugged.

Oh shit. Not again.

I plug it back in. It works. My first call is to Mikey.

“Mikey, what the hell. I came home and my lingerie is in a corner and smells like piss.”

“Look, Tam, when I came over to set up for the party your stuff was all over the house, thrown around. I thought maybe you were in a hurry. Or had the stuff drying, from hand washing or something. I gathered everything up and put them in the corner of your room.”

“Don’t mess with me, Mike.”

“I’m not messing with you. And the door was unlocked. The screen door was flung open and half on. I put it back on best I could.”

I sink down onto the floor again. “Okay.” I swallow hard. Tears gather behind my eyes. The blood drains from my head and pools in my stomach, roiling and burning. “Can you come

over?”

“Sure thing. Is everything okay?” Mike asks.

“I don’t know.”

I call the police. Again. They come over and dust for fingerprints. Again. They interview me. Again. Give me their card. Again. *Will this nightmare ever end?*


I move. Again.

This time I move in with two gals from work, my name not on any lease or on any bills. The last time I hear from the police, neighbors had seen a man with blond hair and tattoos snooping around my place several times while I was gone. Nothing after that.

* * *

I went on.

I went on to be the gal who back-packed Europe with a one-way ticket and a Eurorail pass, hundred bucks in her pocket. The one who started her own magazine, Editor-in-chief and contributor with a ten thousand distribution. The one who drove alone back and forth to San Francisco for the International Poetry Slam team she was honored to be on. The woman who lived alone with two babies under two years-old while her husband launched planes off a carrier in the Persian Gulf.



As the years went on, I tried to be the fearless girl I set out to be and mostly I was and am. Though after all this time, I still can't help looking over my shoulder and watching for the blond man with tattoos.

Tam Francis writes historical romantic fiction with a pen in one hand and a vintage cocktail in the other. She has taught swing dancing for fifteen years with her husband (retired Navy) and is an avid collector of vintage sewing patterns, retro clothing, and antiques. All of which make appearances in her stories. She also dabbles in sci-fi, paranormal, memoir, personal essay, and poetry.

Teeth


M'shai Dash

It was the summer of 1999 in what was then called Chocolate City. It was a sweltering season curated by music that sprang forth from the backyards, churches and ghettos east of the Anacostia River. Go Go music. Drums for mating and drums for war. It vibrated around and through us, activating something tribal in us that called our young bodies to any mating ground we could find. Most of the girls in my neighborhood lost their virginity in a friend's basement, on a playground, or in the back seat of a car. It was just how it was done; you got in where there was enough standing room for two human bodies—or three, if you were the wilder sort—and grunted out all your angst about school, absentee fathers, poverty, and blackness. It was a reckless summer followed by a winter that saw girls drop out of high school to prepare for newfound motherhood, and a surge of violence as would-be fathers stashed rocks in their slouch socks and picked up their guns to defend the drug turf that would yield money to feed their shoe habits and their young. There was death and sex and chaos that beautiful summer, and to outsiders it would appear there weren't any rules for engagement at all. Only, there was. Through it all there was at least consent.

But on August 26 of that year, at fifteen years old, I didn't even get that.

Over fifteen years later and the run down of events still play out in my brain like that horribly chipper Lambchop's Play Along tune. The Song That Never Ends. And each time it does, my mind tries to fill in the holes with all the shoulda-coulda-wouldas that would've saved me from being raped, sodomized, and strangled within an inch of my life. Because the latter is what accepting a ride from a friendly stranger cost me that rainy, humid evening. So the memory runs on a neverending loop, sometimes muted in the background of my thoughts,, and sometimes on full hi-def, surround sound with razor sharp imagery if I've been triggered in some way. Because the act was brutal. And even I'm sure no one in the courtroom on the day my rapist accepted his plea deal felt any connection to me in any way—me, a slightly pudgy sixteen year old girl in too much eye makeup and an ill-fitting blazer— what the defense couldn't help connect with were the 8 x 5, black and white glossies taken after I'd been admitted to Washington Hospital Center from the night he assaulted me.

There were bluish purple welts around my neck.



There was a gruesome looking ring finger from when I tried to crawl away and lost an acrylic nail as I was pulled backward, kicking and screaming.

There were scribbled comments from the doctor about the trauma to my anus and vagina.

And most of all, there was no fucking way he could argue consent, so his ass was going to jail.

But even with all his defense team had been confronted with, they felt the need to give a statement to the court about a girl who had a checkered past. A trashy girl with a history of recreational drug use. A girl who'd gotten into the car of a man she didn't know while wearing revealing clothing. They, of course, left out the part where we rode around for hours talking about our favorite bands. They left out stuff about my battle with bipolar disorder and about me being molested and bounced from home to home since I was eight, but I'm sure those details were just semantics to them. So they took the plea, but they made damn sure they bared their teeth to me in the process. I left the courtroom feeling as if I'd been assaulted for a second time.

Right after the rape, I'd cried for days. Weeks, maybe. After I was released from the hospital and put on a battery of preventive STD meds, I sulked around my Nana's house in a big t-shirt and only

got up to put Neosporin on my cuts and check the color of my bruises. No one who visited me offered any comfort, either. I know they tried, but there was just nothing they could say that didn't equate to "Gee, sorry you got butt fucked in the park" to my sixteen-year-old ears. Only one text I received read like a true gesture of support. It was from an entrepreneurial fellow I'd known for a few months then who dabbled in music—among other things, and his words were straight to the point:

"I can find him whether he's outside or inside."

I remember nodding to myself at the text. I didn't respond to it, but I stood there in my oversized shirt with my half-healed bruises and my puffy eyes and I nodded yes to the text, slowly and surely. I nodded my intent to God/Allah/The Whole Fucking Universe. Then I spent the next few weeks pulling myself together and preparing for my upcoming court date.

Fast forward to the day I walked out of the court building lamenting a system that would only steal eight years from a man who raped a girl, but twenty from brown and black kids with baggies of crack rock. It was a day that ripped me to tendrils and left me calcified. As soon as I swung open the double doors and emerged from




the grey sterility of court building, the sun washed my face and body in warmth. I felt the reassuring hand of my lawyer on my shoulder and felt its warmth too. But I didn't want it. What I yearned for was something cold.

I pulled away from my small throng of supporters and walked to the shade of a nearby tree. Then I pulled my pink Nokia from my fake designer handbag, put on my oversized shades, and replied to the text.

“Find him on the inside.”

That summer was full of sacrifices and drums. Drums for mating and drums for war. I ignored the drums for mating for the rest of that summer, but I did heed the drums for war. I would show him that I could reach him where the law could not. I would show him that my village was a small and insular one but we were, indeed, one. I would show him that I was not a beaten and docile thing, declawed and defeated. I would show him that I too, had teeth.



M'Shai S. Dash is a blogger, digital content creator, and freelance writer from Washington, D.C. She attended the University of the District of Columbia and currently resides in the Washington, D.C. area.

Dash began writing music and poetry as a child, and has recently completed a work of poetry called *Woman In Sujud*. After appearing in PBS's *Legacy: Being Black in America* (2007), she began speaking publicly about social justice issues. Dash has spoken at the Apollo Theater, Charles Sumner School, and Duke Ellington School of the Arts.

Dash writes about race and culture, mental health, and popular culture. Her writing has been featured in *For Harriet* and *MadameNoir.com*. She is also a staff writer for *BlackSci-Fi.com* and a regular contributor for *Blavity.com*.

To A Survivor

Michael Russell

V. To a Survivor

It wasn't your fault. You hold guilt like a snowball
in bare hands, the cold permeates through flesh
into bone—stiffens.

You sit outside, numb winter with winter.

There is a beast hibernating inside you.

Describe him: the long pause before the silence.

Describe him: a snarl, a half-bitten ear, eyes sour as lemons.

Describe him: a thorn, a husk sweet as venom.

Go ahead and wake him, you are ready

to engulf yourself in the feral, the teeth, the frenzy of claws, claws, claws.


Soon, you'll see how he stalks the past

and puts it to rest

with one swift bite to the neck.

Hear the audio component to Michael's poem [here](#)





Michael Russell is a 27-year-old queer poet who is working on his first chapbook. He lives in Toronto. His work has appeared in *cahoodaloodaling*, *Forage*, *The Maynard*, *(parenthetical)*, *The Quilliad*, *untethered* and *QDA: A Queer Disability Anthology*.

Artwork Abstraction

Darshita Jain

Stats say, one in every three girls will have experienced rape or sexual abuse in their lives

I am one of three daughters.

For most of my life, I have been told I am a work of art

My body a work of art a canvas, stretched far apart,

White. Clean. Pristine.

My body is a canvas

That was once used to experiment

Abused

To comprehend feeling prowess.

So instead of calling me art

You can call me an experiment.

techniques used to paint my body

paint splatters, smudging, finger painting and scalpel yielding

not to forget the embossing.

none too smooth strokes

as if all left of the brush was the wood it came with

digging deep into the skin it etched across

hands, greedy to have found a body to feast upon

fingers, holding hands above my head in an iron clasp

a new way to finger paint i guess

textures and the sound of nails scrapping on a blackboard

ringing in my ears : art is not just to see.

and one cigarette burn on my breast.


embossed.

refuses to go away.

on patch of skin burnt for eternity

does not fade away.






My body is an artwork
that struggles to fit in
it has no art movement that would take it in.
Maybe all it is, is a failed experiment
They never really raped me you see
They, stopped before it got too bad
they stopped, before it got too bad?
the two men who assaulted me
never got to finish what they began with
you see i was “lucky”
to have gotten away before they finished what they started
lucky to have them leave ONLY their signatures all over me
lucky to see their faces every time the man i love gets close to me
lucky to see them clearer than any dreams i see
lucky to not know where my real ends and their hands begin.
My eyes see them more than i see my own reality
days dont feel real until i see a part of them and
nights dont seem too complete till i feel their hands all over me
touching
every part of me
painting , my skin every shade of attack
covert, insidious, invisible dripping paint
slowly poisoning every man i see.
faces blending into traces of outlines
moving, welding into the faces of these men : these two men
My PTSD, they call it
has turned me into a masochist.

the pain, only sign i exist
i guess i am addicted.
relieving, painting my own skin over and over again
i cut and bleed i cut and bleed i cut and i bleed the red
just another color
another painting on my skin
Painting the same memory. Over and over again.
Till i question if i can ever be sane again
Till i question if i can ever love again
Till i question if i can be loved again.
My body is used to abuse.
an artwork on display
an abstract to accept or throwaway.
Maybe all i need is to love myself again
maybe i need to learn to paint again
let myself breathe again
stand back and really see myself again.
my paint my story my scars
and all of me,
and recognize.
my body is a masterpiece.
it was never meant to fit in.





Darshita Jain: I am a spoken word poet and the co-founder of a spoken word community in my city in India. I have been writing and teaching poetry across the city in the past year, talking about things that are stigmatized, learning from my own experience, I think poetry can be a powerful tool of expression when it comes to healing.


Water Softeners and a C-

Sarah Kersey

When I was 10,
we lived in a neighborhood that was always under construction
My parents installed an alarm just in case anything were to ever go awry
They set up the defenses that should have been indestructible
But there was this one day that I ended my walk from the bus stop
to my place of safety by entering a house that didn't sound an alarm
to footsteps in the doorway
The batteries were just dead
Before I allowed myself to indulge in an hour
of mind-rotting after school specials,
I checked every room in the house for intruders
I have always been cautious like that
I told my parents the alarm batteries needed replacement
but I never told them about how I checked the room
we kept our water softener in
to make sure there wasn't anyone
dwelling where they shouldn't have been

I tried to write an essay one time
comparing the sexual assault
I endured the august before my senior year
to my house getting broken into
I talked about being brave in the aftermath of a tragedy
After pouring all my blood and half-assed tears into that paper,
I received a C- and a try again
It didn't connect, it didn't make sense, and my metaphors were confusing
I think I tried too hard






to make the trauma a metaphor
instead of emphasizing the reality:
my own personal home
that I had been inhabiting for seventeen years
had genuinely been broken into
And the alarm didn't sound
And that didn't feel brave

I think all I did in that sham of an essay
was convince my teacher I was a coward
I talked to her about it once
I think she may have suspected that my batteries were dead

Either they were dead the evening I endured my attack
or I had just chosen to brush off the persistent ringing of panic
that was sounding in the air
because it sounded too much like my anxiety
I'd always pushed my gut feelings away
so I could continue to live without fear of going outside
Some instincts you just had to choose to ignore
I chose to ignore the wrong one
I chalked up the burrowing feeling
that had made its home in my stomach that night
in the glow of that artificial light to simply being nervous
So I turned off the alarm
and I let him kiss me

There's two glaring repercussions
that being sexually assaulted has produced
I can't look at lava lamps
And I can't end poems about you
Lava lamps remind me of your bedroom
I can't end poems because that would mean that I have closure
That you're gone
That the alarms are intact
But I still have a creeping suspicion
that you could be hiding behind my water softener





Sarah Kersey is a sophomore at Gonzaga University who aims to enter the literary world. She is passionate about writing poetry, reading good books, taking photos, and advocating for awareness regarding social issues.

I Never Said No, Chapter from Memoir In Progress

Mary Beth O'Connor

Ah, relief! Done studying for finals, I headed out to commiserate with my friend. I threw on a gauzy white shirt with blue embroidered trim, Levi's 501s, and earth shoes – remnants of my New Jersey wardrobe, but outdated for Los Angeles in 1981. I walked to the corner of Sunset and Fairfax and plopped onto the bus stop bench.

As I craned my neck looking for the overdue bus, a dilapidated van pulled up to the light. A brown-haired guy leaned out the passenger window and grinned. "Hey doll, my name's Vincent, what's yours?"

Several other women sat nearby, but Vincent fixated on me. I sat up straight while tilting my head. The driver tossed a glance my way but focused on traffic. Vincent appeared to be barely twenty with his perfect skin, wavy shoulder length hair, shiny hazel eyes, and radiant smile. "Where are you headed?"

"To my friend's apartment on the other side of Hollywood."

"Want a ride?" Vincent tapped the door in time with the music. Pointing to the driver, "Doug won't mind."

"No thanks, the bus will be here soon."

Vincent started to reply, but the light turned green, so he waved as they turned right.

Five minutes later, the van again stopped at the corner. "Still here? Sure you don't want us to drop you off?"

"I'm fine. But thank you very much."

"Come on! A girl like you shouldn't take the bus. You deserve two chauffeurs and we're offering our services."

The light changed and the van rounded the corner again.


Another few minutes passed. I continued to wait. I checked my watch and huffed in frustration. The old lady next to me nodded and grumbled about the bus company lacking respect for people's schedules.

And then the van returned. Vincent smiled. "I don't think that bus is coming, darling. Why don't you let us give you a lift?" I shielded my eyes from the sun and gazed up Sunset – just the usual mix of Mercedes and beaters. I stood and walked toward the van.

Vincent opened his door, hopped out, and I climbed in. I kneeled between the two front bucket seats. My long legs stretched out into the empty space behind. Pointing ahead, I explained where my friend lived.

After we drove one block, two strong hands grabbed my waist from behind. Someone





Someone dragged me backward and thrust me down with such force my head bounced off the floor. The assailant shoved my right arm against my spine, sat on my legs, and stuck something hard into my back.

Vincent screamed, “DON’T MOVE, don’t you fucking move. He’ll shoot you.” The van picked up speed. “Bob, do you have her?”

In that moment of total shock, in every molecule, I knew they would rape and murder me. My heart pounded so hard blood roared in my ears. I winced in pain from the arm wrenched behind me and Bob’s weight on my legs. The rough worn carpet chafed my left cheek. I could see the back window of the van and blankets in a pile. I wondered if Bob had hidden there.

I felt terror but not complete surprise. For a long while, part of me had expected to die like this. I recollected the stories my great-grandmother read from the scandal rag about women being tortured and killed. I thought about the lecture my high school chemistry teacher gave when he picked me up hitchhiking, despite this being a common practice in the 1970s. I recalled the daily fear of living in the house with my violent stepfather.

“We’ll let you up if you’ll remain calm,” Vincent

promised.

I managed to blurt out, “OK, OK.”

Bob freed my arm and paused for a minute. He raised himself into a stoop and sat back. Released, I crawled to the rear of the van. My skin felt sticky from the flood of cold sweat. My brain absorbed every detail of the vehicle: green color, two upholstered seats, and a six pack of Bud.

I turned my attention to my captors. Bob smoothed his golden locks into place as he gawked at me. Meeting my gaze, he averted his baby blue eyes. Doug laughed and yelled “asshole” when a Corvette cut us off. Vincent turned in his seat to verify my cooperation.

I heard the horns of nearby cars and sensed even slight turns of the wheel. I controlled my breathing. I shrugged my shoulders twice to loosen my muscles. I sat against the back doors and looked past them to track our path. But I had only lived in Los Angeles for six months and we soon left familiar territory.

Doug said we needed gas. Vincent snarled, “Jesus Christ!” We pulled into a service station. Doug and Bob stood outside the back doors behind me. One of them removed the fuel cap and gas flowed into the tank. I thought Bob



muttered something about not wanting to do this. Remnants of Doug's reassuring and then dismissive response floated over me.

Vincent moved from the passenger seat to Bob's position behind the driver. He sat in the shadows. "I swear to God, I will kill you if you move or make a sound!" He ranted about the stupidity of forgetting to fill up the van. He bent forward and snarled, "Just sit there."

I fixated on the van's sliding side door, which was nearer to me than to Vincent. I recognized the silver L-shaped handle. I had opened this heavy door in other vans. I calculated the time it would take to reach it, engage the lever, and slide the door to the right. My mind shifted to the door behind me and assessed the long seconds required to rise on my knees, turn, and push it ajar, which I could only attempt after Doug and Bob filled the tank.

I heard people outside and tried to determine how close they were. I deliberated cracking a door partway and screaming for help. I estimated the distance between Vincent and me. I pondered the likelihood that he had a gun, because I had not seen it. I considered his rage if I failed to escape. I thought about how my death could be very painful if this man chose to make it so.


I weighed the probabilities of success and failure. Maybe there would be another chance or maybe I could manage my kidnappers well enough that they would set me free – but the odds did not favor either possibility.

Ultimately, I did not believe I would make it out of the van before Vincent shot or tackled me. It was unlikely I could open a door wide enough to yell for help. I did not trust that the strangers outside would react even if they heard me. Although only a few minutes passed, I felt like I had engaged in this agonizing debate for hours. Sick with foreboding, I struggled to hold back tears as I decided not to try.

Doug and Bob returned and settled into the front seats. Bob squinted at me and began organizing his wallet. Before we drove off, Doug peered into the rear view mirror. "Vincent, we'll be there soon."

Vincent now behaved as if we were headed to a party. "Bob, turn up the Zeppelin!" He gave me a beer and let me smoke a cigarette. He told me I was a birthday present for Bob, who was too old to remain a virgin. "Isn't that right, Bob? You've been too afraid to fuck a girl."

I remained calm and interacted with Vincent as if we were new acquaintances getting to know



each other. I remembered reading that it was important to make your kidnappers see you as an individual. My brain assessed ideas, discarded some, and selected others, with the goal of creating a bond and convincing them of my humanity. I chose a gentle but engaged tone and relayed information I thought might be meaningful to them.

I spent the next thirty minutes talking about various innocuous subjects. I babbled about my part-time job typing orders for personalized pencils and matchbooks. I amused them by maligning my rich classmates at UCLA. I mentioned that many of the boys in my small hometown owned vans like this and that I recently moved to LA for college. I listened to their conversations and watched their interactions. Vincent said I was pretty and that everything would be fine. I beamed and nodded.

He took out his drug kit and we snorted cocaine. The white powder burned before initiating a wave of euphoria. Warmth flooded my body. I uttered an involuntary “Wow.” But after this flash of positive energy, the coke further heightened my distress level. I spent a few seconds recalibrating my breathing.

“Do you have anything this good in New

Jersey?” I never had used coke before. Still, I grinned. “Not even close.”

Vincent and Doug reminisced about a party they attended the night before. They compared me to a hot blonde who ignored them both. Bob peered out the window, sipped a beer, and chain-smoked. Vincent chided him for being a wet blanket, so Bob began singing along to the radio.

We exited at Long Beach. I recalled that the Queen Mary docked there, but this exhausted my knowledge. I saw bright lights in the distance. We parked in a dark isolated spot near a marina. As he departed with Doug, Vincent advised, “Treat my boy right.”

Birthday boy Bob shuffled to the back. “I’m sorry about all this.” I contemplated asking for help, but knew he would never oppose Vincent. I allowed myself one silent resigned sigh. I raised my head. “It’s OK, honey. Everything’s fine.” I leaned in, smiled, and caressed Bob’s neck. We kissed and talked and kissed and talked. Today was his eighteenth birthday. His family surprised him with a barbecue. And his sister still owed him a gift.

As he spoke, I listened to Vincent and Doug in deep discussion near the front of the van. I could



not make out the words, but the intensity of the tone concerned me. I needed to balance making Bob feel special with my apprehension about leaving his buddies together too long. When I thought Bob felt comfortable, I took off my shirt and bra. I crouched in front of him and leaned forward to offer my bare breasts.

After Bob finished his half-hearted bumbling and brief penetration, he slowly dressed. I strained to hear Vincent and Doug, but could detect only the muffled crunching of feet on gravel. My anxiety escalated and my heart thumped as each additional second passed.

As Bob left the van, Vincent ribbed him. "How's it feel to be a man? Well, at least not a cherry boy!"

Driver Doug joined me. This surprised and concerned me to the point of panic. As the leader, Vincent should not go last — unless he planned to murder me immediately afterward. Blood rushed to my head. I felt so dizzy I thought I might pass out. I slowed my heart rate, swallowed my terror, and focused on the task at hand.

Doug sat close and offered me a drag from his cigarette. I opened my mouth twice, trying to start a conversation. But my brain would not cooperate. I bit my lower lip. I unbuckled his

pants. "Come here baby."

I heard Vincent and Bob's intermittent laughter and sometimes half believed I might survive the night.


Doug pounded me from behind. "I know you like it. Being fucked by a real man." He came, grinned, and left.

Vincent entered the van in a fine mood and flying high. "Apologies for spoiling your plans to visit your friend. I just can't understand why I had to help a good-looking eighteen year-old lose his virginity."

Vincent first approached me as a lover, trying to arouse me. So I moaned and pulled him close. Sometimes he called me a whore and demanded that I admit I waited at the bus stop to pick up men. I denied this and forced myself to look into his eyes to convey my sincerity. I sucked his dick on my own initiative and changed positions several times at his command.

Afterward, he told me to get dressed. I wondered if they were preparing to lead me to a better killing spot. Instead, Vincent thanked me for being a good sport and promised they would drive me to my friend's place.

As we left the marina, I imagined this might be true. Doug and Vincent appeared happy as they



discussed the best route to take. Bob seemed relieved. I shifted from feeling giddy with hope to being fearful and wary.

Bob rode in the back with me. He lay on his side, propped up by his left elbow. He closed his eyes and sipped his beer. I watched the freeway signs. Were we heading back to Hollywood? I did not recognize any of the street names, but that meant little. It was midnight, so I could distinguish only the brightly lit fastfood restaurants. When we exited on Sunset, I exhaled slowly. Vincent turned to me. “Almost there.”

We pulled up to my friend’s building. Vincent slid out of his seat and into the van’s dark interior. And he opened that heavy sliding door. Adrenaline surged and my heart raced. I stepped out of the van. My brain said, “license plate, license plate.” But my body said, “RUN, RUN, before they shoot you in the back.” My feet hit the ground hard.

And I ran.

Mary Beth O'Connor currently is writing her memoir. This piece won First Place in Book Length Nonfiction Memoir in 2016 at the Mendocino Coast Writers Conference and was published in the Noyo River Review. This year I was awarded third place in novel in the Mendocino competition. I also won Best of Show Memoir in 2017 and Honorable Mention Memoir in 2016 in the Literary Arts Competition at the San Mateo County Fair. Both pieces are published in the 2016 Carry The Light anthology. Another piece won Honorable Mention in the Keats literary competition. That piece was separately published by online magazine The Ravens Perch.



Things I Remember

Suvi Mahonen

The weirdness finally wears off when there's only five minutes remaining. It takes the dregs of my limited self-control to stop myself from jumping off the nutter couch and pointing triumphantly at Laura and shouting 'Ha!'

I don't move. But my face must have. Because she pauses in the middle of her sentence.

'You wanted to say something?' she says, arching her eyebrow in the way that she does so that it disappears behind the thick black upper rim of her funky Gucci glasses.

I think quickly. 'I was wondering what happened to your old pot plant?'

She glances over her shoulder at the empty space on her desk between the computer and the inbox tray where a tall, spiky, phallic-like cactus used to sit. She turns back. 'It died,' she says simply.

I can tell she doesn't believe me. I don't care. I'm still pissed off she suggested Olanzapine 'Just in case'.

I knew I shouldn't have told her what had happened at the hospital.

As soon as I did I realised I'd made a mistake. It was the look she shot me. Something about it said here we go again.

Her chair squeaked as she'd leaned forward.

'What did you say you saw?'

I'd laughed to show it was nothing. 'It was nothing.' I laughed again. 'I knew as soon as I saw it that it wasn't really there.' I looked out along the jagged line of building tops that crossed the breadth of her office window. When I looked back she was scribbling on her pad.

Sand ran down my skin.

'What?' I said. 'You've never seen something out of the corner of your eyes that just turned out to be a shadow.'

She stopped and looked at me. Her nostrils twitched. I felt like grabbing that Mont Blanc pen of hers and ramming it up one of those nostrils.

Then she smiled. 'Of course, I have.' Then she capped the pen and put the pen on the coffee table and covered the pen with the pad. Face down. Then she told me a pithy anecdote about a snake in her garden turning into a stick. Then she brought up the Olanzapine.

I knew I shouldn't have told her.

'Are you going to get another one?' I say, wishing I'd thought of something better than the cactus to try and distract her with.

Her rubesque lips pucker a fraction. 'No.' She crosses her grey wool-skirted, black-stockinged, high-heeled, quite-well-shaped-for-fiftyish legs



and frowns. 'I'm trying to understand why you're still refusing to sign this contract,' she says.

Laura and her contracts. A year's gone by and she's still stuck on them. I know the easiest thing to do would be to give in and say yes. But I always thought they were ludicrous. I mean really, just because you sign a promise with your shrink not to harm yourself, or not to purge, or not to steal, or not to be a compulsive sex addict, etc., doesn't necessarily mean you'll keep it.

Anyway, I have another reason now.

I lean back into the couch. I run my hands over my belly, feeling the reassuring swell of my uterus beneath. So different to three years ago.

I smile.

'Because you can trust me.'

'I do trust you,' she says. 'But I'd still like you to sign this contract.' She holds out her pen to me.

I keep my hands folded.

'If you trust me, why do you want me to restart the Olanzapine then?'

Laura sweeps back a strand of hair that's strayed onto her face. 'Because as I explained to you before, pregnancy and the post-partum period, especially the post-partum period, are a high-risk time for recurrences of prior psychological problems.' She pulls her glasses

down a fraction, making her eyes grow larger.

I'd avoided those magnified eyes of hers when she'd called me into her office today. I was hoping that she'd forgotten what I'd yelled as I'd stormed out a year ago, slamming the door so hard behind me that the handle hurt my hand. And as I walked the short distance from her office door towards the centre of the room – where the same nutter couch and the same squat coffee table and the same purple rug with the wavy yellow trim sat waiting for me – I kept expecting her to say something. Something like 'I knew you'd be back eventually'.

But she didn't.

Instead, as the nutter couch enveloped me in its big, soft, brown, leathery-smelling hug, she just stood next to her desk, holding her elbows, gold bracelets and gold earrings jiggling.

'So,' a kind of smile creased her cheeks. 'Can I touch it?'

All was forgiven.

Until she mentioned the Olanzapine.

I knew I shouldn't have told her.

Things I remember:

- a short, sharp, shiny knife;
- the cold night air on my breasts;

– hearing the mournful hoot of a train whistle
as its bright beam transected the linked wire
fence above my head;

– the sticky treacle of blood in my eyes;
– the salty smell of his sweat;
– the painful rocky ground;
– the crinkle of litter under my back;
– reaching out, trying to grasp the line of
distant houselights in my hand;
– the blazing sting as he stubbed out his
cigarette on my clit.

Things I don't:

– the broken bottle;
– whether he was circumcised or not;
– what he was saying when he tried to set my
hair alight;
– if his tie was plain or striped;
– the name of the person who found me curled
up next to my car;
– Mark holding the phone to my ear while I
cried to Mum;
– signing the police statement;
– testing my urine three weeks later;
– slashing my wrists.

This last bit isn't exactly true. I can remember
fetching the box cutter from the garage. Then
watching as the bright red speckled patterns

splashed across the white-tiled bathroom floor.
But I can't remember the bit in-between. Laura
calls this a classic example of dissociative fugue
in a depersonalised state secondary to a severe
reactive depression.

I call it not wanting to be me.

Suvi Mahonen is a freelance writer based in Surfers Paradise on Australia's Gold Coast. Her non-fiction appears on many platforms including The Huffington Post, The Australian and The Establishment. Her fiction has been widely published in literary journals and anthologies including in The Best Australian Stories and Griffith Review. A portion of a longer work-in-progress was nominated for a Pushcart Prize.



Protection

Starr Davis

(Ma
 ma) sleeps
 with a knife
 under her pillow
 (her dreams are
 (safer than mines)
 I grabbed a butter
 knife, put it inside
 my pillowcase
 dreamed a man
 climbed inside
 my window
 climbed inside
 my body
 dreamed a man
 kissed me on
 my thing, kissed me
 it'll be okay, dreamed I reached
 for my knife, put shaky
 fingers underneath
 the pillowcase and
 felt nothing.
 the knife slipped
 from the case,
 laid on the floor
 next to me won-
 der if the thump
 woke mama wo
 nder if she he-
 ard my skin
 breaking

Starr Davis is a poet from Columbus, Ohio currently residing in New York City as an MFA Candidate in Creative Writing at City College of New York. Her poetry has been published in Kalyani Magazine, Rigorous Magazine, Lipstickparty Magazine, and The Promethean. She works as a Creative Writing Mentor for Writopia. She lives in the Bronx, NY.



The Ducks and the Vagrant

Melissa Lewis-Ackerman

I trembled at the altar in front of my future husband, Max, who wore a smart black tuxedo. His gentle, brown skinned, West Indian face was full of an authoritative joy. His kind, wide dark eyes were partly masked by thick framed glasses. He was broad shouldered and full bellied. My own skin was pale against my black eyes and hair, which was pulled up in an elegant French twist. At twenty-six I looked like a china doll in my long off-white wedding gown.

We were getting married in an evening ceremony, in a stunning, brightly lit Unitarian church in my hometown in Northern Florida. The Unitarian church was the only venue we could find to marry us because Max was Catholic and I was Southern Baptist.

Night fell heavy over the sprawling southern church yard. My attention was torn between the hopeful faces of guests at our backs and the broad, uncurtained, floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked a bundle of low dipping oak trees before us. The limbs of the oaks whipped up frantically, slapping at the glass in a pending storm. I was afraid that night. Not of marriage, but of my own long standing psychological hurdles that I didn't fully understand or know how to shake at such a young age. These hurdles

took the form of my feeling the night was calling me personally into darkness, that I didn't belong in the world of light that surrounded me, and ultimately that some invisible, ominous thing, was coming for me. Instead of feeling elation in joining my life with Max, I was dropping my eyes to my clear polished nails in an attempt to emotionally ground myself in the room.

I couldn't look too directly at Max. I'd avoided his eyes most of the week before the wedding too. He was the only person who could look into my eyes and sense when I was slipping into some separate, paranoid, frantic place. I didn't want the odd things about me to ruin such an important night for him. I knew he needed to feel like he wasn't making a mistake in marrying me. This understanding came from many discussions about how I was supposed to act, and how I was supposed to feel in different life situations. He'd desperately needed me to get my shit together. There was also the added problem of my not being able to blend well into Max's sophisticated world after having been raised in serious poverty in a low part of town.

Raised in Brooklyn, with parents from the Islands, Max was worldly and accomplished. By his early thirties he'd already held a powerful



position in a prominent law firm. He was moving toward a future in politics, while I struggled with introductory classes at the Community College.


In our courting years, Max took my hand, pulling me to him with tenderness, brushing my hair back from my face, kissing my forehead without needing a reason. He'd call me over to his couch and ask if I'd like to sit next to him while he read or watched TV. When I was too shy to dance, he put Bob Marley's, *three little birds*, on the stereo, standing me on his feet, holding me to him while he danced for the both of us until we fell apart laughing. He took me to poetry bars, laid blank paper and pens between us, having us write back and forth to each other in those smoky, darkened spaces. I wanted to be a writer. He nurtured that in me.

The real problem for us was that none of what Max did built a solid foundation between us, or helped me to build a foundation within myself where I could be a worthwhile partner in our mutual lives. I'd grown up with a fist-swinging mother who slurred profanities in my direction, and was subjected to a revolving door of random men. She bartended nights for years of my early childhood, leaving them as sitters creeping into my bed, covering my mouth, shushing me. I was

too young when it all started to know how to stop it. And, by the time I was old enough to understand that what was happening to me didn't happen to everyone, it was too late to figure out how to form the word, no.

That life was swift as a river rushing out ahead of me, closing me in. A person had to become an Olympian swimmer or drown. I became an Olympian by hiding from sexual encounters, by propping chairs against my bedroom door, and by nine years old, taking on complex conversations when cornered where I'd explain to a guy that I didn't want to help him cheat on my mother; a woman who said she'd never be able to keep a man in her life as long as I was around.

I suffered from severe depression, dissociation and post-traumatic-stress for years before I met Max. I didn't know about getting help, or the possibility of healing from severe sexual trauma. I spent most of my early adult life after I'd finally run away from my mother at seventeen, cautious and afraid I was just a step away from one more dangerous encounter with a man. With my biology forever altered by my past, when Max kissed my forehead, I couldn't feel it. When he



asked me to sit with him on the couch while he read or watched TV, I wasn't comfortable with the closeness. When he danced with me to, *Three Little Birds*, and we'd let go laughing, I'd leave the room as soon as I could get away from him because intimacy confused me. And when Max wrote back and forth with me in smoky darkened spaces, I wasn't honest about how unwell I was. I didn't know how to be, and I, just like Max did, hoped I would someday be better.

Before our wedding, Max decided we should write our own vows. I reluctantly agreed, because in the three years we'd been together I'd come to learn that birthdays, Valentine's Day, and anniversaries were the times when Max would become more acutely aware of how disconnected I was as a partner. He'd become despondent, and depressed after some hurtful, thoughtless blow, like my forgetting a special occasion, or, if I happened to remember an occasion, I wouldn't know how to make it special enough. He on the other hand made a spectacular to do of all possible occasions to celebrate me and our lives together. There were fine dinners, and beautiful, specially chosen gifts. This was love to Max, he was good at it, while the overt attention made me uncomfortable. So, when the prospect of writing

our vows came up, my first thought was that Max loved me more than I loved him, because Max actually knew what love was, and this truth wouldn't go unnoticed in front of a room full of people. I knew he would see me far more clearly than he would've wanted to, on the worst possible of occasions.

I felt crowded at the altar. The pastor had forgotten to ask the guests to sit when the ceremony began. With a jittery stomach I recited my simple speech first. Max smiled indulgently as I mentioned all the appropriate things you might think to say to someone you're about to spend the rest of your life with. When it was his turn, Max took a step back, waved one arm out toward the standing room, tears formed in his eyes as he began to speak about me in a way that I surely did not deserve. I don't know how long he spoke. I don't remember what he said. But people came up to me for weeks and years after telling me how lucky I was to have him for my husband.

It hurt profoundly as I grew older and began to fully comprehend how Max suffered having me for a wife. His patience eventually frayed when I didn't adapt to even the smallest things he expected of a mate. He needed a certain kind of wife for his career and social aspirations.

I had no ability to even pretend to be that person. I'd get into our car at the end of an evening spent with Max and other prominent lawyers, learning to dread the things he'd tell me never to do or say again in public, and, he was right. Cloth napkins lay over your lap in fancy restaurants. Not wadded up next to your plate. And, when asked personal questions about myself, no one really needed to know that my early life was difficult or painful.

When Max had me meet his everyday friends for dinner parties, I stayed silent, uncomfortable, wishing to be home, and we'd end up having to talk about that.

Eventually, I felt I was being tortured by the overstimulation of what Max called living, and I could see how he was becoming worried, sad, and leery in my presence.


In our home I kept my personal belongings in one side of our walk-in closet. Any special memento, figurine, or meaningful book I could have brought out to assimilate my existence, I didn't. Our home looked like Max's home. His books were above the fire place. The garage became his office. His medieval sword hung on the wall in the hall.

He'd ask in a hesitant, awkward way, with his

deep voice getting a little higher with each word, "Why is it that you don't become part of the *whole* house? We've been living here for over a year."

I'd tried convincing him he was imagining things, but he'd have me follow him to my side of the walk-in closet and point out my neatly stacked private boxes. Then came the talks where he'd openly express how frightened he was by my behaviors. I'd nod, only pretending by that time that I seriously believed I'd get better, when what I wanted to say was that I was afraid of how big our house was after growing up in the dark of my mother's double wide trailer. That our house's luxurious echoes reminded me that I had nowhere to hide. That its beautiful light stretching in through fancy French doors was exactly the kind of exposure I'd always shielded myself from. That his need for normalcy was no longer just disturbing me, I came to believe it was killing me.

I became deeply depressed for some time, missing the small apartment we'd had before we built the house. Like a helpless kid, I desperately wanted to go back to the place I knew, but there was no way to step back through time. The injustice of it was profound for me, even if my



even if my feelings were unreasonable. And, I'd learned to hate myself, believing I would never be well enough, or complete enough, or something enough, to fit whatever it was I was supposed to be that would make Max feel like he had a real partner and wife.

As we stood in front of the pastor and Max slipped the gold band on my finger, I couldn't see the future. That we'd eventually have a child. That we'd be divorced before my mid-thirties. That he would never forgive me for being a failure at everything that meant something to him. That all the days of my life I'd miss the approval from him I so desperately needed, that I never got.

But the biggest thing I couldn't have foreseen was that our daughter, Riley, at fifteen, years after Max and my divorce, long after I'd become a college professor, would sit across from me in a coffee shop and ask if her father, Max, had ever cheated on me in the decade we were married.

I set my cup down on its saucer, becoming acutely aware of the low volume classical music filling the elegant room we occupied. I looked at the girl sitting across from me with olive skin and lovely brown spring curls falling down around her face and shoulders. She had her father's stunning, wide, West Indian eyes, his intense skepticism,

his need for things to be just and right.

"I have no way of knowing if your father ever cheated on me, Riley, but I have no reason to believe he did."

Riley looked relieved, but not surprised. A smile pulled at the corners of her full mouth. She hesitated before asking, "And you, did you cheat on dad?" She pulled back in her seat abruptly, waving her small olive hand in my face, "No, never-mind, I don't want to know."

In that same moment a waiter came over to see if we needed anything, freezing us both uncomfortably in his presence. And there was an ache forming in me because I knew my daughter never fully trusted me, because her father never had.

As the waiter walked away, I blurted out, "I could have cheated on him, but I didn't!"

"No mom. Don't!"

"No, you asked, and I just want to say this one thing. That I was the kind of person who could have. It just didn't happen that way."

"Why would you say that then? Why isn't no enough?"

"Because I don't want you to believe life is

black or white! I don't want you judging people when you can't know what goes on inside another person. There's no excuse for cheating, certainly. But back then, something being right or wrong had no meaning for me. When I was married to your father, I was a lonely, confused, shell of a person. I was. I didn't have boundaries. I didn't know what boundaries were. No one ever had boundaries with me!"

She moved her hands over her ears.

"I just want you to know me! Your mother. The truth. That I could have!" I tried, reaching over, pulling one of her hands down.


"If you cheated on my father I will hate you, and I will never want to see you again!" She wadded up her paper napkin, tossing it next to her plate.

Technically, I wasn't unfaithful to Max. I lived in a series of emotional affairs with men who were a couple of decades older than I was. It was their steadiness that got me, their gentle way of speaking to me, the way they felt I was courageous and smart to have survived my early life like I did. And these men had so much of life behind them that they didn't need anything from me. The comfort they offered with their acceptance was an addiction I couldn't have

retreated from if I'd wanted to. Every craving I'd ever had to be thought well of, to be loved, without my having to give sex or intimacy in return was fulfilled.

I'd be seen with different men in restaurants and parks. Word would get back to Max. "An innocent walk," I'd say," or, "It was just lunch." As years went by I cared less and less about how I hurt Max. I hated double standards. He lunched with both men and women, but he couldn't allow the same for me. Once I asked flat-out, "How is it that you can be close to people, but I can't be allowed to have close relationships with anyone?" He jabbed his heaving chest repeatedly, "Because, I'm me! That's why! Because I'd never cheat on you!" And there it was, and he was right, even though the double standard was wrong. He knew what my daughter would never be able to hear. That I was capable of it.

Eventually I got too close to a married man. We were seen together too often. Max confronted me. Standing in our living room he swore that I was in love with the other man. I denied it until Max broke in front of me in a way that I still wish to this day that I'd not had to see. His face lost all its hope. All its innocence. Tears pooled in his eyes. The air in the room grew



heavy with his grief. I couldn't stop myself from admitting my feelings for the other person. But when I assured Max that I did not have, and did not want to have, a sexual relationship with this other guy, he turned on me as he was about to exit the room. He raised his hands to his head, holding tight, and said, "I would have much rather you fucked him! At least I could've forgiven you then!"

With the wedding reception ended and all the rice thrown, Max and I stopped at Lake Luca on the way to our hotel. It was a beautiful lake in the center of town bordered by a winding concrete path. We walked, clutching hands, smiling nervously, staring straight ahead into the moonless night. I was happy as I held my dress with my free hand, keeping it from dragging. There was a cool dampness in the air from the earlier passing storm. Streetlamps were dim, dying. Ducks were gracefully sleeping. A vagrant lay passed out on a wooden bench in the distance. I didn't know at twenty-six that this choice to marry would ruin a huge part of another young person's life. And after years and years of hating myself for what I did to Max, it took me an equal number of years to learn to forgive myself for not being well enough to be

someone's wife. We were all just living our lives, I thought. Max, me, the ducks and the vagrant.

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'Savasana' (*Compose, A Journal of Simply Good Writing*, Fall 2017)

'The Jew Who Loved Me' ('Buried' issue of *Claudius Speaks*, 2017)

'Letter To New York' (*Crab Fat Magazine*, 2017)

'White Light' (*Flights*, 2015)

"White Light" (Second Place- Sinclair Community College contest for Creative Nonfiction, 2015)

"Seventy" (*DUENDE*, 2015)

"Clock Towers" (*BOOMTOWN*, Explosive Writing From Ten Years Of The Queens University of Charlotte MFA Program.)

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Mr. Director

Nicole Heneveld

Mr. Director

When a highly respected British director tells me I am
not feminine enough, I do not immediately understand.
 I wonder if this is an acting note or a personal insult,
 whether he was making a
 point as a director
 or as a man
 or both.

The play is

Women Beware Women,

I am Bianca, a sixteen-year-old girl
 who has just been raped. I wonder what that means
 to Him, to Mr. Director, who seems to have all the answers,
 who wants me to be softer, sexier, more seductive, more Woman.
 I want to tell him that when a young girl has just been assaulted
 she may not want to be all things to all men, but instead I
 assume that he must mean *me*; I—not my character—
 am *not feminine enough*, my face too plain,
 my body too short, my curves
 in all the wrong places.

Tell me, Mr. Director, was I feminine enough at ten years old, when the man down the street coaxed me
 towards his car? Was I wrong when I said *no* and ran in the opposite direction?

Was that too strong of a choice? Was I not kind enough to him?

Should I have made the rejection gentler, more polite?

Was I feminine enough when my love, he,
 he thought *no* meant *convince me*?

Was I feminine enough

stumbling home alone

at one in the morning,

when a man stopped me in

my tracks to say what he wanted

to do to my body. I still wake up from

dreams where I never made it home that night.

My neighbor filed a noise complaint because he could
 hear me screaming in my sleep. Is that feminine enough?

Mr. Director, did you ever consider that maybe I know what
 a sixteen-year-old girl would do in this circumstance because

I was once a sixteen-year-old girl without a voice and I will
 not let you tell me to be *more* when I know what it's like to

feel *less*? Mr. Director, if I am feminine enough to garner
 the unwanted attention of the male strangers I pass in the

ten minutes it takes to get from the subway station to

my apartment, I am more feminine than I want

to be. This may come as a surprise to you,

Mr. Director, but women are not just the

sum of their parts. Mr. Director,

even if I am not your *ideal*

woman, I am still

enough.

Nicole Heneveld is a poet and playwright based in New York. She holds a B.F.A. in Theatre Arts and has won several writing awards, including the Donald Axinn Award in Poetry and the Robert Muroff Scholarship in Creative Writing.



Siren*A.L. Kander*

Loud red,
fire-engine red
alarm on his arm
screaming.

Emergency dispatch, please send one of each:
a cop, an ambulance, and a fire-truck.

We might need everyone.

Wet, smearing
blood, thin like water,
making doctors wonder.

“Fish oil supplements,” he answers with pique.

“I’m trying to take care of my heart.”

This is not advice.

This is not a how-to.

This is the worst f**king misuse
of a deft hand and silence.

Cutting themselves is supposed to be
something only girls do.

Boys do it, too.

The unsanitary secret: humans hurt themselves
when they’re hurting and nobody’s helping.

We break glass in case of emergencies
inflict harm so we can predict it

retake blasphemies


like

violence with words

or fists

or dicks
We make pain part of us
build scar tissue around it
live past shards
The topic of this poem—
a cliché that keeps welling up
from children and adults
for whom we haven't made places
to feel safe
who still aren't
being
heard.





A.L. Kander writes with her sidekick, a fearless blue fish who doesn't realize he's only one inch tall. Her work is published or forthcoming in *Breadcrumbs*, *The Journal of Compressed Creative Arts*, *Story Seed Vault*, and beyond.

Playhouse

Nikki Smith

One

I listened to classical music from a young age. Not Bach or Debussy, but these deep, guttural religious symphonies like Joseph Haydn's *Die Schöpfung* and Handel's *Messiah*. My family did not practice any religion, but I was moved by that music. There was something ferocious and fearful in it that transfixed me, held me to the ground. It was unwavering and unforgiving.

We lived just outside of Philadelphia at the time, on the outskirts of the commuter rail. Our house was several miles from the train station and bordered a deep forest, which felt endless to me when I was young. It was a small house. My father helped build it. He and my mother furnished it with items that their friends gave them, with furniture bargained for at yard sales early on Saturday mornings. My mother, my father, my sister and I all slept in the same room.

There were only a few houses near us. An older couple with a basset hound named Woody lived about a fourth of a mile away, and he would trot over to our yard sometimes. I fed him french fries from McDonald's and he took them gently from the palm of my hand, his rough tongue lapping at the salt on my fingers.

Further down the road lived a family with

three children: one daughter named Claire who was my sister's age and two sons – Aaron and Dean – both older than me. Their house was three times the size of ours, just built; everything in it was brand-new and expensive. They lived a kind of life that I had never seen before. I was only six. I didn't understand what it meant to have an entire room just for your toys or furniture that wasn't ripped and chipped away at. I couldn't imagine what it was like to wake up in your very own room.

That was the year that my Uncle Ed stopped living with us, packed up and moved to New York City. I helped him move with my father. We placed everything he owned in the back of my dad's car. Drove it onto a ferry and crossed the Hudson River. My uncle wanted to see the Statue of Liberty on his way in, just like my great grandfather did. It was time wasted, he said, but some time is better off wasted.

Now that he no longer slept on our couch, there was no one to watch Elena and me. The meteorologists warned that it was going to be a rough winter, and it was. It snowed and snowed. My father worked long hours in the city, but sometimes my mother could get out of a shift at the group home – have someone switch with her



- if school was cancelled. But it wasn't always possible. She handed me my coat and boots one morning. "C'mon," she said, "you're going to spend the day at Aaron's house."

We had only been to their home once, briefly, to welcome them to Blue Spruce Road. I had been wary of its many hallways that seemed to spin out in all directions, its large white pillars that guarded the front door. Since then, Aaron's mother would call mine every now and then to "check in." I could hear my mother sometimes on the phone in the kitchen. "Thank you, I'll keep it in mind," she would say. I supposed that was why we were headed to their house now.

The roads were already beginning to ice over. It snowed steadily, these big thick flakes that came down like mayflies, floating dead to the ground. I thought they were beautiful, but I also had a distinct fixation on the damage they could cause. I found it strange and fascinating that a thing so light, so delicate on its own, could do so much harm. Could cause the very tar we drove on to crack open in pain, the ice expanding, breaking apart the earth.

We moved up their winding walkway carefully. Elena, who was so insistent on walking despite not having winter boots, slid on the ice, and my

mom grasped her hand tightly to steady her. I had only just gotten snow boots the previous winter. Before that my parents would tie plastic bags around my sneakers. We rang their bell, which played a short melody then echoed into silence. Aaron's mom came to the door several seconds later holding Claire on her hip. She and my sister were both two-year-olds, and Aaron's mother doted on them, cooing to Elena, "How cute you are...your little chubby cheeks..."

I slipped inside unnoticed, looked back at my mother dressed in her work clothes: jeans and a sweater, her heavy, too-big coat hanging off her body like a sack. She looked poor to me then, compared to the smooth, rounded woman next to me. Aaron's mom smelled like shampoo and something else, something I couldn't place. I looked into my mother's eyes and she gave me a sweet, almost sad smile before turning down the walkway.

I looked around at the shiny tiled floors, the many windows dressed up with lacey sheer curtains. The snow was coming down harder outside, and the soft light that reflected off the ice gathered like dew upon the furniture. Further away I could hear the sound of video games, echoing shouts from the boys.



“How’d you like a grilled cheese, dear?” Aaron’s mom said cheerfully. I nodded and followed her into their impossibly big kitchen. The grilled cheese was already made, as if she had willed me into wanting it, had anticipated that I would accept even though I had just eaten at home and wasn’t hungry.

I sat at the counter and ate in silence. Claire and my sister played separately in the living room off the kitchen. “The boys are upstairs, sweetheart. Go join them once you’ve had enough to eat.”

I went to school with Aaron and Dean. I didn’t see either of them much during the day, but we rode the same bus. Whenever Dean got on, he had control, would sit in the back and carve drawings into the seats with the older boys. He was the kind of kid who would always have control. I was never so sure about Aaron, who was younger than Dean. He seemed softer than his brother. Not necessarily nicer, but less tough, like there were things that could get to him. There was some kind of emotion in him that I didn’t see in Dean.


We were always the last three on the bus going home. Sometimes Aaron would slide in next to me on my seat near the end of the ride, would

offer me candy cigarettes from his backpack and pretend to light them up. His fingers curled expertly around the end and he would fake puff until his stop came.

I pushed my chair out from the counter and hopped down, my feet chilled against the cold tile of the kitchen floor. Elena was fumbling with a toy car, the kind that could be propelled forward by backing it up and letting go. She was concentrated, unaware of anything else. Her mouth worked as she figured out how to get the thing moving. Despite how much time we spent together, I didn’t know my younger sister, not really. We were specters in each other’s lives, moving invisibly past one another, our narratives already pulling away from the experiences we both shared.

I walked upstairs, not necessarily because I wanted to, but because Aaron’s mother had told me to. Her, with all her jewelry, her smell that was half sweetness, half something else. Something else.

The sounds I’d heard were coming from a room near the back of the hallway. I followed it blindly, like a rat trapped in a maze, coaxed forward by the smell of cheese. I found both boys in a bedroom lined with posters of athletes: men



playing basketball, playing baseball, football, hockey. The wall was painted deep red, and there was a bunk bed with a desk underneath the top bunk. Chewing gum stuck to the bedposts. A television and several game consoles, in front of which sat Dean and Aaron.

“Give me a turn,” Aaron said. Neither had noticed me standing in the doorway.

“Like hell,” said Dean. On the screen two characters fought each other, swinging, kicking. Dean’s fingers punched his controller definitively. Then, somehow sensing my presence, Aaron turned abruptly, and we made direct eye contact for a moment, intensely, as if he were anxiously trying to figure out who I was. Then his eyes softened.

“Hey Kira,” he said.

“Hi.”

I stepped into the bedroom and stood behind the boys. I was aware of my hands, of not knowing what to do with them. I rubbed them back and forth and against my jeans. I watched Dean play for a few minutes, hardly grasping what was happening.

“So,” Dean said without turning, “you’re family is like poor, right?”

“We’re not poor.”

“Isn’t that why we have to watch you though? Because your mom has to go to work at some house for druggies? That’s what my mom told me.”

I had nothing to say. It was true.

“What are you playing?” I asked.

“It’s the new *Final Fantasy*,” Aaron said. “Just came out a few weeks ago.”

“Yeah and I’m going to crack it in a week flat,” Dean added. Then the game absorbed him again. He leaned in, tightening his grip on the controller.

I kept my eyes on the television, but I could feel Aaron watching me. I glanced over to him, and his gaze struck me in the same way that his mother’s presence did. I felt uncomfortable, but not simply because he was studying me. It was something in the way that he did it, as if he were sizing me up, deciding something about me. I thought about the fact that my shirt was stained and one size too small. Looked down at my feet, where one toe stuck up out of my sock.

After several minutes Aaron stood up, motioned for me to stand as well. “C’mon.”

We left Dean with the game. I followed Aaron down the stairs to the first floor, where his mother was entertaining Claire and my sister.

She didn't notice us when we passed by the living room. We were invisible. He opened a door, revealing another staircase. He led me down to a finished basement. It was filled with toys so tightly packed together that it was difficult to move around. I was once again struck by his wealth, a concept I had hardly any understanding of at the time. Yet I perceived it just the same, and Aaron suddenly seemed so powerful to me, with all his things, things, things. Anything he wanted stretching on as if the basement was not a room but an ocean, and I was lost in it.

He guided me, weaving in and out of discarded Nerf guns, overturned chairs, rollerblades, and action figures, over to a playhouse made of colorful plastic.

"Go inside."

I ducked my head and entered. It was quite large, with enough space to fit a table. It had a door and a small window. Inside it I could stand up fully. Once, my father had built me a playhouse out of junk wood scraps. I'd had to crouch down inside of it and no more than one person could go in at a time, but it was mine, and it wasn't something handed down or bought at a yard sale but something that had always been and would always be mine. But it didn't last. The wind

wore it down; all it took was one big blizzard for the roof to crack under the weight of snow.

I stood in Aaron's house now, expectantly.

"Okay," he said, "you'll be my wife. You have to pretend that you're cooking and cleaning. I'll be at work."

He left through the little yellow front door, shuffled his way around all the toys to some other part of the basement, and I felt I had no choice but to do as he said. I dutifully picked up an invisible dish, inspecting it for food remnants.

Aaron returned soon after, holding a toy gun. He aimed it at me then, made a series of rapid clicks with his tongue. "I shot you, you have to fall on the ground and pretend you're dying."

I did as he told me. Silently, I lay on the floor, flat on my back.

Then Aaron cried out. "Oh my god," he said, "I've shot you, you're *dying*, I've shot my wife!" He sounded desperate to me, and I was afraid. It didn't feel like a game anymore.

Aaron dropped down to the floor, pulled me into his arms and rocked me back-and-forth. I lay stiffly, my eyes open to his pretend suffering.

He lifted my head and stuck his tongue into my mouth, moved it around schizophrenically. It felt like a fish flopping, the kind I had seen my

Uncle Ed catch at the lake the summer before, bouncing on the dock desperately before dying.

And then Aaron pulled back the fabric of my pants and my underwear, stuck his hand down there and rubbed it hard against me. It hurt a lot; I don't know how long it lasted. I closed my eyes tightly, I was dead, I was dead, dead.

"Now tell me you love me. That's what husbands and wives do. I love you, you're my wife. Tell me you love me."

"I love you," I said.

*

When my mother picked me up at the end of the workday, the snow had still not let up, and it was completely dark outside. She skidded halfway up their driveway before stopping, and we had to trudge through the snow to get back to the car. The ride home was silent and tense. I looked out the window at the snow coming down now in sheets. The car slid around on the unplowed road. The windshield wipers smacked back-and-forth frantically against the blizzard. I felt a wrongness deep inside of me. A wrongness I couldn't name. School would be cancelled the following day as well, but my mom had found someone to switch shifts with this time. "I don't want to put their mother out again," I heard her

say.

When we got home I went to the bedroom and shut the door. I put my tape of Handel's *Messiah* into my father's Walkman, placed the headphones over my ears and lay prostrate on the ground. I let the sounds wash over me and pummel me deeper into the carpet. Until the waves of noise rolled me back back to some other place, to another plane of knowing and being. Until I was twisted back into myself, back into the nothingness between each deep, resounding note.

Two

A few weeks later, Aaron had a birthday party. We got the invitation in the mail, all wrapped up inside an orange envelope. There were basketballs and footballs on the invitation. My name was written in a curly script that could only have belonged to Aaron's mother. "Could be fun," my mom said, shrugging.

My father took me out to buy a gift for Aaron the weekend before the party. We went to a candy shop near the train station. I got him two packs of candy cigarettes and a set of big red lips made of cherry-flavored wax. Two little vampire teeth stuck out of the corners.

"Go ahead, pick out something for yourself," my

dad said, nudging me on the shoulder. I took my time choosing something, looked up and down every aisle, inside every clear tub of candy along the back wall. I settled on a small bag of Satellite Wafers, these sprinkle-filled cornstarch wafers which my father called “flying saucers.” On the front of the bag was a picture of a smiling sun. Its face was crunched up into a grin, but I wasn’t convinced. It may as well have been crying.

My father pulled a ten out of his pocket and paid. In the car I opened the bag and tried a flying saucer. It was tasteless, Styrofoam-like, and the candy inside was less sweet than I would have hoped. But the beads felt nice in my mouth, and I held them there on my tongue. I looked out the window, watched the telephone lines closely as they stretched by into distance. We could have been anywhere. I could have been anyone, really.

Back at home, my father lay down to read and fell asleep quickly, with the book open on his chest. My mother was with Elena, getting a double haircut, two-for-one at Roberta’s. I put on my coat and boots and closed the front door quietly behind me. I walked along the side of the road eating the flying saucers, my boots crushing down patches of snow that hadn’t been stepped on yet. Wind whipped at my body; it was the kind

of winter weather that makes faces go numb, makes hands crack and bleed. I went as far as Woody’s house before turning back. The old dog was inside. I had been hoping to feed him a wafer.

*

The night of Aaron’s party was clear. Not even a flurry of snow. I looked up at the dark dark sky: no clouds, no moon, only stars. It was bitter cold, and I blew hot air onto the fingers that stuck out of my ripped gloves. Aaron’s gifts were stuffed into a little bag, and I gripped it tightly.


“So do you know who else is going to be there?” my mother asked me on the way over.

“No.”

“Well, maybe this could be a chance to make some new friends.”

When we arrived, my mother rang the doorbell, that same echoing melody that I had heard in my dreams for weeks. There was so much noise coming from behind the door. So many boys voices yelling, feet stamping on the ground. I wondered if anyone would hear the doorbell. My mom shifted from right foot to left foot on the doorstep. “Freezing,” she muttered.

Then Aaron’s mom opened the door and a rush of warm air escaped. “Hi Kira, honey!” she



cried, scooping me into their house. There were boys running in every direction. In the corner of the foyer sat a cartoonist, and kids were lined up to have him sketch oddly proportioned pictures of them. Dean darted past with a Nerf gun in his arms, and several boys followed closely behind. Aaron's mother helped me out of my coat. "Ana Teresa is here. Aaron told me you know each other."

Ana Teresa was my age, a small, dark-haired girl in my class. She lived with her father near the cornfield behind the supermarket, in a little trailer. She didn't have a mother, and I never asked, but I knew from what others said that she had died. I'd been to her house before. She owned every movie in the *Land Before Time* series, all packed away in their VHS boxes and lined up in her room in chronological order. Her father made us rice and beans with warm corn tortillas, and I had never eaten beans like that before. When he lived with us, my uncle would eat baked beans every day straight from the can. He'd open it up and scoop them out with a fork just like that, day in and day out. But these beans were different, and I loved them.

We watched the first *Land Before Time* movie together, and I saw Ana Teresa's dark eyes well

up when Littlefoot's mother died. I studied her, searched for some clue of what had happened, things I would never know. She looked back at me. "Do you believe in God?" she'd asked me.

I hadn't been back to her house since.

Aaron's mom leaned over and touched my mother's arm. "You know," she said, "Aaron told me that Ana Teresa and Kira are his girlfriends. How cute is that?"

"Oh really?" my mother said. "Kira, you hadn't told me."

I shrugged. I hadn't known either.

"Aaron," his mother called, "Come greet Kira. Come greet your girlfriend." It took several seconds, but he came from around a corner, pulling at a stiff button-up shirt. His mother motioned him over to her and turned down the collar. She stood behind him and rested her hands on his shoulders, every so often running her fingers up and down his arms.

He looked to me, gave a half-smile. "Hey Kira."

"Thank her for coming," his mom prompted.

"Thanks for coming."

I handed Aaron the gift bag containing the candy cigarettes and wax lips, and he took it from me, glancing at his mom.

"Lovely," she clapped her hands together. "Go

“Go put that on the gift table.”

Aaron pulled out of his mother’s grasp, disappearing into another room. I looked over at my mom, who caught my eye. “Have fun,” she said, “I’ll pick you up in a few hours.”

I left them in the entryway, following Aaron to the dining room, which was just off the kitchen. There, he set my gift on a pile of other, much larger gifts at one end of a long table. At the other end were plates of sandwiches, bowls of cheese puffs, pretzels, and candy. There was a punch bowl and Oreo cookies and several boxes of pizza. Sam popped a few cheese puffs into his mouth, licked the orangey powder off his thumb and forefinger. He frowned at me.

“Don’t follow me. I’m going to play with the boys.”

He left me there, and I ate pretzels and Oreos to fill time. I wanted to leave this house. I wanted to stuff my pockets with roast beef sandwiches and candies and all the things that I didn’t have. I wanted to take something of Aaron’s, a toy that he loved maybe. I wanted to take something from his mother. I had never stolen before, but I felt the urge now; it was boiling inside of me. I looked around the dining room at all the toys that were strewn on the floor – *he had so many of them; he*

wouldn’t even know – when I noticed Ana Teresa leaning against the wall in the next room, picking leaves from a small potted tree in the corner. I went to her.

Ana Teresa saw me coming and waved me over. “Look,” she said, holding out a leaf, “the tree is bleeding.”

I leaned in. A drop of milky white liquid bubbled out of the stem where she had ripped the leaf off.


“It’s like alien blood,” she said.

I examined the tree. There were marks on the branches too, little bubbles of white tree blood where she had ripped off other leaves. Ana Teresa had a fixation with these kinds of things. I had watched her pick the legs, one by one, off daddy longleg spiders on the blacktop at school. Had seen her, on multiple occasions, carefully poke and prod at anthills, slowly destroying their intricate tunnels and pathways, their homes.

Ana Teresa stuffed the leaf in her pocket, tugged on my sweatshirt. “Let’s get our pictures drawn.”

The cartoonist was flamboyant, and put on a show, asking each child, “What would you like to be when you grow up?” He brandished his markers and thrust them at the paper on his





easel with a flourish. Each kid sat on a chair in front of him, remaining as still as possible, waiting excitedly for the moment when he presented the finished product. “Voila!” he cried, bestowing them with their cartoon portraits.

While waiting in line, I spotted a photograph of Aaron and his mother on a side table. It was a little wallet-sized photo in its own tiny silver frame. A slightly younger Aaron sat on his mother’s lap and she squeezed him around the waist. They both looked happy. They looked different in the picture than they did in real life somehow. My family didn’t own a camera, so there weren’t many photos around my house. Once, my father bought a disposable Kodak, but Elena had torn in half most of the photographs we developed. She didn’t know better my parents insisted. I’d saved one though: of my parents dancing in the kitchen, frozen in time. I liked that I could play any song and imagine that that was the one they were dancing to.

I slipped Aaron’s picture – still inside its frame – into my sweatshirt pocket. I don’t believe anyone saw me take it, and if Ana Teresa did she never mentioned it.

Then it was my turn. “And what would you like to be when you grow up, sweetheart?” the

cartoonist asked, gesturing for me to sit down. When I said nothing, he tapped his marker on his temple to show me how hard he was thinking. “How about a ballerina? I’m sure you’d like to be a ballerina.” I had no interest in ballet, but I didn’t know how to object. He worked his markers across the page deftly. In a few minutes, he handed me a picture of myself in a pink leotard, pirouetting on my left leg. My head was twice as large as my body, and I wore a crooked, toothy smile that disturbed me.

When her turn ended, Ana Teresa came over, holding a drawing of herself as a nurse. “Do you want to be a ballerina when you grow up?” she asked, peering at my portrait.

“No, do you want to be a nurse?”

“Nope.”

We stood there in the thick of it all, the only girls at the party from what I could tell. Boys played corn hole, pin the tail on the donkey, darts. They flew madly by with fake guns and swords, shouting out their battle cries: “goddammit” and “move!” and “more ammo!” I stood there, feeling nothing. I had the thing that I wanted; I could go home. Except I couldn’t go home, not yet. Ana Teresa shifted her weight from one side to the other, tapped her foot,

crossed her arms. She was thinking. And I was waiting for a plan. I would do anything she wanted to. Part of this realization troubled me, but another part of me was happy to follow her. I had a friend!

She grasped my hand and tugged me back toward the snack table. We each discarded our portraits there. Ana Teresa opened a pizza box and took a cold, limp slice. I chose a jolly rancher from the candy bowl, unwrapped it carefully. When I put it in my mouth its sweetness hurt my jaw.

Aaron's mother spotted us from another room. She sauntered over. Again I felt an uneasiness. There was something that soured her, made her presence unsettling in a subtle way that I still cannot express. Did Ana Teresa perceive this too?

"Let me see those portraits you've got there." She held them in front of her, admiring their perversely clownish cartoon features. "How cute. Girls, why don't you play with the boys? Aaron's been anxious to see you. He talks about you two all the time. Makes me jealous!" She let out a too-loud laugh. I cracked down on the jolly rancher then, bit my tongue and tasted blood.

We stared up at her. "Well, go on and enjoy the party while it lasts, before you have to go back.

Make yourselves at home." She smiled, her lips pressed tightly together, her eyes staring, staring. She was seeing something in us, deciding something.


And then she turned and left us there. And Ana Teresa and I walked, as if we shared one mind, to the basement door. We opened it, flipped the switch that illuminated the steep, finished staircase, and made our way down, down.

We meandered around the basement room dizzily, ducked into that plastic house, which was messy with discarded toys. "What d'you wanna play?" Ana Teresa asked, kicking at a toy car.

I turned and found a bin behind me filled with all kinds of fake foods: apples, butter, milk, eggs, steak, fish, bananas...more kinds of food than I had at my own house. We pulled them all out, set them down carefully on the yellow plastic table in a cornucopia of tastes and smells that we could only imagine. It looked beautiful all spread out on that table; it looked generous, colorful. I was proud of what we made.

We wavered in front of our feast. I wasn't sure whether to sit or stand, so I looked to Ana Teresa for an answer. And she looked back at me. And in that moment I saw it all, saw all the hurt and





confusion and pain that she felt. And I guess she saw it in me too, because she slapped me then, across my face. I didn't cry out, but it stung, and my eyes watered. I held my palm to my cheek, turned back to Ana Teresa and pushed her down. I hovered over her, and we stared at each other like that, both of us understanding and not understanding what was happening, what had already happened to each of us. How could we have let this happen?

I don't know how long we stayed like that, but at a certain point Ana Teresa sighed, giving it up. "Geez, let's just pretend to eat."

I helped her up, and we sat across from each other at the table. We shared our imaginary meal as if nothing had happened. And when we emerged from the basement, no one even noticed that we had been gone.

If anyone ever asked me again whether or not I believe in God, I would say yes. I would say yes because I cannot imagine any version of my life without pain, and there is something essentially, profoundly God-like in that suffering. The same kind that I felt in the music of Handel. A kind of pain weighted with meaning, meaning that I could never put my finger on and never will.

We were all children of abuse – Aaron, Ana

Teresa and I – all hurting and abusing each other. We wove each other's lives out of a ripped and soiled fabric that unspun as we grew up; we laid the path for what would come later for each of us.

I left Aaron's house the night of his party and looked up at the sky on the way to my mother's car, gripping the picture of his mom and him in its tiny silver frame. In that moment I was struck not by the stars themselves, but by the dark spaces behind them, the billions of miles strung between each of them. What filled those spaces, I wondered? I had a vague sense that most of the universe was made of nothingness, that there were few lights in that vast darkness. Somehow, I knew it was an illusion that the stars looked so close together. In truth, every one of them was alone.

Nikki Smith writes and lives in Brooklyn with her partner and their cat. She wrote this story to heal and to educate others about the truths of sexual abuse and the experiences of survivors.




Hollow*Danese Grandfield*

once upon a time
i watched and waited
as mother sewed,
her nimble fingers stitching the
last now one, two, three
stitches, and then she
draped it,
finished, lovingly around
my shoulders, kissed me
on the cheek, and pulled
up the hood.
“When you are in the woods,
daughter, always wear the hood up.”
my name is Katharine. not red.
nor riding hood.
i skipped into the heart
of the forest that day
wearing the red she chose
instead of the green
i really wanted-
distracted by picking
delicate white flowers-
sniffing their aroma,
pushing the hood
back only for a moment.
from behind
a familiar voice-

“Where are you going little girl?”
i turned around slowly-
dropping my flowers.
he towered over
me as I looked up
his teeth, so white-so sharp,
his nostrils, quivering
he stepped closer,
i inched back,
pulling my hood up,
saying, just above a whisper,
“To grandmother’s house.”
i wanted to run-
but I didn’t.
he nodded, confident
sly, bowing politely
licking his lips, waving goodbye
as he hurried away-
anxious to get to grandmother
first- the appetizer before
the main meal
-me.
i felt the small axe
tied to my waist-
a gift from grandmother
for my eighth birthday-
its handle smooth






its blade sharp
i gripped it tightly
under my cape
as i innocently walked
through her front door.
“The better to see you with my dear...”
i
fell
into
the
hollow
of
the
wolf’s
belly.
i couldn’t move.
i couldn’t see.
silenced by his dark belly-
but i found the axe,
chop, chop, chop
using it to create
my own space,
cutting through the thick walls
escaped, emerged-
born again.
I killed the wolf.
And grandmother followed me to freedom.

The scars from his bite have become a deeply carved cavern, an empty bowl capable of collecting rainwater.





Shattered pieces. Shards of glass. Tucked away inside. Until.

Until words and photographs provided her a path to healing.

Now she is bold and insistent. She will not be stopped.

Her name – Danese Grandfield – a Woman, a Mother, a Grandmother, a Writer, a Photographer, and so much more she is discovering each day.


Her hope- to shed light into the darkness and pain carried by those who have experienced sexual trauma. And to simply share love, which never, ever, fails.

Cigarette Number Six: In Tile and Glass Cages

Doren Damico

this one makes me think of sex
and then forget again
being raped in a bathroom
so it's the cigarette
i might want after great sex
and it's the cigarette
i smoke to forget rape sex
i still can't scream
i'm still trapped
in tile and glass cages
that's when you think of a cigarette
and then when you are here
wherever you are
catching those slow, deep
poisonous breaths
you aren't there
where your whole life
was taken away from you
'cause you have to spend
the rest of your life using restrooms
restrooms where there is no rest
Cigarette Number Six is for this
and for after the shower
that will never cleanse
contaminated brain cells
you get through that hell
again





to the other side
and breathe
and maybe cry a little
because you still can't remember
what happened in the end
in that big black void
you know you forgot
'cause it was real bad
you light up a cigarette
you have a smoke
and a good cry
or not
just cold numb nothingness
nothing but a cigarette
so good in the rain
to remind you that you are alive
you are breathing
and the rain falls for you
for all the tears you can cry
or can't cry
trying to cry away those memories
corrupted interrupted amygdala dendrites
and how they painted the rest of your life
in tile and glass cages
where no one can hear you
even if you do scream

Doren Damico is an artist, educator, and writer based in LA, California. Her first book, *When You Can't Scream... Or 10 Reasons Why I Smoke*, includes poetry, photography, and an intimate narrative that explores her journey of trauma, acceptance, and healing. Doren's poetry can also be found in: "Coiled Serpent: Poets Arising from the Cultural Quakes and Shifts of Los Angeles," "2016 In The Words of Women International Anthology," and "Nuclear Impact: Broken Atoms in Our Hands."



Evaporated Life

Jackie Filer

I sit cross-legged on her couch, running my hands up and down the sides of my thighs like a small child who has been asked where the last cookie in the jar went. The dryness overtaking my throat is doing a grand job of silencing my tongue as I try desperately to speak. Even my blood feels foreign. She reminds me to breathe, every so gently in the way only she can as my therapist. A joke floats between us that passing out on her watch is not an option. She knows her sarcasm will break my spell, has a hunch she can pull me from the brink of disassociation. Leaving my body, escaping to another reality is not hard for me I've been doing it the majority of my life. The trick now becomes to stay present in the moment when I have to bare my soul. She hasn't rushed me into anything this is on my schedule. After all, I brought the journal. The one I found in a box of stuff I packed six years ago when my mom called:

"We sold the house and are moving in June. You need to come pack up your room."

"What do I do with all of my things? I'm 1600 miles away, I can't bring it here."

"Doesn't matter to me," she replies curtly. "Come empty your room out."

I booked a flight for two weeks later and flew to Texas. A place I spent the first eighteen years

of my life and now only for a few days around Christmas. I'm glad they are selling the house, it harbors painful memories, secret hiding places and a girl I am more than happy to forget existed. The house is down a quarter mile driveway guarded by a black gate. It gives the ominous impression no one is welcome here unless invited. Business attended to inside the brick house was not for public consumption. I walk in the back door and it looks so different. They have repainted and all the photos are gone from the mantel. The house doesn't look lived in. I head upstairs and the oppressive Texas heat swamps me as I ascend. Even in April temperatures are eclipsing the high 80s.

"You'll have to turn the air on. We've shut it off since no one is ever up there anymore," she calls to me from the kitchen. I walk over to click on the thermostat noticing they have put a door back on my brother's bedroom. I'm sure it's only for the potential buyers, can't imagine my parents wanting to explain how they took away his privacy as punishment. I click the air on and smile. My brother and I used to fight over the temperature of the upstairs constantly. I preferred it warm, he preferred to live in Antarctica. I usually gave in and let him win but




always put up a fight. Until my dad stepped in one summer and decided that was enough, it was his house and he got to set the air temperature. We took turns sneakily setting it during the night and putting it back to the “right” temperature in the morning. We were always cohorts in little rebellions. Present a group at odds with a common enemy and they will join forces to defeat him.

I push open my bedroom door and the daylight dust hits the shelves and my bed. The same bed I slept on the first eighteen years of life. The room is a pale yellow, a color my mother painted for me when I was getting closer to thirteen. I think she wanted me to feel calmer. All of my furniture looks out of place and disconnected from who I am now. My shelves are filled with trophies and plaques, smiling pictures and floral arrangements. I hardly remember who this girl was. There are some boxes on the floor and plastic bins in the bathroom. Without any method I start to dump my shelves into the boxes, labeling as I go. I have no idea what to do with any of this stuff. I don't want to keep it, but I don't want to get rid of it. I can't imagine wanting it someday but what if I do? What if I come into my own and remember who I was when I lived in this room, lived in this

life?

I lift up my faded blue duvet and pull the trundle bed out. A shotgun lays across the bed. Oh, right, I'm in Texas. It's the shotgun my brother got for his 13th birthday. It usually hangs in his closet; I wonder what it's doing in here. I wonder if my mom has been sleeping in here. Maybe she needed it close by.

Flinging open the closet there is a hazardous selection of clothes left behind when I packed for college. Garments outdated, old, and too small. Shirts that didn't make sense to donate and pants I hoped I would squeeze back into. I sink into my favorite spot on the floor, between the lower hanging rack and the bins of knickknacks, pressing my back into the wall. I shut the doors and peak thru the gap. Flashes of my life dance in front of me in the darkness. I wrote my first book on this spot. I talked on the phone late into the night from this carpet. I hid from the yelling in this fortress. I was darting to squirrel myself into this spot when my mom stopped me and confronted me one night. The night she told me I couldn't tell anyone about him and what he does. The night my brother sat on the floor and cried because I tried to give him hope. The night I realized I would never be normal and things were



never going to be okay again. I crack the closet door to allow for some light and see the writing on the wall. Literal writing. I scribbled in pencil all over the back of the closet. You had to be in the closet to see it and obviously my mother had not thought to repaint this section. I would need to do that before I left. My twelve-year-old handwriting showed me how much I longed to be loved and wanted. How much I wanted someone to *want* me. The message is the same over and over and over again. My fingers softly linger over the hasted pencil marks and I smile at my braveness. That would have earned me some stripes across my backside had anyone ever found it.

“If you need more boxes they are in the garage.” My mother yells up the stairs cutting into my memory.

“Thanks” I respond bringing myself to my feet. I should finish this.

Several hours and eight boxes later the entire first eighteen years of my life has ceased to exist in this room. I began to haul them down the stairs and load the truck with stuff for the Salvation Army. A handful of the boxes are going to my Nana’s house, she has the space and I’ll drop them off later. I see the spot where the cedar tree used

to stand, before the hurricane took it down and it reminds me I have no idea where my journals are. I didn’t see them in the packing. I rack my brain for my hiding spots. They aren’t buried, a tropical storm taught my not to bury paper in a county below sea level. Afraid with construction someone would discover my false drawer I removed them out of the bathroom. I didn’t see them in my dresser. A stale pack of cigarettes sure, but no journals. Where did I hide them? It comes to me and I trot up the stairs. I shut the bedroom door and sit cross-legged on the floor undoing the clasps to the air vent. Pulling out the filter I shine a light into the vast darkness of the bones of the old house. There they are, near a small shiny fake gold jewelry box. The two journals that hold all of my secrets thru adolescents. I carefully grip the beams and make my way inside to retrieve them, I’m not as small as I used to be and could easily fall thru the ceiling. Wouldn’t that be a site for the new owners. I grip the purple zebra print plastic ring bound book and her sister, a pale easter egg colored leather bound book, with ‘life is an adventure’ scrolled across the front and make my way back to the carpet. I sit in silence unable to open these treasure chests. Jostling the vent


back in, I shove the journals in my purse and head to the truck flipping the ignition where Miranda Lambert's *House that Built Me* comes on the radio. Pulling to the end of the winding driveway I stare at the dynasty in my rearview mirror, taking a mental snapshot of the house I grew up in. This house didn't build me but it did shape me. Who I am is a direct result of who I was behind those doors. When I get to my Nana's house I dump the journals into a box and slam the closet door closed. Out of site, out of mind, effectively erasing the girl I was all those years ago. She was dead to me anyway.

My therapist encouraged me to bring them back. Five months ago when I ended up in her office a shamble of a young lady I had no intention of discussing who I was before college. I figured the cliff notes version of my childhood would suffice. The topic of turbulent childhoods unfortunately means we don't get to discuss it only once. I made the human mistake of thinking I had finished growing in that department. None of us are ever truly done; the occasions that shape us, the memories we harbor, the events that define us resurface multitude of times as new experiences capture us. The latest of my adventures had taken me to Texas for a month

where reorganizing had led me to the box I locked into a closet six years before. As I held them in my hands I still wasn't brave enough to open them. Cut to one phone call and a sleepless night later I had poured thru all three, including the newest addition from my college years. In the tight fashion I controlled my life, the journals were tabbed and color-coded for future use. What the hell was I doing? Leave the demons in the box in the closet where good monsters belong. Rapidly my youngster self, the small girl I had evaporated from my life was begging me to hold her. Begging me to forgive her for all the childish mistakes. I didn't know how to forgive her without losing the foundation from which I was built.

The subject of today's agenda rendering my silence is an assault I scribbled hastily in one of these journals using my captor's verse. The majority of the page is filled with purple ink and the words 'I'm sick.' I don't understand myself. I don't remember this occurrence. I remember the first one by the same man when I was eight. In his hay barn barely big enough for a full grown adult to fit he came in behind me, shut the door and delicately arranged me on a pile of loose straw. The summer air suffocated the small space





as he laid his enormous man body on top of my small, frail, innocent one. The bruises on my legs and shoulders remained for weeks and were the proof I needed something bad happened. *Bruises I hid in shame as if their manifestation on my skin were evidence against crimes I had committed.* That was rape. A word I hadn't heard yet. A word I learned about on the news one night and got my sister to read the definition to me from a dictionary. A word I learned to attach to that experience. A word I couldn't say for years.

That happened to me.

That happened to me.

That happened to me.

That happened to me.

I repeated this phrase over and over as I watched the news. When my sister begged me to explain it's the only phrase I echoed. It's all I could say.

That happened to me.

The only way my eight-year-old brain could compartmentalize this hazardous act.

That happened to me.

But this one, this assault when I'm older, when I have started to understand male and female anatomy, when I am fully aware of the dangers of this man, I end up back alone with him and I don't

remember anything. My therapist softly speaks, "I can only imagine how bad this one must have been for you to not remember." I've been arguing with her because I remember the other two assaults in my early twenties. By then however I had a vocabulary for such things. By then, with a handful of partners, I had consensual sex. At eight and thirteen this grown man in his forties was my introduction to all things sexual. What distorted lessons he taught.

My body remembers the assault. The amount of pain encompassing me the week following the reading out loud of that entry is vile. The nightmares are lucid, limiting my sleep to a few hours a night and once I woke to my boyfriend coming to bed but instead of his face it was my attacker. Not normally a crier my cheeks were wet and swollen in the mornings. The feelings were similar to when I thought I was going crazy, the first time my PTSD came full force. I desperately waited for this time to be over, for my body to return to normal, for my brain to let me remember. I never remember though. I am still protecting myself from this, to avoid the hatred and the absorption of my complicity in the matter.


This girl, this version of myself I scattered

across the country desperate to forget has never left. What I'm learning now as I approach thirty is life doesn't work that way. I don't originate a new identity in every state; don't have the luxury of reinventing myself every time I cross a border. This ignored girl, this neglected child has been with me the whole time. She was with me in college when a former boyfriend locked me in a bathroom and forced his dick in my mouth. She was with me the summer after graduation as I basked in the evening warmth with a beer in hand before a man pushed himself on top of me on the porch of our house. Animalistically he attacked my body causing irreparable damage. She taught me I would survive these acts of violence because I had before. She reminded me no one could destroy me unless I give permission. I wish she made me braver than I feel now but she is a child. Children had a bravado that cannot translate into the adult world. What she is teaching me, what she has been trying to communicate to me from the beginning is my voice is valued. My expressions are legitimate and my feelings are warranted. I can and will be wanted for the very person I exist to be. I do not have to change or adjust or morph into a different, braver, impostor of a person to face the world. The world can learn

to accept me. The broken, beautiful, messy, powerful, hurt, jumbled, boundless woman I am. What my younger self is asking, the only thing she has ever asked is for me to find my voice. I spoke as a kid on the pages of a journal because that was my only safe place. Now I am outside of the physical hurt, I am no longer in active danger and it is safe, *finally safe*, for me to speak. To let go of the injustices I have harbored in my soul. These men, these brutal, broken, violent men, chose me because I did not have a voice to share. Their hope preyed on my vulnerabilities to swallow the indignations committed against me. Because I had no choice, it happened. It's not my fault, it's not her fault either my younger self. She was a victim of circumstances completely out of her control, searching for affection and attention in the only form it was offered. I carried her inadequacies into adulthood after I locked her in a closet to die. The moment has arrived to throw them away.

I walk into my therapists' office and look her fully in the eyes. "I'm ready to tell you their names," I say, my voice stronger than expected. "I don't want to carry this inside. I don't deserve to and I can't keep quiet any longer." Her eyes meet mine full of strength and hope and her





mouth slides into a tiny smile. She leans back, picks up her coffee and lets me speak, unsophisticated, jumbled, erratic and conquering speech. It makes no difference how it tumbles out, just that I'm speaking, regaining the power these men held from me for so long.

Jackie Filer is a freelancer in the entertainment world. She works in television, theatre and film in a multitude of aspects; covering any ground that needs to be covered. New York has laid a stake in her and Jackie now calls the city home. Any spare time she has you will find her drinking wine with her girls or on the top of a mountain discovering new perspectives on life.

Penance


Whitney Rio-Ross

Reflecting on cupped
hands and tangled limbs,
the mirror will show
what you missed:

Wrapped under your
reach, my palms
remain open, legs
paired sleeping snakes.

Forgive my mouth
for making no sound.
You never asked
what I had to say.





Whitney Rio-Ross: I hold a Master's in Religion and Literature from Yale Divinity School. My work appears or is forthcoming in *The Other Journal*, *The Windhover*, and *Adanna*. I live in Nashville, TN, and work as an adjunct English instructor at Trevecca Nazarene University.



ISSUE 5: MEMOIRS

AWAKENINGS

Awakened Voices is a literary program of Awakenings, a non-profit organization dedicated to creating a physical and virtual artistic space in which to promote the healing of survivors through the arts and engage in an open dialogue that furthers awareness and understanding of sexual violence. Please consider helping us spread our message of healing by sharing and supporting Awakenings.

Awakenings' mission is to provide survivors of sexual violence with a trauma informed, inclusive art-making experience that encourages healing.



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