



SPIRE LIGHT:

SPIRE LIGHT:
**a journal of
creative
expression.**

**ANDREW COLLEGE
2022**

2022

*Spire Light:
A Journal of Creative
Expression*



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A Journal of Creative
Expression

Andrew College

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Cover Art: "Synesthesia" by NOAH VARSALONA

Omari Hunter Prize Winner

Cover Design by Heather Bradley

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This issue is a passage beyond survival during a time of more questions than answers. I continue to be saved and seek comfort in escaping the world that transmutes the very wherewithal to keep us here. I hope that you, too, will be transported by these pages of art, prose, and poetry from around the world and our tiny square in Southwest Georgia.

Curating this issue has been an honor and a duty, to both the contributors and the students that assist with every aspect of the work at hand. We want to reflect the vast diversity of experiences and evoke a pop of every emotion possible with levity in between.

There is more responsibility than ever to celebrate and recognize established and emerging writers and artists. A special congratulations to Ian Canon for his story “The Last Sock Thief” as the winner of the Illumination Prose Prize, and Noah Varsalona as the winner of the Omari Hunter Prize for his cover art, “Synesthesia.”

We are immensely proud of all of our contributors and editors for their bold and brave contributions to the 2022 issue of *Spire Light: A Journal of Creative Expression*. None of this would have been possible without all of you.

We would also like to thank Dr. Karan Pittman, Academic Dean, and Dr. Linda Buchanan, President of Andrew College for all of their support in allowing us to continue one of the few print literary magazines that celebrates writing and art in all of its full-color form!

The final selection is “Ready to Say Goodbye,” a posthumous publication by Omari Hunter, a revered and generous young man who graced our campus and baseball fields for far too short of a time.

History

In roughly 1983, Andrew faculty member Herbert Shippey started *Tiger Tales*, which soon became *The Menagerie* under the direction of Professor Lela Phillips, a printed art and literary journal featuring the work of the Andrew College community. It ran for 21 years, with its last issue in 2004.

Then, in 2011, *The Menagerie* was re-envisioned by Professor Amanda Knight as an online literary magazine called *The Welkin Ring*, borrowing a phrase from our Alma Mater, which showcased work of Andrew College students, faculty, and staff.

In the 2016-17 academic year, new faculty advisors and a new group of students relaunched the print form, while maintaining an online presence as well, under yet another new moniker: *Spire Light: A Journal of Creative Expression*. We now seek submissions from outside the campus community so that each issue reflects not only what we create but one that opens our view of the world beyond the campus walls.

“Spire” also draws from our Alma Mater, in a line that reads, “The spires of Old Cuthbert,” referring to the unique architecture of Old Main. The spires stand tall over Cuthbert as some of the first and most recognizable features of our college and town, just as we intend for our journal to represent, to a variety of audiences, the artistic talents as well as values of our historic institution.

Moreover, our spires have recently been illuminated with exterior lights, and *Spire Light* acknowledges our interest in illuminating others with art, poetry, and prose, from however small our corner of the world. In addition to our Illumination Prose Prize, we added the Omari Hunter Prize in honor of our late student to celebrate his contributions to our campus and our lives.

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ILLUMINATION PROSE PRIZE

Ian Canon

The Last Sock Thief

The history of the professional sock thief, developed in parallel with the sock, was hidden from the general public for obvious reasons. This secret profession was a highly illegal, shadow enterprise, run by the far-reaching fingers of Big Sock. This gave them substantial financial interest to keep it hidden from the public—their soaring profits depended on it. Still, it surprises me that those sock thieves, artists in many senses, who had daily face-to-face contact with their targets, were able to evade detection for so long.¹ The sock thieves took their rogue-like duties as seriously as any thespian, academic, or death-defying circus performer might. It forced them to work in isolation within their own section of a city, and they received no information about their colleagues within this noble brotherhood. It is only thanks to the now-discovered journals of one sock thief—the last and greatest sock thief—that this author knows of it at all.

Once I was made aware of this profession, I poured over sock history for weeks. I worked backward, assuming sock thieves did exist, and was able to piece together a reasonable account of their emergence. The earliest recorded history of sock thievery dates back to the ancient Egyptian town of Naqada. It was a bill of sale for a sock, written in hieroglyphics,

¹ There are examples of the general public being exposed to the sock thief with extreme incredulity. Jean Jacques Thoreau, who was caught and hanged in England for stealing socks during the 18th century, is one example most sock historians are aware of. Until Alyoshenka's journals appeared the reason for his sock thievery was always a mystery. Then was also Samuel Winnipeg's great 19th century novel, "The Sock Thief," which was, heretofore, read as satire.

made not from woven knots but a knotless technique called naalbinding.² This was a split-toe sock designed to wear with sandals. It was popular with middle-aged fathers. Shortly after that discovery, as the fathers bought them up in record numbers, one conniving and industrious sock dealer hired a sock thief to pluck those socks from tree branches on the riverbank. For their reward a sock thief was paid an innovative sum of ten percent the sock price and a rogue industry was born.

One might be inclined to ask themselves, “Why socks?” A sock is a unique item. You lose a glove or a baseball cap and you go looking for it. You lose a sock and you think that is just what socks do. They go missing. No one questions the inherent strangeness of a piece of clothing that disappears all on its own. They simply believe that a sock is born to go missing. Was this always so? I am unsure. I can only comment that we now believe it to be so ingrained in sock culture that to go missing is a foregone conclusion.³

The story of the last sock thief begins at the height of sock thievery in the early 20th century. Henry Ford had perfected the assembly line and factories were churning out goods and services in record time for diminishing prices. This caused the common household to have, for the first time in history, a disposable income. However, consumption did not directly follow this increase in purchasing power. The sock thief was needed to drive industry, becoming more important than ever. The highest

² Also known as nålebinding or nålbinding, this form of "knotless netting" predates both knitting and crochet.

³ In fact, studies like Franz, Hunger et al. (2001) have shown that not only does no one question it, but the general populace will find it peculiar if a sock does not disappear within a six-month period.

recorded profit-share of the sock thief during this time was 50% the retail sock price. The masses had the money to spend and as long as sock thieves were plentifully employed the economic circle would keep on churning. But a talent for sock thieving was rare and the talent of this particular sock thief was the rarest of all.

These details come from the journals of a Russian immigrant turned sock thief named Alyoshenka.⁴ Alyoshenka arrived in the United States from Moscow in 1919 at the ripe thieving age of seventeen. He had an eager, boyish face—innocent and open and good—and stood approximately⁵ six and a half feet tall. Due to a slight crook in the shoulders, he appeared slanted, bringing his height down to sulking six three. He had long and nimble fingers, and, in short, possessed a body made for thievery. He could pluck items directly off someone’s body without their knowledge, almost as if plucking grapes from the stem and plopping them into his mouth.

He discovered these abilities while a stowaway on a steamship travelling across the Atlantic Ocean. While hiding under stale bunk beds, in fish barrels, or in the shadows of luggage stacked from floor to ceiling, he extended his thumb and index finger through the salty air and took what he liked. He could snatch a yellow apple out of a commanding officer’s hands

⁴ There is no last name on record. I should also mention that Alyoshenka is the female diminutive of the male name Alexy. Alyoshenka is, indeed, a male, and often referred to himself in his journals as “Aly” or “Ali.” There is also no connection to the Kyshtym Dwarf, a premature female baby who was so deformed some mistook her for an alien. While an irrelevant and digressive detail, I’d like to pre-emptively dispel any connections someone may read into the name.

⁵ It might be questioned how I know what Alyoshenka looks like, if all I have are his journals. Within his journals, there is a creased and tattered photo of the boy from the mid-shoulder up, and he has, many times, described his outings in great detail, remarkable as they were. Through some cross referencing, it was rather easy to get an idea of his size and come to a satisfactory conclusion about his physical appearance and height, both as a young and old man.

right before the man could take a bite. Every time the officer crunched into the air, he looked around, embarrassed, as if it were his own fault he had bit into the space where an apple used to be. He managed to sustain himself in this way for the entire fourteen-day journey—and indeed for the next twenty-two years of his life.

When he first set foot on the New York Harbor, Aly did not know what direction to go. His senses were overloaded. Bodies moved all around him, chattering as they reunited with their families, and a ship's horn blared above the seagull's mewing. But, above all, a smell carried over the still-salty air. It was a mixture of fried pastries and the industrious freedom that followed smog. He held his nose up and let it lead him through clothes-lined alleys and stone streets and muddy backyards until he found himself in a local market. There, he saw that the stories he heard as a boy about America were true. There were rows of farm-to-table meats, a river's ransom of fresh trout and tuna, imported figs, cobblers and cotton dealers, inventions he did not know were possible, peanut butter pies and chokecherry pastries. And they could be all his. He only had to stretch out his bony fingers and stuff them into his threadbare pants.

The average person would not have noticed Alyoshenka during this first public thieving. As items disappeared from between the fingers of fishmongers, and hoot and hollers signalled the disappearance of goods, no one could entirely place the cause of these occurrences. It was as if a magical force had waltzed through this market and evacuated individual items with a snap of their finger. But there was one trained eye in the audience that day, and that was a man named Rickhard.⁶ He watched Alyoshenka stuff his clothing full of domestic and foreign goods until at last Alyoshenka appeared, behind a cart full of melons hidden in an alley, on the verge of bursting. This man was an ex-sock thief and Alyoshenka's

⁶ Or Richard or Rickard, as Alyoshenka would sometimes call him.

hiring officer.

“You there,” Rickhard said.

Rickhard’s voice shook Aly so hard that three pairs of wingtip leather shoes and an assortment of fish heads fell from his overcoat like snow falling from a spruce tree. Aly clutched his jacket and looked down at the stolen goods, as if he had no idea how any of it got there.

“What’s your name?”

Aly looked back at the man. He had a prominent mustache, speckled with grey, that rose beyond the tip of his nose. Aly replied in Russian, something to the effect of “what?”⁷

“English?” Rickhard said.

Aly stepped back. The fear was evident in the whites of his irises. Rickhard held out a hand to the poor boy, curling his fingers back at himself.

“I mean you no harm, boy.”

Aly softened at the shoulders. Rickhard cupped a hand under his chin and mimed a spoon, as if to say, “Would you like something to eat?”

Alyoshenka nodded at the man, who then came closer, picked up the shoes, and handed them back to the boy.

Rickhard taught Aly everything he knew about sock thievery. It did not matter how talented a thief was—without proper training the inevitable retirement home of a sock thief was behind bars. It was a statistical fact in the field. But make no mistake. Rickhard was no humanitarian. He got a finder’s fee from Big Sock for each new recruit he brought in. To Rickhard’s poor fortune, however, that finder’s fee was not commensurate with the talents that Aly brought to the industry.

⁷ Alyoshenka could, at this time, understand a small bit of English that he had picked up during his time on the ship.

To Alyoshenka, the position gave his days a purpose. It was something to perfect and excel at, to turn his attention towards and spend hours reading about real and make-believe thieves, rogues, and criminals. He bought books on how to stay hidden, how to bend and twist his body like a cat's to slip under doors, to scale brick walls, to find alcoves under his armpits that could fit a rolled sock. He observed people's habits, listened intently to Rickhard, and learned the business better than anyone who had come before him. The ethical question⁸ never struck the boy, because Americans had all sorts of unethical enterprises—stockbrokers who would soon sink the whole damn thing through their greed, insurance salesmen, or those men who sell aluminum siding to housewives who do not need it—and this was just another line of work meant to rob their customers blind. This was just the way Americans behaved.

Soon Alyoshenka was able to afford his own room within a six-room house. He of course had a communal bathroom and a kitchen, but to afford his own private sanctuary was a great satisfaction. And for nearly a decade this sock thieving business went about smoothly. He was able to store great sums of money in a sock under his bed. He had the luxury of choice when he dressed himself in the morning, picking between three shirts, two jackets, and two pairs of shoes. He treated himself to a steak once a week in a pub and could afford a night of drinking once a month. He had, as they say, made it.

However, there was a marked demarcation point for the sock thief, where a struggle began between sock thievery and automaton. It

⁸ To be clear, a sock thief, as many rogue brotherhoods do, did have a code of conduct—a sort of ethics—which Rickhard imparted onto the young boy. Some of the rules included, but were not limited to: A sock thief steals only socks. A sock thief does not steal from the neighbourhood in which they live. A sock thief does not talk about sock thieving. A sock thief, should they be caught, has no official employment with Big Sock. A sock thief is an artist of sock thievery, and they should look to advance their skills as any artist would.

occurred in the early 1930s as the washer and dryer became a ubiquitous household item. In what could only be called a bloody allegiance⁹ between Big Washer & Dryer and Big Sock, an elegant device replaced sock thievery called the sock furnace. This hidden compartment within the dryer burned a single sock, provided there are five¹⁰ or more socks in a load, every time you use it.

Before the sock furnace, a sock thief could make enough money to live on a single block of territory. Even in the industry's peak, two sock thieves in a well-populated area might split one block down the middle. Socks were everywhere. They hung in back alleys and in backyards and the world was free for the would-be thief to come plucking socks from clotheslines. Sock thievery, prior to this period, enjoyed a short but plentiful rise and fall, with its peak being somewhere between post-civil war America and the late 1920s. Most sock thieves were simply not skilled enough to make it through the Great Depression.

But by July of 1941, a few months before the attack on Pearl Harbor would throw America into the war, the strain on the waning industry was finally being felt by the greatest and last remaining sock thief, Alyoshenka.¹¹ Now thirty-nine years old, he had a more pronounced rounding at the shoulders and veins, like the red roots of a tree, that spread across his nose.

⁹ The washer and dryer made it more difficult for the sock thief to remove socks from households, given that most of them would be hidden inside a closet or hamper. As a result, sock sales plummeted. Without their forced disappearance, socks were lasting years. Big Sock employed scientists and doctors to warn of radioactive poisoning from washer and dryers, and shadow advertisements were pushed through subsidiary offshore businesses blaming them for household fires. Eventually, a truce was called. They both understood that business would be better for the both of them, and the great minds behind Big Sock and Big Washer and Dryer got together to invent the sock furnace.

¹⁰ Pairs of socks will not net the sock thief a higher price because customers only buy in pairs. A single sock or a pair of socks are no more valuable than one another, because the replacement sock, whether it is a single or a pair that was stolen, will always be a pair. Thus, it is easier to steal or burn single socks.

¹¹ Alyoshenka, to be clear, was not aware he was the last remaining sock thief.

He still lived in the same flat and that roll of cash he kept in a sock had evaporated. It left in its place a growing mountain of bills. With the price per stock rapidly dropping, it made every month a scramble. This was compounded by the sockmonger having a new quota each week until, one day, Alyoshenka did not have enough socks to pay his rent.

He was standing in a poorly lit basement below a dry cleaning business and in front of a steel desk that, the green paint flaking off, bore some steel-bound disease. A sockmonger sat at the desk barely looking at him.

“Ye need ten more.”

The sockmonger flicked a soggy, split-end cigar onto a plate beside a half-eaten pastrami sandwich. He took a hard drag and let the smoke dangle between his nostrils.

Behind him were hundreds of sock bags, all bags Alyoshenka recognized as his own.

“Ten more?” Aly’s Russian accent was nearly gone.

The monger pointed at a sign with a ruler. “350” was written in chalk.

“But it was 340 just yesterday,” Aly said.

“And today ye need 350 socks.”

“Moves awfully quick.”

“Not my problem.” The man kicked his bare feet onto the desk.

“How am I to pay my rent?”

“With ten more socks.”¹²

¹² I was able to track down, through a great amount of effort, the daughter of this sockmonger. I wanted to see if this man ever spoke about Alyoshenka. To my surprise, when she heard the name, she smiled and said that her father often spoke fondly of the man. That is not clear from the journals, but if he were indeed the last sock thief, Alyoshenka must have become a kind of living legend to these mongers.

He had spent the entire night climbing fire escapes, stalking through nurseries, and crawling on his belly through dirt and grass. He pulled socks from strings, from doorknobs, from the feet of sleeping children, just to fill his sack with 340 socks.

“Will you remember my quota for tomorrow if I leave the bag here?”

The man hocked a loogie. “Could go up tomorrow.”

Outside, just after dawn, he kicked a rock down the length of a dusty brick street. His landlady Wanda had already given him an extension on his rent three times in the last four months. She made it clear he would not be getting another. If he stepped into his apartment and delivered that news, he would be turned around, back onto the streets, back to where he started twenty-two years ago. He looked up at the sun. The American dream was over and the buildings around him suddenly appeared foreign. He looked down at the rock, clenching his fist as if he could squeeze away his problems. This was the end. He pulled his right leg back and attempted to kick the rock as hard as he could, anywhere he could, but narrowly missed, rolling his ankle and tumbling to the ground. Covered in dust, he lay on the ground. He held his ankle with one hand and punched the ground with another. He wanted to scream out in pain, in frustration, in the dead-end he found himself in, cornered and with nowhere to go. Instead, he composed himself and thought of a plan. He had no other choice. He needed to survive.

Standing up on one injured, unstable ankle, he looked around. He would break one of the rules—he would have to steal from his own neighbourhood and march right back to that sockmonger and slap ten more socks down on the table.

The situation was not ideal. It was too late into the morning, around people who could recognize him, and he was now injured—but this was America. The land of opportunity. He just had to keep moving forward. But he had to move fast. He limped through the street and looked for a well-

stocked alleyway or a backyard clothes hanger before those with ‘acceptable’ jobs woke up. A block away, about eight houses down from his own, he spotted a small, one-story house with the tips of socks peeking just above the fence in the backyard. His right thumb rubbed up and down against his fingers in excitement. Maybe his luck was changing. He did not know this house or the people that lived there. All he had to do was reach out and pluck those socks from their wire and give himself time to think of a new plan.

He leaned over the fence, which rose to his shoulders, and saw the socks. There were pink and yellow socks, pure white socks, baby socks, winter socks, insulated socks, thin dancing socks, ankle socks, knee socks, Christmas stockings, women’s stockings and more! It was a sock thief’s dream—and it begged the question, which he asked himself out loud many times before: whose territory was he in? Why was it so ripe with socks?¹³ It seemed now such a stupid and petty rule; a bureaucratic rule meant to keep the sock thief poor and ultimately reliant on Big Sock. With that thought, he resolved to take them all and rebel against authoritarian sock mongering. He would slap down more socks than he needed, show that he was the best at what he did and would always be the best.

He stretched his good ankle through the air, above his head, and up and over the fence, his body following like a slinky, landing it on the other side of the grass. The clothesline was parallel to the house and he angled himself to be covered up by the larger socks hanging from the wire. He took quiet giant steps only with his good leg. The rest of his body followed behind. He started from the left side of the line, and within seconds, was standing on the right side of the line, every pocket of the

¹³ At this time, there had not been another sock thief in operation for at least three or more years.

overcoat full.¹⁴ He took one more look at the house, green shingles hanging from it, an empty unlit back window, then turned around.

There, inches from his face, so close he could smell the gunmetal, was a shotgun.

“Now hold it right there.” The man squinted angrily at him from below a frayed fedora, the corners of his eyes pulled back and wrinkled as if a bird's talons dug into them.

Alyoshenka had never been caught before, never had the implication of violence held over his head. He slowly raised his hands, swallowed, then wet himself.

The man saw the pee stain that formed on his pant leg, then up at our shaking Aly whose terror seemed to wrap him in a sort of innocence. “Jesus, son,” the man said, unlikely much older than Aly. “Get a hold of yourself.”

Alyoshenka sniffled.

The man stepped closer and put his free hand under Alyoshenka's chin. “I know you,” he said. “You live at that ol' kook's place just down the road.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And what are you doing in my yard?”

“I was hungry, sir,” he said.

“Hungry?”

“I sell the socks,” Alyoshenka said.

“So you're not some pervert?”

“No, sir.”

¹⁴ There is no official rule regarding how many socks a sock thief should take from a single household, since the number of socks available will change from house to house. However, Alyoshenka noted a personal rule of thumb, which he was breaking, that a sock thief should not exceed 10% of the available socks.

“I should have you arrested,” the man said. “I got three daughters here.”

“Please, sir!”

“Teach you a lesson.”

Alyoshenka got down on one knee, then the other, and slowly wrapped around the man’s legs, who tried to squirm away from them.

“Please, sir! I won’t do it again, I promise. Please! Please! Please!”

The man pried Alyoshenka off of him. “Get a grip!”

Alyoshenka clasped his hands together and prayed. “Oh, please, please!”

“Stop begging like a child. You’re embarrassing yourself.”

“Please just let me go. You will never see me again, I swear it.”

The man took off his hat and ran a hand through his oily blonde hair. “I know I’m going to regret this.” He motioned toward the ground with his shotgun. “Empty your pockets. Quickly now, before my wife sees me being kind to a pervert like you.”

“Lord, thank you!”

“It wasn’t the lord who saved you here, boy.”

Alyoshenka threw the socks at his feet and limped out of there.

Later, beneath a sock-stitched blanket, his nerves were bent spindly ends. He fish-flopped from side to side, playing the scene over in his head, trying to figure out where he went wrong. He had never been caught before, never even had a close call. It wasn’t like him, but he had never been in this sort of desperate situation before. Then he thought of Wanda. Any second, there would be a rap of knuckles on his door. He would open it slightly. She would be frowning, her hair up in a net, holding a rolling pin. He pulled the edge of his nightcap below his veiny nose, covering it, and snorted. He wanted that sweet sock musk to take over his thoughts, but instead, he thought about his one love, his art—thieving—

and the inevitable end to the only life he knew. He threw the blanket off him, tore the nightcap from his head, and got out of the sock-stitched mattress. He sat down on a pile of socks in the corner and opened his journal. He needed a plan. A new direction. He should get up and leave, beat Wanda to it, take control of his life. For all he knew there were better jobs out there with more rewarding lifestyles. But it was not just that. He was no common thief. He was an artist! A painter paints in the style he loves and the style Alyoshenka loved was stealing socks. Except for the fleeting moment when one realizes that their sock is missing, a kind of sad inevitability much like when the old catch themselves in the mirror, he was not harming anyone. He had dignity! Pride! It was no honest trade but it was his and he was not going to abandon it. But he had to admit his business was dying. If only he could suck the sweat from socks to satiate his hunger or build a mansion out of loose, worn threads.

But that was it! An idea had shot out of the heavens and struck him right on the tip of the nose. If Big Sock no longer found what he stole worth their weight in cotton, he could make something of that cotton. Over the years, putting his nimble fingers to good use, he had become a master with a needle and thread. His fingers moved faster than any sewing machine he had ever seen and breaking down the cotton into usable threads was simple enough. Three hundred and fifty single pairs of socks barely fed him for a day, but they could fill an entire clothing rack in a corner of a store! He jumped up, out of his sock-bag chair, and pumped a fist in the air. No longer would Big Sock control his fate from up in their ivory sock towers. His talent would go towards himself! He stood up on his desk—barefooted—and looked up at the sky. He saw Alyoshenka's Cloth Goods floating above his head. There he would be the artist, the seller, the dealer, and the procurer!

Then came the heralded rapping at the door.

“Aly?” It was Wanda.

“Yes?” He opened the door a sliver.

“There’s a policeman here to see you.”

His upper lip twitched, and he took a step back, holding himself.

“Are you in trouble?” Wanda said.

“One moment.” He closed the door on her. He quickly switched out of his sock pajamas and into his work clothes, shuffling out into the hall, a paddy cap in his hands, nervously twisting the cap bill between his thumbs.

“Yes?” He said.

A man stood at the door with a double-breasted blue coat. His badge shimmered in the hallway light. His eyes, already impossibly close together, narrowed in on Aly. “Are you Alyoshenka?”

The man with the shotgun jumped out from behind the officer, followed by his wife. “That’s him! Alyoshenka the pervert!” He spit on the floor.

His trial was swift. Big Sock would not come to his defense, acted like he didn’t exist, and branded him a madman and a thief, despite the contract Alyoshenka had signed.¹⁵ But even with Big Sock’s abandonment, his sentence was rather harsh for a minor thief: four years for burglary and petty theft.

His cell was secluded from the general population, due to the low-risk nature of his crime. He had a stiff but acceptable bed, one and a half meals a day, and a paltry list of dog-eared books to choose from. In some ways, his accommodations were an improvement to Wanda’s. In others, like having to defecate in public, they were not.

¹⁵ The contract outlined the terms should any sock thief ever be caught. As a reward for their silence regarding Big Sock and their shadow organization, they would be looked after in jail—the most comfortable cell, extra food, books, and anything else they might need.

This, for a few weeks, was a satisfactory way for Alyoshenka to live. It was peaceful, regimented, and not completely dangerous. But like all artists, even of the sock variety, the itch to steal soon grew. Officers reported themselves going home with only a single sock and prisoners' complained of missing items, up to and including socks.¹⁶ This seemed rather innocent at first, a minor inconvenience to those around him, but with barely anything to do, Aloyshenka became more daring. He quickly moved on to shirts straight off the backs of guards, the laces between shoes, rolls of floss and toilet paper, cigarettes directly from breast pockets, chicken nuggets from three cells over, and whatever else he could fit between his thumb and forefinger. They would search Aloyshenka's cell, but they could find nothing. Still, the guards, and Aloyshenka writing in his journals, knew that to continue would be to risk his life. He was turning both the guards and prisoners against him, but he couldn't help it. This was what he was born to do. It was what he was going to do even if it killed him.

And one night that's exactly what happened. He had recently plucked a pen from a guard, to continue working on his journal, while the man was in the middle of a crossword puzzle.

"Who did this?" The man shouted. "It was my father's pen!"

He took his baton, rattling it up and down the bars of the six cells, and the other inmates started to turn on Alyoshenka—as he was the culprit behind all their missing stuff. Aloyshenka hid under his cot with his blanket over his head. The other cells began to riot. They screamed his name, threw food through the bars, and ran their thumbs across their necks.

"Admit it, Ruski!"

"Give our stuff back!"

"Let us at him, Sarge!"

"We'll get your pen back. Just let us at him!"

¹⁶ Their shift reports are all public record.

“You hear that, Aly? You got yourself into quite a pickle.”

Aly said nothing, and his whimpering was drowned out by the continued shouting.

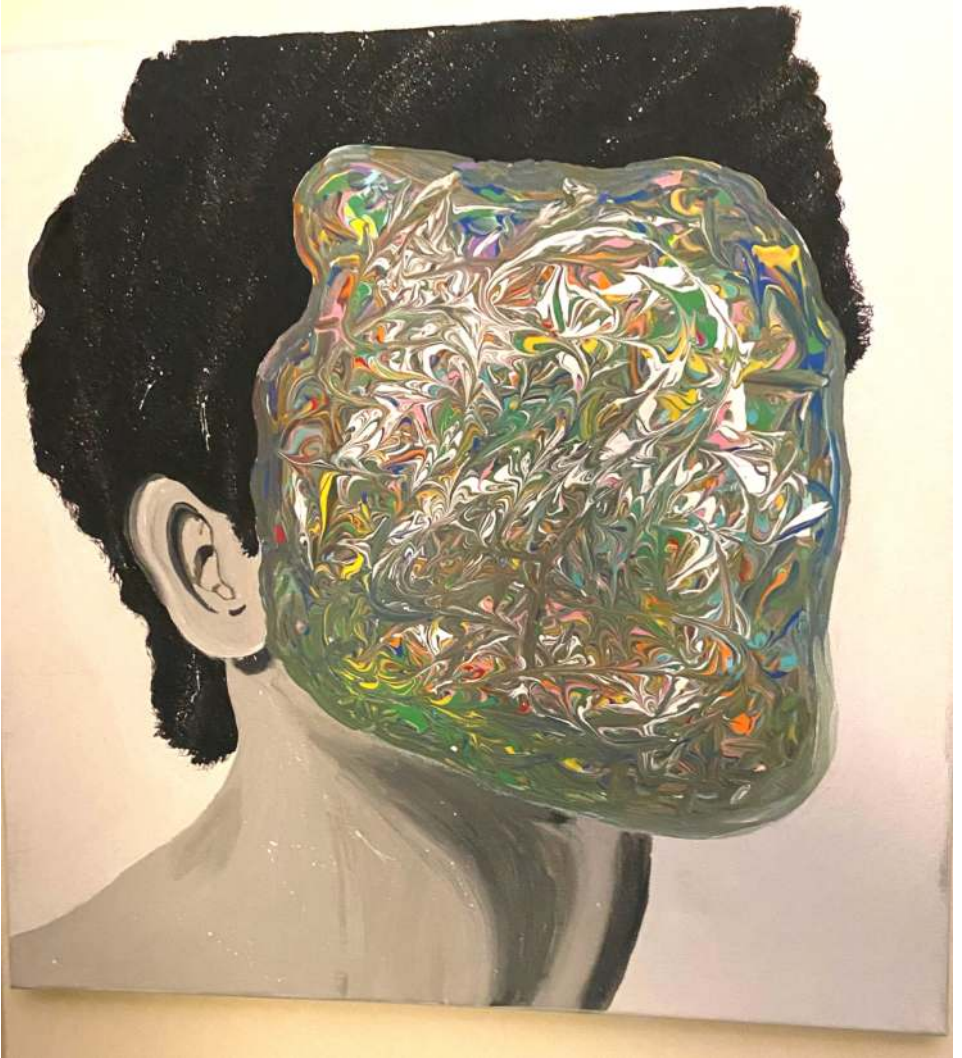
“This is your last chance,” the guard said, backing up towards the hallway door. “I press this button and all of the cells open. All you have to do is return the pen.”

Aly did not trust the man, believing it to be a trap. Those doors, one way or another, were going to be opened, and it was a steel quilled pen, the point sharp. He could use it to defend himself. So he kept quiet. But, and this wasn't in his journals, those doors opened and The Last Sock Thief was beaten to death right there in his cell, never to steal a sock again.¹⁷

¹⁷ This has been tucked away in a drawer beside my bed for some months now. I take it out every few days and wonder what Aloyshenka's life meant. I've never been able to come to a satisfactory conclusion. It seems to me like Aloyshenka had a gift, a gift that went both unnoticed—hopefully unnoticed until now—and underappreciated. I feel quite fortunate enough to have read the full journals, and do not wish them to go to waste. Perhaps, his journals could inspire a whole new generation, as it has indeed inspired me. On my walk home from the University library yesterday, I noticed a smog-grey wool sock hanging from a clothes wire. It was just above the fence, and within reach of my person. I looked around the block and seeing it empty, reached out and plucked it from where it hung.

Kylie Feghali

Anxiety



K.S. Baron

what if panic attacks were asteroids

would you take them more seriously? if i told you the
asteroids were aimed directly at earth, you'd probably
find a bunker and hide as deep
underground as you could go, praying
and hoping and wishing that you're far enough
to avoid the blast—

but there's no bunker in my brain

i can't dig through my skin, carving
out bone and blood and muscle until i find
somewhere to take cover
from the explosions and the earthquakes
in my body, cracking my lungs, tearing my esophagus
until breathing becomes hyperventilating—

begging doesn't work

the hollowed-out craters echo in my skull
no one believes that panic attacks are as crippling
as a mass extinction on earth, burning the sides
of my fingers like an asteroid in the atmosphere as it
singes its way to the surface, watching
everything crumble underneath.

Christopher Johnson

Leesburg Mural



Valerie Hunter

Autobiography in Sixty-Four Colors

You buy the crayons on a whim,
just because they happen to be
next to the sinus pills you need.
(You never think clearly
when you're congested.)
It's the sixty-four-count box,
the one you used to get
in every Christmas stocking
until you were eleven,
the age when your mother deemed
a new box of crayons
was no longer a necessity.

At home, after popping the pills
and brewing some tea, you open
the crayons, spill them across
the countertop, watch as they shimmy
before your eyes, a vibrant, rolling dance.
You dig out some scrap paper
and draw random shapes,
capturing the colors of your history.

One orangey brown is the same rust
that ate away at your second-hand Barbie bike,
and here's that queasy green of the tiles
in your elementary school's bathroom.
A pure blue brings to mind the dress
Ashley Sims wore so much in first grade,
a dress so beautiful that you were finally
forced to draw a brown line on the skirt
with a marker during art class.
(There aren't any colors for the screams
that followed—Ashley's, the teacher's,
your mother's, and finally your own.)

None of the reds can quite capture
Mom's lipstick, or the translucency of

cheap red wine in her plastic goblet,

but the darkest one matches
the stain on the grayish-beige rug where
Mom once spilled. You reproduce
its exact shape now, a Rorschach test
version of a rabbit's head.

It was the perfect spot to play
doctor with your dolls—
the patients never made it,
so you covered them with tissues and
shoved them under the coffee table morgue.

You draw and sip and draw, finding the colors
of your tragic seventh grade eyeshadow,
your cousin's dog's scarred collar,
the crumbling concrete of your old front steps.
The color of the flecks in Cavan Dooley's eyes,
which you never noticed until you kissed him
behind the bleachers freshman year.
The color of the velvet lining
in your grandmother's jewelry box,
which you lovingly stroked at the age of three
until the lid snapped shut and pinched your finger.
The color of boardwalk cotton candy, of the weird
casserole that only made an appearance
when money was especially tight,
of the birdhouse you painted for Mom's birthday,
which collected dust in a closet for years.

When you're finally done,
after each crayon has lost
its manufactured tip, you
hang the pages on the refrigerator,
your own abstract self-portrait,
and go to bed with your entire childhood
swirling through you, undiluted.

Lisa Lynn Biggar

THE WOMAN IN THE WINDOW

Since the pandemic, Jessie has taken to running four times around the green in town, the road providing a barrier from the surrounding houses in the small neighborhood. One of the homes, a modest yellow rancher, has a large bay window in the front with the sheer white curtains always slightly parted. Jessie saw her sitting inside for the first time about six months ago, her profile: a sharp nose, pronounced chin, tuft of white hair like a cloud above her head. She was transfixed, probably watching the news or her soap opera, or maybe scenes from her past, mystical revelations. Jessie didn't want to stare, invade her space, so she looked away, always looks away, as she runs by.

Today, leftover snow crunches underfoot from the early February storm, an abundance of walnut shells creating an obstacle course, the bare deciduous trees raising their arms to the heavens in an impressive array of angles. Jessie can feel the woman's eyes trained on her as she runs by the house for the first time. Should she wave? But then the woman might get confused, think that she should know Jessie, think that she is getting senile (if she isn't already). She might open the door, invite Jessie in, and Jessie would have to feign knowing her—or just explain she was being friendly, that this pandemic has her waving to everyone, smiling without a mask now that she's been vaccinated, making small talk (though it is just the opposite, her social skills atrophied).

Maybe the woman has been alone during this whole pandemic, shut up in her home, going on two years now, and is craving company. Maybe, variants be damned, she is vaccinated and ready to open herself back up to the world. Is Jessie obligated to become her friend, share tea and cookies? Tell stories? Jessie wonders what stories the woman might tell. Has she

always lived in Galena, a small rural town on the eastern shore of MD where Jessie and her husband moved to over twenty years ago? Seems Jessie should know this woman, but she and Vic know very few people in town. People here tend to keep to themselves. And there's a handwritten sign by the woman's driveway, asking people not to use it for a turn-around, which, to Jessie, speaks of wanting privacy, of not wanting to be disturbed. Maybe the open curtain is just her way of keeping an eye on the world, making sure it stays off her property.

Jessie suspects the woman lives alone. She's only seen a landscaper there, cutting the grass, tending the flowers, and, once, a UPS man who left a package on the front porch. She wonders if she is a widow. If her children (if there are any) ever come visit her. Or do they send flowers from far away states? Jessie and Vic own a cut flower farm, and they get calls from guilty sons and daughters. Is an \$80 arrangement enough? Enough for what, Jessie always wonders. For *giving* life, for being *responsible* for a life?

Jessie runs by a second time and ventures a quick wave, then looks away before seeing if the woman waves back. What if she were my grandmother, Jessie thinks, wouldn't I want people to see her, to *really* see her? To acknowledge her existence? *What if this is me in twenty years? On the inside looking out, while the world passes by.* Maybe she should just knock on the woman's door, introduce herself. Say, since I see you every day, I thought we should at least know each other's names. Maybe hers is Verna? Maude? Irene? Or maybe something more glamorous, like Tallulah. Maybe she lived life large once and enjoys the solitude now—like Greta Garbo hiding behind her big floppy hats and dark shades.

On her third time around, Jessie hears a tap at the window. It stops her dead in her tracks, but then she is afraid to look over at the window, afraid of what the woman may want. She continues to run away, faster. But what if the woman needs help? What if she's having a heart attack or stroke?

Jessie has let her CPR certification lapse (everything seems to have lapsed during the pandemic) but she could call 911. . . She considers foregoing her fourth time around, afraid of what she is getting herself into, but she'd never forgive herself. . .

She runs slower as she nears the window again, her heart palpating. She doesn't even have her mask with her. She glances over: the woman is gesturing to her to come to the door. She is standing up now, her face in bas-relief, hollowed out beneath her high cheekbones. In a white flowing nightgown she looks ghostly, nearly camouflaged by the white curtains. Jessie's breath catches in her throat, but she comes to a stop. She can see the woman moving towards the door, and now she is opening it, peaking out, a white medical mask on her gaunt face now. A blue terry cloth robe wrapped around her frail frame.

"Do I know you?" she asks, her voice surprisingly strong.

Jessie crosses the street, to the sidewalk in front of her house. "I was just waving," she says. "Just being neighborly."

"Are you a girl or a boy?" the woman says. "I'm nearly blind."

"I'm a girl," Jessie says loudly, looking in the hazy blue of the woman's eyes.

"Nothing wrong with my hearing," the woman says. "What's your name?"

"Jessie."

"That's a boy's name."

"It's my name. And I'm a girl. Woman."

"It's cold out there. Come in and warm up," she says, beckoning to Jessie.

"I don't have my mask," Jessie says.

"I had my shots," the woman insists.

Jessie hesitates. . . "Okay, just for a minute."

The woman opens the door wider.

Jessie's legs feel like rubber as she walks up the two steps to the small cement porch, feeling as if she were caught in a trap, lured by bait.

"You live in town?" the woman asks, closing the door behind Jessie.

"Just outside," Jessie says. "My husband and I have a cut flower farm—Galena Blooms Farm."

"I've heard of it" the woman says, leading Jessie past the living room to the small kitchen that is straight back and to the left. She is steady on her slippered feet, sure-footed. A round dining room table by the back sliding glass door. A single plastic sunflower placemat.

"We're two fields behind the fire hall. Down Mill Lane."

The woman motions for Jessie to sit down at the table, goes to the refrigerator and takes out a pitcher of water, pours Jessie a glass, her sure movements belying her near blindness.

She puts the glass in front of Jessie, sits across from her. "That was Ol' Man Riley's land," she says. "He used to sit at the end of Mill Lane with a shot gun."

"I've heard stories," Jessie says, thankful for the water. She hadn't realized how dehydrated she was and how long it had been since she'd been in someone else's house. She tells herself to breathe, calm down, to keep her distance.

"Shot at a few too," the woman says. "Missed them by a mile," she cackles. "Blind as a bat like me. But it scared people off."

"I saw your sign in the drive-way."

"Yes," the woman says. "My husband was like Ol' Man Riley—didn't like people on his property. And he was stubborn too—refused to wear a mask. The virus took him early on."

"I'm so sorry," Jessie says. She and Vic have been very careful, always wearing their masks in stores, dinner out being take-out and a bottle of wine by a river. It's brought them even closer, over thirty years together. She can't imagine what it must be like for this woman.

“He was old,” the woman says. “Older than me, and I’m nearly ninety.”

“Do you have children?” Jessie asks.

The woman shakes her head. “None to speak of.”

Jessie leaves it at that. There was always that argument for having children—that they would take care of you in your old age. Jessie and Vic didn’t think it a good enough reason. There are times she feels an emptiness, but what would it be like to have children that desert you? Or children that can’t make it in the world? That just disappear?

“My babies are my orchids?” the woman says.

The orchids have a room of their own in the back of the house where the sun pours through the four curtainless windows. Jessie has never seen so many different varieties. The larger ones blooming upside down, hanging in planters from hooks on the walls. Others on shelves and tables. There’s barely room to walk.

“I’m a botanist,” the woman says. “I used to work at Longwood Gardens—Orchids were my specialty. Did you know there are more than 25,000 species all over the world?”

Jessie shakes her head. She had no idea. She and Vic only grow flowers in the field and an unheated cold frame. Hauling buckets of water filled with flowers to market is enough work. They didn’t want to get into hauling potted plants as well. But the orchids are extraordinary, exotic. She oohs and aahs over them and the woman tells her their beauty has had a powerful effect on people since ancient times. “Royalty has died over orchids,” she says. “And great sums of money have been given to those who can find the elusive ones in the wild.”

“Where do they grow?” Jessie asks.

“Mostly on trees. They feed off the decaying organic matter on the bark. It’s commensalism—when one party benefits and the other is unaffected.”

“So they don’t hurt the trees?”

“Not a bit.”

“They’re amazing,” Jessie says, staring at all the different colors and designs of the blooms, some that look eerily like monkeys, bees, butterflies, hummingbirds, small, pink and white naked men, anatomically correct. . . Jessie laughs at these.

“Some of them mimic their pollinators. But some just have a brilliant sense of humor,” the woman laughs. “The wonder is that they are all perfectly symmetrical—each flower can be divided perfectly in half, with two equal parts.”

“That’s incredible,” Jessie says. “Nature is incredible.”

“You wonder how we got so far off track,” the woman says.

“Yes,” Jessie says, looking at the woman now. “Do you have anyone to help you?”

“I have my friend Esther Ann. She’s going deaf, so we make a great pair.”

Jessie learned that the woman in the window’s name is Barbara. A month has gone by and Jessie’s been back to visit her several times, learning more about her (She and her husband met at an orchid conference when she was in her twenties—it was the orchids that brought them together, cast the spell of love on them), and about the orchids: they stop blooming in the spring, grow their greenery in the summer, begin blooming again in late fall. Barbara is teaching her how to propagate the plants now, showing her a keiki, a new growth on one of the stems. “It has to have good root development before you can cut it,” she says. She moves amongst the plants like their mother,

caressing and coddling them, using touch to navigate. She calls each one by name, ascertaining the growth stage of each with knowing hands. Despite her frail frame there's a life-force about her, especially when she is amongst the orchids, a blush in her hollow cheeks.

Jessie is trying to convince her to come to the flower farm for a visit next month when the weather breaks. She could see the tulips in bloom. She and Vic plant hundreds each fall, early, mid and late blooms, a rainbow of color blanketing the field.

"I can't remember the last time I went outside," she says. "The world doesn't seem a very inviting place anymore. I think it's best to stay inside with my orchids. They need me."

"Just a short visit," Jessie says. "You could bring Esther Ann."

They hired a driver, an older man with thinning grey hair who introduces himself as Ron. He helps Barbara and Esther Ann out of the back of the gold limousine. Both of them dressed in loose-fitting jeans and flowered T-shirts, carrying straw hats. It's the first time that Jessie has met Esther Ann, a short, stocky woman with smiling green eyes above her flowered mask, her white straight hair cut short like a boys. Jessie invites Ron to join them, but he says he'll just read his newspaper in the car. "Let you ladies have at it," he smiles.

"I'm the eyes. And Barbara's the ears," Esther Ann says laughing. They hook arms, Esther Ann seeming to ground Barbara, keep her from floating away like a dandelion gone to seed. They follow Jessie to the front yard where she has a long table set up with home-made lemonade and pound cake she made from scratch, powdered sugar sifted on top. Jessie sits far enough away from them, but they sit together as if one organism.

The tall lemonade glasses used to belong to Jessie's grandmother—a colorful fruit pattern: oranges, cherries, lemons, limes. Esther Ann

describes them in detail to Barbara, including the green serrated leaves at the end of the bunched cherries. And Barbara imparts Jessie's words to Esther Ann, loudly, in her good ear, their lips coated with powdered sugar.

Jessie takes Ron a glass of lemonade and a piece of pound cake. It's the middle of April, a beautiful day in the high sixties, the clear blue sky like still water. The birds singing cadences of ancient times. On days like this it is hard to fathom, Jessie thinks, the tragedies of the world, the shadows lurking around the corners. The tulips opening to the sun, vulnerable, yet unafraid.

Noah Varsalona

The Platter



Avital Gad-Cykman

THE TWIST

Living on the border means to be subject to a constant threat of violence. The kibbutz on the northern border of Israel was deliberately founded in a sensitive location, as a part of a belt of safety for the country, but it was built—by chance or based on a careful calculation—in a small decline in the land, a twist from the expected center of a target. Therefore, rockets launched from Lebanon don't hit it directly, and land in the open areas outside it or on less fortunate settlements. The fortunate localization is a popular assumption, and Dana buys into it. She's not afraid when a rocket advances like a shrilling train on remote trails over her head.

On her first month in the kibbutz, in the beginning of the eight-month pre-service period of her unit, she and her boyfriend walk together, her head at the height of his chest, across and along the curved paths of the kibbutz. She admires the lush vegetation, the big lawns on which children play and people walk without destroying the fresh green, and the trees: eucalyptus, carob, casuarina, and fruit trees shading lovely little corners of blooming lilacs and irises, framing small gardens next to the modest one or two-story family houses.

She has informed the work manager her choice to work with garden plants and is filled with anticipation. Her boyfriend works wherever he's told, in the nail factory or at the club, and doesn't mind it, because he's here temporarily. He came to accompany his Tel Aviv group of scouts that constitutes half the unit until his real service in the Air Force begins. As they walk, his head blocks the sizzling sun from her eyes, and the light becomes his aura, which fits him well. He's a prince in his family, a beloved and admired member in the unit, and defined as "the unit's gold" by the kibbutz's youth who serve in the combat forces. It's rather hard for her to shine her own light, but she is happy to shine his and hers as one.

The sturdy work manager, a gray-haired kibbutz veteran, says that girls usually work with children, assisting the children's homes or kindergarten teachers. It doesn't require physical power, and it fits the girls.

"I was asked what I want... 'Usually' doesn't mean I 'have to', right?" she asks.

"There's no opening for gardening." Since she insists she doesn't want to work with children, he sends her to pick up apples until being called to the gardens.

On the first two weeks, she is still getting to know the people from her unit who came from Jerusalem or Tel Aviv, so they all chat gladly while picking up apples, and when they are tired of the weight and the cautiousness necessary to prevent any harm to the fruit, they listen to radio programs of light music, drills and summer games. They wake up at four am and work for six hours in the heat, repeating the monotonous movements.

She says that robots might have done it better than people. The plantation manager rolls his Dali-like mustache and says robots won't have her soft hands. After work, she is dead-tired all day. The fun music and the now less-in-depth conversations are not enough to hold back boredom and disturbing memories for long. Also, one boy from her unit has joined the kibbutz's garden manager.

She hides the fury boiling her mind and insists to the work manager, "I've done my best for three weeks as an apple picker; send me to the gardens now."

He says she can leave the plantation, but there's no opening for gardening. He's sending her to that part of the kitchen in charge of collective breakfasts and dinners. "You won't work in the sun-it's better than picking up fruit. But consider working with children, because it's the best," he says.

A friend visits her, and exactly this day, a rocket slices the kibbutz's sky. The friend, an uncommonly cheerful girl she's known from the age of twelve, hides under a sink in the corridor. Dana explains she has nothing to fear.

An elderly kibbutz female member, who's done the kitchen job as long as anyone can remember, sets Dana's schedule, and demonstrates how to arrange breakfast trays for two-hundred people, make pancakes on Saturday mornings, and clean the large kitchen from floor to ceiling every day, with special attention to the eight metallic doors of the industrial refrigerator. The gardeners, men and boys, work outside. Her boyfriend uses his humor and his hands to bring her out of the gray numbness that covers her like a costume after work.

Two weeks later she gives in to the work manager's pressure. She expects him to be impressed by her change of mind, but he isn't.

Dana starts working as a children home teacher's assistant with five kids aged one and a half to two years. The teacher, a thirty-year-old friendly kibbutz member with brown hair and eyes the same color teaches her to change diapers on the two youngest children, scratch the kitchen and the playroom from floor to ceiling, read them stories from picture books, let them draw, play with materials and play in the sand box, tuck them in the small beds in the dormitory after lunch, bake chocolate cakes and make sandwiches with chocolate paste or with pickles, ham and cheese. Dana obeys and imitates even the tone of her voice, as she has no idea how to approach children. She enjoys listening to the teacher's stories about kibbutz members, gossip that disrupts the honorable appearance of veteran couples. She resents the teacher's request to initiate activities with the children, because Dana has no idea where to start.

The tension across the border has a changing yet undeniable form, a cloud that hovers. It threatens to suffocate the area and finish with the place, but once settled, its scars disappear with the winds. In a few months, the

military phase begins, the boys will take an active part in the combat and the girls will “hold the fort,” whatever that means at the time. Their participation in future conflicts is certain, only the time and the exact place are still unknown. The rockets over their heads, the occasional explosion, news and recruitment of the kibbutz youth and reserve soldiers are routine.

The morning her boyfriend leaves for the air force, they wake up in their separate rooms, have a coffee, hugged in the corridor, and walk together to the bus stop near the dining room. The planted forest witnessed their intimate farewell last night, something she doesn't like to put into words, because it disembodies their love. Now when people witness their separation, they say or shout goodbye, the girls hug him, the boys hug or tap on his shoulders. The kibbutz hails him for his choice, as he's living the military dream of many.

She keeps a straight face, as if her faith in life were not disintegrating back into the stream of grief for her parents and every single person she has lost or was lost to her. He is sad to leave and simultaneously impatient to begin his piloting career. She can hardly hold back tears when the bus engine sounds down the road. He climbs in, and she withdraws to a rock behind the bus stop and sits, looking at the shadow inside the bus and the smoke.

His departure is as if he'd pulled a loose woolen thread from a sweater, unaware of the consequent unraveling. A clever boy from Jerusalem, her new friend, leaves for anywhere else but this pressure cooker of the kibbutz and the unit. Another friend, a sensitive guy, whose huge eyes seem not only to look but also listen, is released due to sickness. One of her two roommates becomes obsessed with order, awakes at odd hours to tidy up, and her nervous chatter grows more unsettling by the day. The other one goes her own way with a boyfriend from the kibbutz and a new set of friends and is never around. Eventually, Dana notices the

volunteers, young people from all over the world, who stay at the kibbutz in exchange for six-hour-work a day, and makes three of them her best friends.

Once, while taking a nap in her room, a rocket falls behind the animal corner, to which Dana often takes the five children from the children's home to feed and caress a donkey, ducks, chickens and rabbits. This was her initiative. Fortunately, it's their rest time as well.

"Once it takes place, it won't happen again," she tells the teacher afterwards. "I know someone who's been hit by a car twice," the teacher says.

"It's an exception to the rule," Dana says.

The teacher shakes her brown ponytail and makes a gesture with her muscled arm as if she is going to object, but ends-up holding back her response. "The kids are waking up," she says.

"What a headache, all that cleaning afterwards," Tom, the blond long-haired, bearded volunteer says later at the volunteers' housing, passing her a puff. She takes the cigarette as if it's nothing to her, but it's only her third time. She inhales the smoke, memorizing its unique scent, and chuckles at Tom's comment. Annoyance is always elsewhere and not with the threat itself. If you're angry about cleaning after a bomb, you forget about the threat to your safety.

She likes him.

When she first asked Tom to smoke together, determined to do this adventurous, daring thing, it took all of her convincing skill to make him understand he wouldn't be considered a pusher. In her opinion, the volunteers enjoy all sorts of adventure. Their power to choose what they do is a big deal from the point of view of a girl whose basic training is fixed in the near future as well as her two years of military service. In fact, her unit is already on duty, despite their civilian clothes and relative freedom in the kibbutz.

“I wish I could live with you all,” she tells Tom and their mutual friends, Ian from Holland, Simon from Australia and Melissa from the United States.

There is no choice regarding the military service, and for a long time, no doubt in her mind it’s absolutely necessary. You receive mail from the army in the last year of high school, and a year later you’re a soldier. Everyone her age has been recruited, the boys for three years and the girls for two, except those limited physically or mentally, and the orthodox youth, whose political parties’ power weighs on the government and parliament’s policies so heavily it releases them from this requirement.

She does not think anyone should opt out unless they are incapable of doing anything helpful in the army. The nation is surrounded by enemy countries and will be destroyed without its forces of defense. On the other hand, sometimes she thinks that the religious girls, who volunteer for a year for the so-called “national service” instead of the two-year-army service, and attend to social necessities, may be assisting the country better than she does with her work at this well-off kibbutz. Anyway, it’s not a choice she’s allowed to make.

Her place as an outsider of her group bothers her, despite her deepening friendship with the volunteers. Her friends among the volunteers are already speaking about going back to their countries or continuing their travels. Tom and Ian come from the same small town near Amsterdam, and they travel the world together. They plan to see Guatemala and Mexico later this year, but before that they’ll ride motorcycles in Egypt or Turkey. She says that one day she will visit them, if they are back in their town, or she’ll meet them on the road. Simon says he hopes to see her in Europe before he goes back to Australia. He makes her sweet tea with mint and tells her about his sister, who always plays the guitar, even while telling him about a heartbreak. She fears their departure.

She frequents the dancing and music club her unit reconstruct in the common dining room's basement. This is her way to make amends. It's easier without speaking.

She observes the unit members. She never knew you could dance that way, combining movements in pairs and swaying with attention to harmony. She can't. She tries. She likes the music.

The meetings to discuss rules and problems are held there as well. She attends these for a while, but the long meetings are impossible.

Another period of violent tension across the border causes the hundred and fifty kibbutz members, the thirty volunteers and her unit of thirty future soldiers to stay in more than usual. The surroundings of the pool overlooking the mountains and the huge sky are empty. Dana focuses on taking care of the five children she grows to love.

At noon, Maayan, the one and a half-year-old girl with smart wide eyes and plump cheeks, asks her to read her a book. The other children draw, with serious expressions, lines and shapes they later say are their cat, or their family. Far booms and bangs don't disturb the children. She tells Maayan a story about children taking a stroll, and shows her the drawings of nails, flowers and a dead bird. Maayan points at each drawing with her plump finger, and her eyes sparkle at the familiar images as if she'd never seen them the way she does now.

After work Dana is restless, expecting excitement that equalizes the drama of whistles and explosions. While eating a vegetarian burger on her way to the volunteers' housing, the sounds and voices wafting from the youth's shacks hit her as deeper, sometimes wilder than ever, libido going out of control, a loud exclamation for the sake of self-reassurance. She'll see her boyfriend in two weeks, if they're lucky. In the meantime, she spends more time with the volunteers than with anyone else. She feels better in their room and its small kitchen than at the unit's housing with her group. Here she is happy, letting go in a second language.

When she looks back at this period, it is not the rockets she remembers as violent, but being subjected to the kibbutz's predefined work placement, attending meetings that last forever, losing friends for other military courses, staying behind when the volunteers leave, and departing from "her kids" to the army.

Christopher Johnson

Museum of East Alabama



Christopher Johnson

Museum of East Alabama



Marek Kulig

Big Fans

Dad comes home from work
and we want autographs,
selfies, to help him take off his shoes
since he won't gift them,
the same pair he's worn
now almost four years.

Maybe he'll let us collect his socks
instead—we won't sell them, we promise,
are too young, we joke,
for an eBay account,
and mom isn't in on this.

The sharpie cap of his lips
redacts his signature smile.

The ball I have isn't regulation,
fits nicely in the Fisher Price hoop
in the living room and too
easily down the one nailed
above the garage door.

Larry's naked, holding out his pjs
like a jersey, number rocketship,
and Leslie's facepaint is mac 'n' cheese,
cheeks splatted yellow like stars
that have dulled into suns.

We'd have traveled were we able,
tuned in live had it been broadcast.

He bellys through our turnstiles
of outstretched hands as if to the end of the bench
and puts a plate in the microwave.

The timer goes off,
but the way dad looks at us
it's more of a stat line.

Raimondo Rossi

My Voice Counts



Sophia Futrell

Bound by Blood

The girl didn't even need her posse of security guards: her presence was enough to part the sea of reporters and politicians who were fighting clipboard and elbow to follow her as if she was a modern-day Moses. Her heels, clacking loudly on the marble floor, spoke for her. Just before she entered the room, she stopped, pointing to one of the journalists.

"How bittersweet," she said to him, her New England accent juxtaposing with the southern drawls of her nearby, oblivious parents. She tilted her head slightly as she stared at his hands. "In this hall full of murderers, I find one single innocent."

She took off her mask and her citrine-gummed smile met with a confused laugh from this journalist and the flashes of several cameras from the others. Whenever she smiled, something borderline hypnotic compelled every person around her to mirror it, but in the backs of their heads, something told them that her grin was more like a predator baring its teeth before its prey than an affectionate expression.

"Excuse me," one of the cameramen called out to her through the chaos. "Will your sister be joining you in the conference?"

The girl's nimble hand, about to reach the door handle, froze in place. "She... *disagreed* with my plan." Each word sounded carefully calculated, handpicked for the press. "She no longer wants to be associated with me, so please don't try to reach out to her for comment."

Once she opened the doors to the room, she situated herself at the head of the table. If you didn't know who she was, this would be an odd sight to see unfold on international TV: a lanky teenage girl peppered in acne and sunburns, in what looked like her freshman homecoming attire, was

surrounded by world leaders of every kind of evil and the smartest scientists on the planet. Her portrait has been photographed more times than the *Mona Lisa* at this point, but she seemed as forgettable as a dreamscape, an amalgamation of the most average angles a person could be composed of. Aside from the bright red tuxedo she wore and her naturally yellow lips, anyone who looked like her could have disappeared into the crowd and never been found again.

But millions were tuning in to see her because she was *the* Ichora Lilliath. The girl with golden hair, golden eyes, and, most importantly, *golden blood*.

The daunting questions discussed by the white coats and blue suits were left unanswered by her as she stared at each attendee's clenched fists.

War, famine, pestilence, it was all the same to her, so she let the words float over her head like cherubs. As long as she stayed focused on their sins, Ichora existed in a vacuum. When prompted, she simply echoed information that they had already become acquainted with from articles and her old interviews, a surface-level biography.

"I was born with a never-before-seen genome that makes my blood a metallic yellow color. My parents named me after ichor, the term for the golden blood of the Greek gods. For the first few years of my life, I was given various tests at Boston Children's hospital, but doctors found no lasting negative effects connected to my condition and discovered that I have immunity to nearly every disease on the planet. However, I perceive the world differently..."

"Yeah, yeah, we've heard it all before," the director of a so-called humanitarian organization cut her off. "*Please*, just answer us: are you going to let these wonderful men and woman use your DNA to develop an antidote and end this pandemic? You can help us save millions!"

Ignoring him, Ichora's brass saucer eyes widened even further as they trailed from his bulging arms to his pasty face. "How ironic of *you* to

say.” There was enough ice in her voice to make the journalist from earlier break out in goosebumps.

“What does that even mean?” “Dammit, just give us a response.” “Why does it have to be *her*?” The other attendees muttered their impatience.

They quieted down when she slammed a thin palm on the table. Her face didn’t redden with anger as blood seeped into it- it *glowed* ever so slightly like a vial of radon; a gradual, graduated poison to those around her. Even when she was surrounded by dictators and deceit, she could keep her seething breaths so silent that she could strike them before they even stood up. And they knew this very well. Despite this, another philanthropic liar mumbled. “Well?”

She gave them one last strained, Steinway-key smile before speaking.

The woman was slouched in the high seat, her glassy, alcohol-fogged eyes on the TV. After realizing that the amber whiskey she had been downing reminded her too much of the person on the screen, she left the glass half-empty next to her shaking hand.

Between mumbling an empty prayer and watching the conference, she didn’t notice the young bartender approach her.

“Wait a second,” he said, glancing from the screen to her. “Aren’t you that girl’s sister?”

Usually, she tried to escape the mention of her sister, but a combination of the alcohol and the program being aired made her seek company. Just this once, before the world falls apart.

“Technically, yes.” She sighed. “But I don’t really want to consider myself related to anymore. *Especially* not after what’s about to happen.”

“Wait, what does that-”

“I’m Juno, by the way. Not whatever name you’ve seen on the news or just Ichora’s sister.”

“Got it. My name’s Damian.”

They mirrored the awkward silence that the girl on the other side of the TV welcomed.

“How ironic?” Damian raised an eyebrow. “I don’t get it.”

When Ichora was a toddler, she used to laugh about strangers having ‘cranberry juice’ or ‘red marker’ on their fingers. Juno could sometimes see these stains too, but they wavered like a mirage. After she scraped her knees at a playground, Ichora stopped joking. After they witnessed fresh blood blossom on the fists of a boy in their class shortly before he killed his cat, she stopped speaking about what they could see altogether.

“If I had to guess,” Juno muttered. “She probably saw the blood on his hands. If I were there, then I would know for sure.”

“Oh yeah, I remember reading about that. So you have that same, uh, gift?”

“Yeah, sort of. I don’t like to admit it, but *we*- Ichora and I- are a lot alike. I’m really just her but older, duller, and without the piss-colored blood.”

As their laughter died down, she added, “but I wouldn’t call it a gift- we never gave it a name, but I consider it more of a curse.”

“Oh... Well, I was going to ask how guilty I am, according to your curse, but you don’t have to answer if you don’t-”

“No, it’s alright. I’m sure you’re not as bad as any of those richies in that conference, anyway.” Juno’s vision dimmed as everything outside of his fidgeting fingers became a blur. “Let’s see... I see a few dried trails of blood on your hands. Maybe from crushing bugs as a kid, or running over a squirrel by accident.”

“WHAT DID SHE JUST SAY?” An old man sitting in a nearby booth smashed a bottle of ochre rum on the ground, making Juno jump in her seat.

“Are you-” She sprung up, starting to pull up her white blouse’s sleeves before noticing that his anger wasn’t directed to her. Following his gaze, she watched Ichora get up from the table, the shit-eating grin plastered on her face contrasting with everyone else’s shocked expressions. “What- did you get that?”

“Yeah...” Damian said quietly. “She said... ‘No’.”

One word, a million implications.

But no surprise to Juno, because she knew her sister as well as she knew every curl on her head. She fidgeted with the singular straight tuft she kept behind her ear.

“‘No’ as in, she won’t donate any of her blood to help people?” The bartender looked like he was about to smash a glass on the ground too. “To end this pandemic? You’re her sister- *Why would she say something like that?*”

“I just said, I’m *not* her sister anymore. But I used to feel the same way when I was her age.” She shrugged. “Course, I realized that it would be impossible to ‘purify the world’ in her words, since so many people would be ‘impure’ by her standards.”

“She’s for real, though? I mean- yeah, if we’re counting the murders of *squirrels* and *ants*, like you said, that would be almost everyone.”

“Oh, she’s 100% genuine about it.” Juno glanced over her shoulder before lowering her voice. “I know because... well, I’ve seen the blood on *her* hands. The first time I saw it, she...” She told herself that it was just the alcohol that made her stomach feel tight. “Actually, forget it. I’ve got to get going. I’m sure that more folks are going to recognize me, and they’re not gonna be happy.” As much as she was reluctant to confirm it, the fact was that, aside from their differing heights and which primary color acted as an undertone to their skins, Juno looked eerily similar to Ichora.

Damian’s confused farewell was filtered out by the memory that flooded her head.

“What do I look like?” She asked Ichora.

Her younger sister's eyes had sharpened into shards of tourmaline, pupils shifting like waves crashing against the cliffs of her irises.

"Wow," Ichora finally said, grinning from ear to ear. "You only have one drop on your pinkie. I knew you would be good, but you might be the nicest person I've seen!"

"Your turn now, right?" At the bob of her sister's curl-covered head, Juno willed her own eyes to do the same. But instead of just the edges of her vision melting away, everything went dark.

"Hello?" she called out, footsteps echoing on the hard, black floor.

"I'm right here!" Even though it had her voice, the tall figure that stepped out of the darkness looked nothing like Ichora. Its spindly limbs were long enough to build a bridge over the uncanny valley that it bailed from. It was sharp shapes and dark matter, a vantablack form beyond her colorful comprehension. And the amount of blood on it was unbearable- its smell ambushed her senses, making her double over gagging.

Juno didn't want to believe that this was Ichora. But the thing's human smile and eyes, peeling open from the crimson abyss that coated it, confirmed that it was her. As Juno was shaken back to reality by their mom, she screamed. She screamed and screamed for hours, until her raw throat felt like it had been scratched by the monster itself. She screamed so loud that perhaps, wherever it lived beneath Ichora's radiant skin, it heard her and smiled even wider.

"None of you really understand," she once told an interviewer shortly before leaving home. "Trying to see her like everyone else does is like trying to put some cheap Party City angel wings on your sleep paralysis demon."

Like a scolding parent, the interviewer responded, "You're a funny young lady, but you sound absolutely ridiculous. Your sister's going to save the world one day with that condition of hers, and you'll regret insulting her like that."

"How ironic of him to say," the Juno of the present day muttered to herself.

Outside, she removed her mask for a moment and took in the cool air as if she had been drowning, submerged in her thoughts for too long. She normally didn't risk her health like this, given her asthma and horrible

immune system, but something told her that this would be the last gust of fresh wind that anyone would inhale that day.

Tomorrow, the air would become thick with the rusty stench of death.

Sierra Albritton

The Divide Series I



Thomas Elson

You Had to be There

I will not judge.

Except for One

Who was not there.

#

Crammed into wagons. Doors closed. Left in darkness until arriving at this place – not unlike the other places except this one with unpainted wood instead of concrete. Rows of us stacked upon rows barricaded inside stockades with more rows cobbled onto more rows.

Outside and away from the bare wood and bare floors, our bare feet and baren lives tread through rubbish – vegetable, animal, mineral – human, non-human, inhuman.

Scattered corpses. Emaciated people. Rotting smells smoldered from uncovered pits and fetid bunkers. Electric fences surrounded barking dogs, loaded guns, and filth. We waited - herded, experimented upon, raped - startled by gunfire - frozen in place each time a body thuds like a garbage bag into an open trench.

They probed me daily. I received no benefit – other than staying alive, which, under the circumstances, was not much of a benefit. Food and water rationed. Never allowed to wash. No showers. Not even a toothbrush. Bathroom facilities? Outside – in the back. Lice and assorted insects settled on beds, clothing, skin, inside bodies.

I survived for eighty-eight days.

After a smiling face turned his thumbs-up into a thumbs-down, the prussic acid caused my chest to sting. I convulsed as if from epileptic seizures. Blood coagulated in my lungs. Breaths turned to gasps. People yelled. I yelled.

Then all was quiet.

Then all were dead.

Fused one to another from the heat.

Men in masks entered hacking with axes to separate us. Then an order came down, "Burn them."

Breezes mixed the air with odors from various gases – cadaverine, putrescine, fecal - into a hole where dust never settled.

They dumped my – our - ashes into a ditch.

Then I met Him.

I had nothing to lose.

I told Him a joke.

He did not laugh.

His voice boomed, "Human degradation is not funny."

My reply, "I guess You had to be there."

Noah Varsalona

Untitled



Stephanie Daich

RED-NECK-WEDDING

What have I done?

Smashed beer cans littered around my feet, with beer sticking to my ankles. Mud stained the bottom of my heirloom wedding dress.

My wedding should have been nothing like the red-neck get-together I just had. Could that display of animal behavior even be called a wedding?

I had spent my life dreaming about my ideal wedding, my mom prepping me when I was just a toddler. She had always planned my reception to be at the Topping Rose House.

I wiped the sweat dripping down my neck as I looked at the mismatch of folding and camp chairs strewn about. This weed-infested lawn seemed like the best spot for the priest to marry us the day before. My throat still hurt from screaming when the chair brawl broke out. My new husband Jim and his father and stepfather started the fight. Within a blink, half the wedding party joined in. I thought only Hollywood created that type of savagery. I guess not. I couldn't wait to spend the holidays with these people.

I had no idea where my husband Jim was. That morning, I wandered around the trailer houses, field, and yard, searching. There wasn't a lack of passed-out faces to scan. I never did find "the love of my life."

"Shayla, my brother might-a run off with his ex-girlfriend Buffy Joe. I saw her here last night," Jim's sister Kelly said, laughing through a mouth of rotten teeth. As I wiped her spit off my face, I had two questions. Why was that funny? And why were all her teeth rotten?

I looked at the bread-tie Jim had wrapped around my finger for a wedding ring. My sister wore a 100,000 dollar engagement ring from her husband. When my brother-in-law slipped on the wedding band, the ring

rose \$40,000 more in value. They had a lovely wedding at the Topping Rose House.

My red-neck wedding, in truth, was my mom's fault. I had only brought Jim home to grab my swimsuit. He was a tour guide for the canoe trip I was about to take.

Jim had called to cancel the canoe trip because his truck had broken down. Sophie, my childhood friend from summer camp, was visiting from Spain, and I had promised her a canoe expedition. It wasn't my thing, but Sophie wanted it.

When Jim had texted to cancel, I realized I was only five minutes from where he was stranded. I didn't think it a big deal to pick him up so we could still canoe.

As my mom saw that red-neck in our foyer, she abandoned all her social graces. "You need to leave now, young man. There is no place for you here."

It delighted me that my mom thought Jim was my date. I decided to have fun with this.

I put my arm around Jim's waist. "Mom, don't talk to my boyfriend like that." I resisted the urge to gag as his stale meat smell overpowered me. Jim played right along, and he slipped his arm around my waist. I tensed up. His greasy head leaned against mine—his breath smelt like an ashtray.

"What are you doing, Shayla? No, no, no, no, no!" My mom spat out with her hands on her hips.

"Mom, I am twenty-five. It's about time I did things my way. I love Jim, and you can't stop me from dating him." I had to hold in my laughter. I had found a button on my mom, and I loved pushing it. Her reaction bordered epic.

"I love your daughter, Ma'am." Jim played right along.

I was only doing this to trick my mom, but when I watched her facial muscles tighten and the vein pop out of her neck, exhilaration filled

me. In my whole life, I had never rallied my mom up. I was the obedient daughter that let her control my life. I didn't even choose what I would eat during the day. A rush of excitement moved me. And like that, Jim became my boyfriend.

I had never dated anyone as fun as Jim.

The majority of stuffy dates I had gone on with other guys consisted of dinner and a movie. I only watched a movie once with Jim, and he projected it on a sheet in his backyard. I think his whole neighborhood joined us. We sat under the stars while bats circled our heads. The dark sky enveloped me in wonder.

We never ate at a restaurant, although we ate at lots of bars or truck-stops. I had never been to a bar before. Jim seemed to know everyone who came in there. Jim had a genuine truth to his friendships with others, which I had never felt in my upper-crust society. Everyone in my circle of friends and acquaintances was fake. Even my mom. No, especially my mom.

Jim and I had other dates, like truck-pulls and fishing. I still haven't decided if I like to fish or not. And then, of course, every other day, we had BBQs with greasy hot dogs and burgers. And beer. Beer in bottles. Beer in cans. BEER!

I don't like beer, with its yeasty flavor, but Jim and his clan of red-necks sure did. Beer seemed to be the center of all activity.

Jim brought a new dimension of fun and adventure into my life. I loved the ease everyone had when they gathered, and I admired the friendship Jim had with his parents. Jim's parents seemed to accept him for who he was. They spent their time enjoying each other's company instead of their time criticizing and trying to change Jim, as my parents did with me.

I never fell in love with Jim. I fell in love with how much my dating him upset my mom. For once, I felt like my mom was my marionette on a string, instead of me as hers.

I ended up in the compound of trailer homes as my wedding venue when my mom canceled my Paris trip. My mom and I had plans to go to France for shopping, just her and me. But, when I refused to break up with Jim, she revoked our trip.

The next day, when Jim proposed to me at the corner gas station, I said yes to spite my mom. Later, as I sat on Jim's family's five-acre property, surrounded by passed-out guests and trash, I realized how dumb it was to marry Jim to get back at my mom.

Our wedding had been complete with something they called pig-in-the-mud-wrestling. Some of the guests actually climbed in a giant mud pit and wrestled with pigs! It astounded me when Jim's mom gripped my hand and dragged me toward the mud.

I tried to shake her off. "Starla, I am in my wedding dress." My dress, which cost more than the whole wedding must-have, I inherited from my grandma. It was a lacy vintage assemble. Grandma might haunt me for life if she watched me wear it to this wedding.

"That is what would make it so awesome," Starla said with a snort and kept dragging me closer.

"Starla, stop!" Had I just yelled at my mother-in-law?

Starla stared at me, then released my wrist. "Party-pooper."

Did she honestly call me a party pooper at my wedding?

I looked around the property and wondered where she was now. Was she one of the passed-out bodies?

I stood up from the pile of beer cans.

Maaa. A goat rummaged around the garbage. Even though I had dodged pig-wresting in my wedding dress, mud had managed to soak the

lace. It sickened me to think I had soiled grandma's dress. I stood and walked past the goat. It snatched a bite of my train and wouldn't let go.

"Give me that, you vermin." I grabbed a beer bottle and hit the top of the goat's head with it. The goat released my dress then displayed its horns.

"Watch out. It's going to buck you," I heard one of Jim's cousins say, one of the few people not passed out.

I grabbed a folding chair and shielded that horrible goat from me as its head rammed the chair a couple of times. With each buck, I stumbled backward.

"Help me," I screamed. The cousin finally led the goat away, but not before he took a video of my plight on his phone.

It took a minute to calm from the goat's vicious attack. Heavy breaths filled me as my shaky hand steadied myself on the make-shift alter we were married over. The humidity of the morning drenched me in sweat. My hand rubbed the rough wood on the altar. Who would have thought I would be married over a barrel? Surprisingly, the wedding certificate still laid on it. I picked it up. Our legal signatures etched in red ink. I am not sure red is a legal color for signing documents.

Vrrrrr. The sound of Bobby's monster truck roared to life. Bobby had disappeared last night; otherwise, that monster truck was supposed to be our limo. Beer cans tied with twine dangled from the bumper. Obscene drawings adorned the window from those who had decorated our wedding "carriage". Bobby should have chauffeured us to the Best Western for our wedding night.

Beep. Bobby blared the loud horn, which jerked my heart, and I jumped. Out of one of the trailers, Jim and *Buffalo*-Joe came running out, hand in hand. They laughed as they climbed up the enormous tires into the limo.

Rrrrrr. Bobby revved the engine, then peeled out. Mud splattered the cars as the monster truck disappeared into the sunrise. The loyal chauffeur drove the "happy couple" away.

A heavy lump filled my chest. *I think I just got abandoned on my wedding day.* Well, I guess it was the day after my wedding day. But, either way, my husband left me. I looked at our wedding certificate and tightened my grip. I was legally bound to that cheating-lowlife.

"Ain't you going to go after 'em?" Kelly said, walking towards me. She took a swig of beer from a bottle. I didn't know what time it was, but it was still early in the morning.

"Um, no. He left me."

Kelly leaned her head back and took a giant chug. Beer dribbled out of the side of her mouth.

"Ahh," she said. *Brrrp.*

Gross. I dropped my eyes to the certificate, with my name Shayla etched for time.

"Don't be glum, sis. We'll find you another man."

"Twenty-five and divorced. Wow, that sounds amazing." I had really jacked up my prospects and future.

"Ah, no worries. Ma was on her third marriage at twenty-five." Kelly dropped her level and searched the beer cans. She picked one up and finished the stale beer in it. I shuddered at the sight.

Wonderful.

"Maybe I can get an annulment," I said. "We didn't even have a wedding night."

"You're fine. We printed that there certificate on the computer. Did you go to the courthouse and file for a wedding before the wedding?" Kelly picked up and dropped more bottles and cans.

"No. Are you supposed to do that?"

"Yes, something like that. You go and pay for a certificate. Jim went there, but it was like forty dollars or something. When he complained that was good beer money, I told him I could just print him up a certificate. And here it is," she said, touching the marriage certificate. Her gaping mouth turned to a large smile, obviously proud of her forgery. "I did a good job. Looks legit, doesn't it?"

I stared at the certificate. I didn't know what an actual marriage certificate was supposed to look like.

"So my marriage isn't legal?"

Kelly took another long swig of beer. "Nope."

"But, a priest married us."

She wiped her mouth on her bare arm. "So?"

I stared at the certificate. I looked around the compound with its five trailer houses; One for Jim, one for his mom and step-dad, one for Kelly, and two for storage. I thought about my family's three mansions and two summer cottages scattered around the country.

I didn't want to live here on this junky compound. I did like my life with all the wealth. But, on the other hand, I loved stepping into a new way of life. Jim's people knew how to have fun. They genuinely cared about each other. I didn't want to walk away from that.

"I guess you are not my sister anymore," I said. I didn't care that Jim ran off with another woman. Actually, I was glad he did. But, it hurt to leave a group of people who engaged in life. How could I return to the rigid social rules that had defined me?

"I might not be your sister, but I'll always be your friend," Kelly said, standing up. She put her arm over my shoulders, and I felt her kindness.

A couple of pigs headed toward us.

I looked at the wedding certificate. I might not be legally married to Jim, but my mom won't know that. I put the certificate on the altar for the moment.

I looked at my soiled dress. I watched the pigs move closer, then said, "Hey Kelly, I have an idea. Let's do a little pig-in-the-mud-wrestling."

My new best friend grabbed my hand and said, "Yee-haw! That's what I am talking about."

Noah Varsalona

Gummy Bears



Marek Kulig

Tennis Balls

At school the teachers
cut x's into tennis balls
and stuck them with legs,
conceiving immaculate quietude,
till young boys (is there no one else?)
played destruction derby,
pushing (clacking, really)
their desks together
for a collaborative learning activity.

Hung from the ceiling
of the garage, dangling feet
above the ground a car
will roll into and set, hovers a tennis ball
like a handy parking assistant
midway through a slow motion clap
that, effectively, won't sound.

In the lot of the medical center
lays a punctured tennis ball,
doubtless fallen off the walker
of an elderly patient
for whom the world now looks
hardly more askew than it would have
had this tennis ball stayed put,
or had it never been repurposed
to keep down the racket.

Noah Varsalona

Bowl of Apples



John Grey

A CONTINENT APART

I flew across country,
landed in LA.
You were still home in Providence.

I was a short drive from the Pacific.
The Atlantic lay forty-five minutes
from where you sat on the couch
and read your book.

I was having dinner
at the hotel
and you were crawling into bed.

I watched a little TV
while you slept.

Then I dozed off
and you were already
on your third dream.

And just as my dreams
got started,
your alarm went off.

When I awoke,
you were well into your day.

I ate, watched TV, and slept alone.
And I was missing
who you were
three hours before.

Lucy Zhang

Godless

Kyrie is a liar. He says everything is going to change when Comet 37A approaches Earth, bright enough you can see it with a cheap telescope. Because the gods like it when massive snowball-shaped comets come into human vision—it makes them feel important, like they're worth orbiting. Because gaining the gods' favor takes more than prayers and offerings of the last batch of hydroponics-harvested apples. Comet 37A is in full view without a telescope, and all I see is a dot illuminated by the sun, growing larger as it nears our planet's surface. But after another day passes, it shrinks as its path diverges from us, speeding away from both Earth and the Sun with a crashed spacecraft smashed into its body, a spacecraft that was supposedly launched and lost a century ago and only just made impact.

“How do you know that's what really happened?” I ask.

“What else could've happened?” Kyrie answers.

I don't think the gods are suitably impressed because weeks after Comet 37A disappears, the electrical grids are still out, undersea cables cut, satellite internet equipment knocked from orbit. There's not much left for Kyrie and me to do besides walking to our local farmer's market for food and redeveloping all kinds of hydroponics and greenhouse technology in our backyard garden because we've never studied gardening before, and now we're left playing by trial-and-error. Kyrie begins to put more tubing together. I am to install the pump for the new section we've siphoned off

for the tomatoes. We want to take down our wick system because the string doesn't provide enough water and nutrients to our plants which have begun to yellow and wilt, but taking it down means starting from scratch—waiting for dormant seeds to turn into vegetation yet again. I think I'm fairly patient but Kyrie needs instant results, still conditioned from high speed Fiber days and push notification vibrations quaking against his skin milliseconds after a reaction to his online contributions to open source repositories and knowledge bases. We're trying to build a nutrient film technique-based system even though Kyrie hasn't figured out how to drill holes through the PVC pipes. I've been assigned to figure out the pump system and reservoir vessel which is an old fish tank we bought to house several goldfish who died within the year, although I've already finished doing what I can, the pump hooked up and blowing bubbles in the tank. I start putting together individual netcups to hold the roots above the water flow—a task we are supposed to do together but Kyrie is still figuring out the PVC pipe. I think he thought the PVC pipe would be easier to handle because it was just poking holes through tubes, but he should've known better—we've never been athletic or handiwork-competent.

“I think you'll need a drill or hole saw,” I say, watching Kyrie try to jam a knife around the outline of a circle sketched with a dying sharpie.

“Saying that is not terribly useful.” Kyrie drops the pipe to the ground and stands, stretching his back and shoulders.

“You think the gods will drop a drill in front of the doorstep?” Because no one can predict their whim, certainly not me, so might as well use their unpredictability for our optimism.

“You know that's not how they work.”

“It’s worth dreaming.” We both laugh. Since the solar storm, we laugh easier. Kyrie claims it’s because we’re in the fuck-it phase of coping, although I don’t care as much about the phase as I do about us now getting uninterrupted nights of sleep—something we haven’t had in years despite copious bottles of melatonin and tabs of research papers written in 10 pt. font on loop quantum gravity. I’m not one to argue even if we run a real risk of the gods abandoning us for good. The gods have already cursed most of the plants outside our garden, which is part of the reason why we started our garden (the other being boredom).

When we leave for the store, we can see the sidewalks and lawns overgrown with cursed plants—succulents and grass and aspen trees whose stems and bark have turned red. They sprout white, marble-shaped fruits that purportedly taste like honey but are lethal for consumption, symptoms starting out as vibrant, red rashes, then your lungs closing up, your eyeballs swelling, your blood solidifying in your veins like stones until you die. The remaining seed incubated by your stomach grows outward, eating the remains of the body to create a magnificent, towering red tree we all once thought was beautiful until they’d begun to show up everywhere, roots poking through human bodies like pores. Kyrie says it’s not because we were forsaken, but because the gods had given us a gift we’d yet to learn to utilize. Even so, we began our garden, protected by fences and coverings from the curse, not quite ready to understand the gods’ intent.

“We should take a few fruits back. Imagine if we figured out how to make them edible,” Kyrie remarks as we pass one of the neighbor’s houses which has been overrun with cursed plants, the drywall and bricks and glass cracked and infiltrated with roots, the roof and chimney torn open for the red branches to stretch and grow freely, the tops decorated with white beads of fruit. But he makes no move to pick a handful of the

fruit that has dropped onto the ground. I step around one that has rolled to the middle of the sidewalk. There's no way to search ResearchGate for existing studies about the topical effects of these fruits, and while we've only observed them to be toxic upon consumption, we're not taking any risks in the name of science.

We arrive at the store which is managed by an old Auntie who hardly gets out and hasn't realized a solar storm swept through and took the Internet with it. "May the gods be with you," she says as she bags the dried lotus bulbs and mung beans we've "purchased" with long expired credit cards that Auntie's broken card reader thinks are valid. I feel bad about it and wonder what we'll do when Auntie finds out she hasn't earned any money, but Kyrie insists we're paying her in social interactions, saving her from dementia. "As the gods would have it," he concludes. "They're trying to get us to prioritize well-being, shun material distractions. Money causes more trouble than good."

"I guess so," I reply.

When we arrive home, I begin cooking the mung beans and lotus bulbs. We have a bit of sugar left which I've decided to finally use in sweet bean soup rather than let it rot in the cupboard and get infested with ants. Plus mung beans are cooling foods, and if anything is going to protect us from the effects of coming into contact with cursed plants, it might as well be something tasty. Kyrie calls it pseudoscience but I was raised on traditional Chinese medicine and feel defensive. "Not any more pseudoscience than the gods are," I shoot back as I stir the pot. If I let it boil for too long, the beans will turn mushy and brown, in which case it's no different from baby food—a waste of a vessel for our remaining sugar. My goal is a respectably soft but cohesive texture, a bright yellow-green color.

Kyrie heads to the backyard to continue forcing the pocketknife through the pipe, pushing and pulling the blade while shifting the center of his weight like he knows exactly how to physically and biologically optimize his body to sever PVC. I turn off the stove and hear him shout.

“Got one out!” He holds up a jagged-edged circle cut from the edge of the pipe. In a different timeline, I imagine snapping a picture for him to post online, a break in content from the images of ramen and mountains tops and sunsets. I dislike cameras and think my smile makes me look fake, my eyes like desiccated crescent moons, but Kyrie used to say these photos online and papers published on JSTOR would prove he existed long after he died. Now he thinks the gods are waiting for comets and poisonous white fruits to take over the world. “Because they’ve given up on us?” I had asked. “There’s no use trying to guess their intent,” was his answer.

I give Kyrie a high five and he pulls me into a hug. The pot of mung bean soup is cooling on the counter, and we walk over to the kitchen table. I pull two bowls from the cabinets and ladle soup into both followed by huge spoonfuls of sugar, dumping sugar into each bowl until the container is empty. We own these expensive ergonomic metal soup spoons Kyrie ordered but never let us use, insisting on using our old plastic ones because they “worked fine.” I pull out the metal spoons and place one into each bowl. Kyrie doesn’t argue.

Sierra Albritton

The Divide Series II



Grief

Denial

It begins in darkness. Recently widowed Emma fears the creaks and groans of her antique house. At night, even the sound of the ice machine rumbling to release a new cube pushes her heart to her throat, presses the play button in her relentless imagination. Emma can only envision murderous intruders as the origins of these sounds.

One night, she hears a repeated tapping, forces herself out of bed to investigate this latest horror-inducing noise. She looks out the window, sees only darkness. Downstairs, she gasps at the sight of a bat fluttering in the shadowy living room. Panic seizes, she grabs a lamp's chain. The bat disappears. She runs upstairs, slams the bedroom door.

Isolation

Emma wakes with a jolt, her phone's buzz. 8:15. Janice. Ever since Jon's death, Emma's sister in Boston calls every morning. She is *just checking in*, making sure Emma is up, showered, *maybe going out today?*

"That's awful," Janice says about the bat. "I'm sure it's gone. Sometimes they just go in and out a crack. It doesn't want to be in your house, believe me."

"I don't want to be in my house either," Emma says.

"Oh, honey. You can always come here."

Emma knows if she went to Janice's she'd have to get out of her pajamas, talk, pretend to be okay.

"I gotta go- getting together with Amy next door," she lies.

Anger

Annoying Ken the exterminator tells Emma there are no bats in her eaves, no holes or cracks anywhere. “Maybe you didn’t really see a bat,” he says. Emma continues to hear the bat’s distressed chittering every night, sending her running to her room.

The health department lady tells her it’s actually a good thing she’s not sleeping. If she did sleep, then she’d need to get rabies shots. At this news, a fierce anger blazes in Emma. Not one to yell at or swear to, she throws her phone across the room, cracking its screen. Afterwards, she feels depleted, like cold ash blowing on a beach.

Bargaining

The fifth night of noise, Emma reads everything there is on the Internet about bats. Words like integral, ecosystem, endangered, pollinators float past Emma’s eyes on the glowing laptop screen. She admits to herself that bats are actually sort of cute.

“Okay, bat, I will come out of my bedroom and help you if you leave. I want you to live. I know you don’t want to be here,” the first words she says out loud in hours.

Emma turns on all the inside lights, opens all the doors, waits. A chorus of cicadas overtakes. Emma watches the bat’s exit. Its wings pump with nervous energy, achieving its victory, its glorious exit into the night.

Depression

Emma sleeps deeply, well into the day, missing Janice’s call. Waking, she shuffles to the kitchen, opens the fridge, grabs whatever takeout container lingers there and eats its cold contents.

After several long nights of sleep, loneliness keeps her wide awake. It feels like pain, like sciatica ripping down her leg. She is shocked by a deep craving for the bat-another living thing breathing beside her.

One night, she turns off the inside lights and switches on the outside ones, observing the flies as they swarm, hoping her bat is well fed, happy. She repeats this for several nights, sits in her kitchen, watching the flies seethe around the spotlights. Emma ponders the fact that the natural world is always out there, doing the things it is meant to do, relentlessly working, living its purpose.

Acceptance

Emma surveys the pile of dirty containers and slop encrusted forks in her kitchen sink. As she rolls up the sleeves of her robe and begins to clean, the familiar chittering sound fills her ears. Again, a bat, right there, clinging to the kitchen curtain, shaking. Emma shuts off the faucet, looks closely, feels pity instead of fear.

“Hello,” she whispers.

She gently encloses the shaking bat in a kitchen towel, carries it outside, sets it free. Emma watches the bat disappear, knowing its acute senses will lead it where it must go, show it exactly what it must do.

John Grey

DELAYED FLIGHT

Another terminal. Another plastic seat.
A screen above my head. Arrivals and departures.

Outside, a clear sky at least.
No wind. No clouds.
Nothing to hinder the day's levitations.

In an hour, I'll be aloft.
The man next to me will doze off.
I'll look at a map of everywhere the airline flies.
A woman will ask, "What would you like to drink?"

I'll look down, with bird's eyes,
at the patchwork.
Farms. Towns. Rivers.
Maybe even a city
where the traffic seems to move.
(Unlike any city I know)

But, until then, I wait.
It's the part of the journey
where there is no taxiing
to the top of the runway,
no takeoff,
no stewardess,
no warm greeting from the captain.

It's plastic seat stage.
It's screen above my head stage.
It's arrivals and departures stage.
Then it's the stage of
the disembodied voice saying,
"Your flight has been delayed."

So, in an hour, I'll be looking forward
to the hour after that.

Breandrea Prince

Hear me Cry

I feel broken
help me
I feel lost
show me
I feel unwanted
love me
I feel doubted
trust me
I feel alone
care for me
I feel misunderstood
listen to me.

Tell me
Do you feel me?
Can I be healed?
Can I be heard?

Leshunti Mizell

Missing

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS GIRL?

IF YOU HAVE ANY INFORMATION ABOUT
LESHUNTI MIZELL CONTACT (555) 555-5555



*Missing From:
Columbus, GA*

*Date Missing:
April 13th, 2010*

*Age: 7
Height: 4'5
Weight: 100
Hair: BLK*

Have you seen me?

Leshunti was last seen wearing a bright smile on her face. A smile that showed everyone around her that she didn't have a care in the world and that she thought the world was sunshine and rainbows. A smile that showed the world that she didn't know how the world operated. She was also last seen wearing a blindfold. A blindfold that covered her eyes from seeing the evil in others.

Leshunti thinks that the world is a magical place. She never watches the news, so she has no idea about all the terrible things that are going on in different parts of the country, she only knows about what is going on around her. She thinks that since her life is good that everyone else is having the time of their life. Oh, how wrong she is.

She has no idea about all the hardships that people around the world have to deal with, what people in her neighborhood have to deal with. She is so oblivious to the world around her. It would be nice to have that girl back. It would be nice to see the world through her eyes one last time to forget about all the crazy things that happened in the world; It would be nice to forget about all the terrible things that have happened in the last year. That child doesn't have to worry about the fear of wondering if her dad, the one person in her life that makes her

remember that life has meaning, was going to survive his surgery. She doesn't have to worry about how she is going to function if he doesn't survive. She doesn't have to worry if her mother is going to die from covid, something that doesn't exist where she is. Most importantly she does not have to worry about the thought of the world ending one day, because the generation before her didn't do their part of keeping the one planet that we do have healthy. What a terrific life she is living.

She imagines that in the future the world is going to a magical place with flying cars in the sky, and with houses where you could pull a lever and the house would be a different house or even a different location. I blame Barbie and Mickey Mouse on that crazy imagination that she has. If only she could see what the future actually looks like, I bet she would think that everything that she saw was a bad nightmare, it sure feels like that sometimes. I wonder where Young Leshunti is. Maybe she is somewhere hiding in the shadows seeing all the things that are going on in the world, just like everyone else in the real world, and she too is wishing that she could go back to what the world used to look like before she saw what she saw.

Can You Help?

Can you bring back this child and make her forget how terrible the world is? Can you make her forget that everyone is not treated the same and that some people have different advantages in life? Can you turn back time so that she can have time to play around with friends again without wondering if that would be the last time that she will see them? Can you bring back the child that only saw the good in others, and was willing to defend someone so that their name wouldn't be slandered? Can you bring back the child who is willing to give the shirt that is on her back for someone, even if she doesn't know them?

Do you think you could reverse time so that her family could see that happiness in her eyes once again? So that they can see how wide her eyes get when she experiences something new. So that she can get excited over seeing the most basic things like going through a car wash and seeing the mailman come to her street and bring the mail to her mailbox. So that she can be bouncing off the walls with energy. Leshunti always had a twinkle in her eyes. She was always excited to see new things and she was equally excited to see things that she already saw. She always looked at something like it was the first time that she saw it. She was always excited to go outside and see the world and all the creatures living in the world with her. She was always happy. It was amazing how sheltered she was from the world and from seeing how the world is not as beautiful as she thinks it is. How would she react when she sees how the world is now? Would she try to tell everyone that is going to be ok, or would she realize how terrible the world is?

If you have any information on where Leshunti might be please call (555) 555-5555 and contact the local authorities immediately. All callers can remain anonymous, and all information will be treated confidentially. Authorities have released this missing person poster for Leshunti Mizell. They ask for the poster be shared as widely as possible.

Zachary Holley

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We may revise these Terms from time to time.

these Terms

giving access

to

your

soul

condemning

you

to

purgatory

Effective: November

4, 2021

Signed-You

Christina Hoag

I Stayed

No, it's not. Can't be. But it is. Even at a distance, even after a year, I recognize his stoop-shouldered, loping stride slicing across the parking lot. It is him. Heading for the exact restaurant where I'm sitting at a window table waiting for my friend Lucy.

My stomach cartwheels. I sit back and lower my head, hoping the curtains of my hair will hide my face. Maybe he hasn't seen me. I hear the door open behind me. Footsteps shuffle to a stop. I squeeze my eyes shut, hold my breath. My legs wobble. I wait for the fist to close around my wrist, the finger to jab my face, the vomit of insults and warped accusations.

The feet move. Away from me.

I exhale but keep my eyes closed and concentrate on my breathing. *One one-thousand, two one-thousand...* The chair in front of me scrapes. Fear spears me. He's circled back in one of his "gotcha" maneuvers. My eyelids snap open.

It's Lucy. Thank god.

"Danny just walked in," I say in a taut voice.

Alarm springs on her face. "No wonder you look pale."

"We should go," I say. I want to leave, but I'm frozen in my chair. Maybe Danny didn't see me when he came in. If I stand up, he might notice me.

"Where is he? I want to see this guy," Lucy says. She picks up the oversize menu and peers around it as she scans the restaurant.

"This is like a cliché out of a bad movie." I gaze at my blurred words of the menu on the table.

"Clichés are based on truth. What does he look like?"

"He has hair sticking out all over like a scarecrow's," I say.

“Black?”

“He dyes it.”

“Got him. He’s sitting with a guy and a girl.”

“Are they looking over here?”

She shakes her head, still staring at him. “I can see why you fell for him. There’s something about him.”

This irritates me to all fuck. She’s supposed to say he looks like a nutjob, not that he’s alluring. “Can you stop doing that?” I say.

She twists back, sets the menu on the table and penetrates me with her eyes. I see curiosity mixed with disbelief. I know what she’s thinking: How could someone like me, a journalist who’s always had her life together, fall victim to something so ... sordid like domestic violence? A broil of shame and embarrassment burns inside me.

“You want to know how it happened,” I blurt.

Lucy’s eyelids flutter. “You never told me the whole story.”

“It’s just ... humiliating. I can’t believe it all happened,” I feel defensiveness puff out of me. It takes energy to put up a front, and I’m suddenly tired. “That I *let* it all happen.”

Lucy says nothing, waiting. I take a deep breath. I’ve never really explained the whole Danny thing to myself or anyone else. It’s like a plate of spaghetti in my head. I’ve tried to disentangle it numerous times, but I’ve always given up when I encounter the knots. But I know I need to separate all the strands, not for Lucy, but for myself. I guess now’s as good a time as any.

#

I fell in love with Danny on our first date. As I sipped a Chablis, a balmy Miami breeze breathing on my back, he leaned low on an elbow and asked me to tell him about my life as a foreign correspondent in Latin America. The beam of his full attention focused on me. It was an unnatural

feeling for a lifelong self-effacer. My childhood moving from country to country with my father's job meant that I was always the new kid, always different. If I wanted to fit in, I never talked about my unconventional upbringing. I had never overcome that shyness about myself.

But Danny wanted to know everything about me. I talked and talked, another strange feeling. I've always been the consummate listener, one of the reasons that a career as a journalist fit me like a sheath. It allowed me to exist in the background, the place where I was most comfortable.

As I spoke, Danny's lips curved into a beatific smile. I had the overwhelming sensation that he was drinking me like a glass of water.

"You know," he said, when I tapered to a close, "you're the most interesting person I've ever met."

The power of validation filled me.

Danny wooed me hard. He showered me with roses and figure-silhouetting evening dresses, squired me around chic restaurants and clubs where he showed me off to his friends in the movie business. He was a low-level director waiting for his big break. "You don't realize how beautiful you are," he'd say. "I really like that about you."

He wanted to read everything I'd written. I pulled out folders of magazine and newspaper clippings. As the lazy blades of the ceiling fan beat the air, we sat on my living room floor and he leafed through them, reading bits and pieces. He looked up at me, his eyes large. "You're a great writer. You're wasting your talent on this small shit."

"I know I can write," I said.

"No. You really don't understand how talented you are." He tossed the sheaf of paper onto the floor. "No one's seen the real you before, have they?"

His words wrapped around my throat so tightly I couldn't speak.

He was right.

I'd never had trouble attracting boyfriends, even marriage proposals. But I'd never been in love with any of them because no one seemed to care about who I really was, just who I was to them. No one had ever told me I was beautiful, bothered to read my work, reach inside and discover the hills and valleys of my inner landscape.

But Danny did. Right away he spotted the chasm of lovelessness within me that I didn't know was there. My alcoholic father would roar at me to get out of his sight and my mother laughed at me when I was upset. They ascribed to the rule that if you had something nice to say, don't say it. I had to constantly strive to gain their approval and avoid their attention at the same time. I didn't have to strive for anything with Danny. He accepted me for who I was. He even wanted more.

Our relationship quickly blossomed. Now, when I eyed couples sitting together, radiating the comfort of completeness without even touching, I triumphed that I had arrived in the Kingdom of Coupledome. I had finally made it to the summit where the world knows you are worthy because someone wants you.

One wintry weekend, Danny took me to a posh resort, tucking me up in towels on a chilled beach and fetching me drinks. In the evening, he placed a forest of candles around the bathroom, drew me a steaming, scented bath, then undressed me and led me into the tub, kneeling at the side to lather me with his mitt-sized hands. As warm water cascaded over my back, I felt Danny permeating my pores, filling my abyss. I was afraid to exhale for fear that I would breathe him out.

"You're the angel sent to me from heaven," I told him.

And I meant it.

When I met him, Danny was visiting a friend in Florida. He lived in California. After our romance kindled, he'd jump on a plane and be at my doorstep without warning. "I can't bear to be away from you," he said. After several months, I went to visit him.

We stopped to get gas one night after dinner at a high-end steakhouse with people in the movie business. When Danny slid back in the car, he had metamorphosed. His face was contorted with rage as he accused me of having sex with a waiter. “Someone saw you with him back by the bathrooms.”

I reeled at such a preposterous allegation. “What? Who told you that? They’re lying.”

He wouldn’t reveal his source. As he drove, he kept spewing. I wasn’t taking the relationship seriously. I wasn’t in love with him. I was flirting with every man at the table. I tried to defend myself, to point out the irrationality of his accusations, but he wouldn’t listen.

He was still raging when we arrived at his apartment. I had no idea what to do. I face-planted on the couch, turned myself into stone. Talking hadn’t helped. Maybe ignoring him would. I could hear him in the kitchen on the phone. “I’m with this scumbag. Come get me.”

He entered the living room and shoved me with his knee. “Get up.” I froze with fright. He kneed me again, harder. I got up. His phone chirped. As he answered, I strode to the bedroom and started packing my bag. I’d call a taxi to the airport, take the first flight anywhere. He entered the room. “What are you doing?”

“I’m going home.”

In one stride, he seized my wrist and flung me. I landed on the bed, luckily not on the dresser. I picked myself up warily, watching him. His chest heaved as his hands clenched, unclenched. Getting ready to use them or trying not to? I couldn’t tell.

“You don’t really want to give up what we’ve got, do you? What we’ve worked for?” His voice was pleading. I relaxed. “You can’t be that cold. We have a great thing going, but if you want to leave, I’ll let you.”

I grabbed my half-packed bag. He stood aside and let me pass, but he followed me down the hall, insisting over my protests that he'd drive me to the airport. I reached the foyer. He darted in front of me and blocked the front door. Then he pinned me against the wall. I struggled but I couldn't budge the rampart of his six-foot frame. "You can leave but you'll never find anyone who loves you like I do. This is it for you, you know that, sweetheart."

He kept talking in a volcano eruption of pleas. My head and heart spun in a muddy centrifuge. Then he scissored through the slurry to the bright, true filament at its center.

"You love me, don't you?"

I really didn't want to leave Danny. I just wanted the Danny who gave me my heroin-high, the Danny who adored me. I fell limp and as he pressed his lips to mine, the cracks inside me smoothed over. I couldn't let him go.

I kissed him back, and the ocean of the relationship closed over my head.

Several months later, I boxed up my life and moved to California to be with him. "I need you," he said.

Danny had come to rely on me, and truth was, I relished that role. I found the keys and papers he was always losing, accompanied him to meetings, wrote his emails. I took him to the emergency room when he had a stomach infection and crawled into the gurney with him because he was cold. I stanchied the blood when he picked at his earlobe and arm. "No one's ever been there for me like you. I'll never forget that," he said. "You're very kind."

It made me feel important to be needed. I'd never felt valued for who I was. My worth came from tangible achievements, school and work, and my sense of myself was confined to being a shy, brainy bookworm. But Danny had broken through my quilt of emotional numbness by recognizing my zany humor, my compassion, my articulate speech and more. He dizzied

me with the concept that I had intrinsic worth, hard as it was for me to accept.

In return, there wasn't anything I wouldn't do for Danny. Without his asking, I brought him an English muffin, toasted extra crispy, in bed every morning. I trimmed his toenails. The more I did for him, the more he asked of me, and he always knew exactly what I needed to hear as my reward. "I can't live without you," he'd say, clutching my thigh. If I balked at doing what he wanted, he also knew the barb to pierce my recalcitrance. "You're just like all the rest. If you loved me, you'd do it." Of course, I didn't want to be like all the rest. I wanted to be special. I'd never felt special before so I did whatever Danny asked.

After we moved in together, things that he'd previously talked about—hiring a maid so I'd have more time to write, getting married even—evaporated, as did the flow of money and even sex. He demanded more of me, making me run errands to fetch him things. His praise devolved into criticisms. "You're unsteady." "You're moody." "You're secretive." He counseled against keeping my old friends or making new ones. "They're jealous of you. You're way above them."

A maelstrom of doubt clouded my head. Was he right?

I put down the changes to the start of the hard work of domestic partnership. And we still had fun. We'd twin with our baseball caps turned backwards and sweatshirts tied around our waists and laugh ourselves giddy at stupid things—the way I bit into an apple or his clumsy fingers that looked like sausages. We went dancing and Danny twirled me to disco hits until my heart beat like shaken Tic-Tacs and his back stiffened into a ramrod. Sometimes we'd quietly recap our days over dinner like any other couple.

But those heady sparks occurred less and less. I came to live for them like an addict craved a fix.

Danny hoisted me onto his pedestal one last time. For my birthday, he insisted on holding a little party at a trendy restaurant, complete with his favorite ice cream cake, although all I wanted was to go out to dinner with him, alone. So, I made conversation with his friends as he sat on the other side of the tufted velvet booth, talking business with a couple hangers-on and ignoring me. Under the muted glow of a crystal chandelier, I tried to convince myself of the generosity of a gesture I didn't want, that I was proud and lucky to be with someone so in demand. But I saw the pedestal was hollow.

I knew there was something broken in Danny, just like there was something broken in me.

#

“Are you ready to order, ladies?” The over-cheery server is a welcome interruption. Now we can move on to the business of eating.

Lucy waves her off then studies me like I'm the Mona Lisa. To avoid her gaze, I glug half the glass of water.

“I know from what you've told me before, that it got a lot worse. Why didn't you just get up and go?”

“Why does anyone do what they do?” I bang the glass down on the table a little harder than I'd intended. I actually feel that I should get up and go now. I don't have to undergo this interrogation. A familiar brick wall springs up inside me.

She lowers her eyes and picks up a spoon, flipping it over and over. “Sorry. You don't have to tell me...”

I feel the bricks inside loosen and tumble. Telling the story aloud is forcing me to not only confront it but put it in order in my own mind. I have to keep going.

I fuel up on the rest of the water.

#

Danny's baseless jealousy worsened even though I was living with him and working in his office. According to Danny, I cheated on him with the plumber who came to fix the sink. I arranged a rendezvous with a lawyer I sat next to at a dinner party. I was flirting when I returned a boy's ball to a group of people at the park and a man stood to accept it.

One Sunday we went to the beach. Sitting under a brittle blue sky, he thumbed through his contacts, calling people to push scripts. I tried to read, but I couldn't focus with his loud, profane conversation, so I went for a walk, plowing the lacy surf as I dodged babies and balls. After a while, I turned back. When I arrived at our spot, all that remained were a pile of orange peels and my sandals. My eyes darted to the parking lot. Danny was pulling away in the car. I bolted to the road. He was gone.

A police car cruised by. I flagged down the cop, told him I'd had a fight with my boyfriend and asked if I could borrow his cell phone. He rolled his eyes as he handed it to me.

Danny was in a fury. "I looked for you everywhere. You were giving blowjobs along the beach!" He wouldn't listen to reason but said he'd come get me. I hung up and handed the phone back to the cop. I had no money, no clothes, no choice but to wait. Two women came up as I sat on the curb under a petticoat of shade. "Leave him," one said.

Three hours later, he still hadn't shown up. I borrowed a passerby's phone and called him. I told him the police had come by asking why my boyfriend hadn't picked me up. Danny was petrified of cops. He arrived within minutes. I got in the car, steeling myself for the tirade.

"How dare you call the cops on me! Of course, I was going to come get you. Is that all you think of our relationship?" He looked at my feet. "I left your sandals? I didn't mean to."

I accepted the hail of blame as the only way to pacify him. No, I shouldn't have been gone so long. Yes, I should have taken my phone. Yes, I should have made him talk to me if I was bored and lonely.

I knew I'd made a mistake to move in with Danny, but I couldn't crawl back to my parents, friends and admit I'd been wrong. I didn't know how to say that I'd made a bad decision. I always had my shit together. I was the A student, the reporter who always made deadline, the one editors relied on in a pinch because they knew I'd get the job done. All that had trapped me in the sticky cobweb of pride in the pursuit of perfection—and approval.

Besides, I had glimmers of hope that it would work.

After one of his rages, Danny unveiled a chink of self-awareness. “I know I'm not good at this relationship stuff. I'm fucked up.” He sat on the edge of the bed, twisting his hands inside one another, his voice fracturing under the ballast of revelation. “You don't know what it's like to be me. I have so much pain. It's like a black hole inside me.” He plunged his face in my shoulder and wrapped a lock of my hair around his fist, tugging on it as if it were a lifeline.

Danny told me his father would beat him then take him bleeding to the hospital for stitches. He'd go to school with bruises and tell the teacher he'd tripped when she asked who hit him. He suffered migraines from the blows to his head. He said he deserved to be beaten. “Back then that was how you disciplined kids, and I needed disciplining. My father had to hit me to keep me on the straight and narrow. If he hadn't, I would've been a juvenile delinquent. I've never told anyone this. When people see the real me, they always run away. You're the only one who hasn't run away.”

His pain severed my heart. I wanted to crawl inside him and smooth his ragged edges, fill his black pit with love. I had to rescue him, not abandon him. If he got help, we could be happy. He promised to see a therapist. “I'll do whatever you want me to. You're the only person who has cared enough to want to help me.”

I was buoyant on a sea of hope. I researched therapists and made appointments.

He never went.

The rages and jealousy escalated. The corkscrewing of my emotions and thinking tightened. I began to slide.

Thanksgiving Day. I made a turkey dinner and Danny invited his assistant Ned and, without asking me, a vapid friend of his who I couldn't stand, Sally. The meal was a lot of work and so was putting up with Sally, but afterward, I got my recompense. "How did I ever live without you?" Danny asked. He gave me a petal-soft kiss on the lips as we cuddled on the couch to watch a movie. Around nine, he had to take Ned home. Sally left, as well.

"Sex when I get back?" he whispered as he caressed my hair. "I love my beautiful green-eyed girl so much." He traced the outline of my lips with his forefinger.

I waited for Danny on the couch. I waited for him in bed. At ten-thirty, I called him.

"I'm on my way home. I'll be right there." He hung up.

I fell asleep and woke to an empty bed at twelve-thirty. I called him.

"I'm five blocks away," he said.

"What happened to you?"

"I went with Sally to meet Sean and his girlfriend for a drink."

An arrow quilled with anger, resentment, bitterness, envy shot through me as I hung up. I'd been the perfect girlfriend that day, and I still wasn't good enough. I splintered, right down the middle.

Danny called back. He didn't mean to hurt me. He loved me, needed me. Sobs strangled my throat. I couldn't form words and hung up. I spotted his Oxycontin on the dresser. Danny had been taking them for

years for back pain. Oblivion beckoned. I didn't want to feel anymore. I wanted to be unconscious, for him to find me and freak out. Maybe the prospect of losing me forever would scare him into treating me better.

I swallowed a pill. Nothing. After a while, I took another. My stomach somersaulted. My muscles shimmied. My teeth chattered. But I still felt rending pain.

I rammed one of his Vicodins down my throat. I started to float but I was wide-eyed. I took another and waited vainly for the blissful knockout. I finally swallowed two sleep aids and around five, crashed into a shattered sleep.

I woke to Danny kneeling at my side, puffy pouches under his eyes.

"You scared me. You were so upset on the phone. I'll never do that to you again, I promise. You know I'd never hurt you. You're so beautiful. I didn't realize what I was doing. I'm so sorry. It'll never happen again." He buried my cheeks in his square palms. "But you never asked me to come home. I was waiting for you to say 'Danny, come home.' I would've if you'd said that."

I didn't care what his excuse was. He was there. I flung my arms around him, burrowed my face in his neck and intoxicated myself with the smell of his skin.

As always, his apologies, as well as his worry that I'd taken so many pills, faded. By now I'd learned that the key to maintaining stability was avoiding triggering his rages. I weighed every move I made against the possibility that he'd explode. I started to scheme. I lied about running into friends when I arranged to meet them. I lied about traffic jams when I was late coming back from the supermarket where I went to call my friends and family without him hovering over me. When he railed at me, I turned into a quivering, crying blob of Jell-O because I'd found that was the only way to halt his fury.

I became someone I no longer recognized.

When my next birthday rolled around, I didn't even merit a happy birthday email. Danny picked a fight with me the day before and went AWOL as punishment. I spent the day researching on the internet what could be wrong with him. When he showed up the next day with a pair of turquoise earrings and a smile, I was no longer pretending.

"Danny, I can't ride this rollercoaster with you anymore. There's something seriously wrong." I tucked his hair behind his ears as we sat on the couch. "I think it's something called borderline personality disorder. It's not your fault. You can get therapy for it, mood stabilization drugs."

He nodded. "I don't want to be like this. You're right. I'll go to a therapist, I really will this time."

We held each other so long and tight that we had to let go to gasp for air.

When I woke with early morning's pale clarity seeping through the blinds, Danny was gone. I shuffled through the living room to the kitchen to make coffee. The floor was littered with torn scraps of paper. I picked up a few pieces. Photos of me.

Dread gripped my stomach. A scrawled note lay on the table. "Nice try at brainwashing me."

The front door flew open. Danny marched in.

"You cold evil bitch!" He towered over me, his face rabid. I shrank back. It was the worst I had ever seen him. "You've been poisoning my pills! I'm going to take them to my friend at the DEA to have them tested!"

The truth crashed me like a two-by-four upside the head. Danny was mentally ill and dangerous. On flimsy legs, I dashed into the bathroom and locked the door until I heard him leave. Then I made the best decision of my life.

I was throwing clothes into a bag when he came in. He'd done his usual one-eighty. "Where are you going?"

"To a hotel."

“Why?”

“Why? You accused me of attempted murder.”

“I didn’t mean that. I was just mad. You know how I say things when I’m mad. I take things out on you because you’re the one closest to me.”

“How can I stay with someone who thinks I would poison them?”

“I love you. You mean the world to me. I was just angry, that’s all. How can you leave me? Doesn’t our relationship mean anything to you? Don’t you want to help me?” He looked around. “Can you leave the couch and some kitchen stuff?”

I left with just my clothes and drove through a gale of sobs to a motel, where I curled up on a bed and cried myself into exhaustion.

Danny left me countless voicemails. “I just want to know you’re safe. You know I love you. I want you back. I’ll do whatever you want. I’ll go to a therapist. Think of all we’ve been through together. Think of our history.”

Maybe it was the flood of tears that cleared my vision, but I didn’t fall for his entreaties this time. It was like when I got glasses in fourth grade. Suddenly, I could see leaves on the trees instead of a fuzzy verdant mass. I saw that it wasn’t photos of me strewn in pieces on the floor, it was me. Danny had shredded my sense of self. I had to gather up the shards and take possession of myself.

He didn’t make it easy. He mounted a Napoleonic campaign to win me back, phoning, emailing, messaging. He used friends as intermediaries, sent flowers, ambushed me in front of my new apartment.

Not responding to him was the hardest thing I’d ever done. I couldn’t go back to him, but I still felt as if a huge chunk of me had been gouged out. I’d erupt into crying fits while driving, shopping, showering. I longed to see him, hear his voice. Everything reminded me of him—his brand of sneakers in a store window, someone wearing a wooden cross on a string like the one he wore. I felt guilty for leaving him. Who would take care

of him? I forced myself to remember the bad times. And I felt burdened with indelible shame that I'd allowed this to happen to me.

Danny's pursuit went on for months, then I realized I hadn't heard from him for a while. A massive weight lifted from me.

I spoke to Danny one last time. He called several months later at four in the morning, catching me fogged with sleep. "Do you miss me? I miss you," he whispered.

It was the same tactic he'd used when I'd tried to leave him the first time. He hadn't changed. He never would. But I had.

"I do miss you, a lot, but I will never go back to you."

#

I slump, drained.

"Wow" is all Lucy says.

I nod. That about sums it up.

"Hey." I swivel. Danny stands there, like an apparition smiling with warm eyes. "How are you?"

The restaurant bustle drops away. I stare at him, this man who was the earthquake of my life, who altered the geography of my being.

"Let's go." Lucy's voice sounds faint, as if she's down a tunnel, but I note the urgency in her tone. Now she knows the whole story, it's she who has turned apprehensive.

But I'm not. I feel nothing. To my own amazement, I am enveloped in calm. I know then Danny was just something that happened to me. That's all. And it's over. The telling of my story exorcised the ghost of it. I stayed with him out of fear. Now I can stay in this restaurant out of strength. I'm not going to let him control my life any longer.

The server swishes over. "Ready to order?"

I turn to her. "Yes. Yes, I am."

Omari Hunter

Ready to Say Goodbye

Green and beautiful and freshly cut
soft as a pillow when I'm touched.

A yellow circle in the sky
ready to say goodbye
fresh meat hits the grill hard
a crowd of people can't be far.

Walking in and eager to eat
under the grill I take a peek.
Two blue shirts walk up in a pair
to see a white ball thrown in the air.
The Spectator yells *Welcome All*
while the umpires yell PLAY BALL!!!

Contributors

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K.S. Baron is from the Finger Lakes Region of Upstate NY and traveled to the maple-filled state of Vermont to earn her Bachelor of Science in Professional Writing. Like her hometown, she is small, but she loves to explore and finds strength in writing, friendship, and cats.

Lisa Lynn Biggar received her MFA in Fiction from Vermont College and is currently marketing a short story cycle set on the eastern shore of Maryland. Her short fiction has appeared in numerous literary journals, including *Main Street Rag*, *Bluestem Magazine*, *The Minnesota Review*, *Kentucky Review*, *The Delmarva Review* and *Superstition Review*. She's the fiction editor for *Little Patuxent Review* and co-owns and operates a cut flower farm on the eastern shore of Maryland with her husband and three cats. Find her at writinglisa.com; twitter.com/lislafleur

Ian Canon is a Metis writer living in Saskatchewan. He was mentored by Scotiabank Giller Prize-Winning author, Sean Michaels. He is the author of the novel *It's A Long Way Down* (2018) and the poetry collection *Before Oblivion* (2017). His stories have been featured in *Montréal Writes*, *The Sunlight Press*, *The Spadina Literary Review*, *Found Polaroids*, *The Junction*, *Public Salon*, *The Creative Cafe*, and he's been profiled for *Vue*. He is the fiction editor for *The Fieldstone Review*, regularly presents workshops on writing with the Saskatoon Public Library, and hosts a podcast with the MFA in Writing program at the University of Saskatchewan.

Stephanie Daich works in corrections and has the privilege of observing many types of people. She uses writing and poetry to capture the rich experiences of living. Examples of magazines and books you will find her work in are *Making Connections*, *Youth Imaginations*, *Chicken Noodle Soup for the Soul: Kindness Matters* (publish date set for 5/2022), and others.

Thomas Elson's stories appear, or are forthcoming, in numerous venues, including *Ellipsis*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Bull*, *Cabinet of Heed*, *Flash Frontier*, *Ginosko*, *Short Édition*, *Litro*, *Journal of Expressive Writing*, *Dead Mule School*, *Selkie*, *New Ulster*, *Lampeter*, and *Adelaide*. He divides his time between Northern California and Western Kansas.

Sophia Futrell (she/they) is a Latine high school senior from Arlington, Virginia, and the senior editor of her school's literary magazine. She enjoys writing and reading both poetry and prose: among their favorite authors are Neil Gaiman, Ocean Vuong, and Elizabeth Acevedo.

Avital Gad-Cykmán is the author of *Light Reflection Over Blues* <http://ravennapress.com/books/light-reflection-over-blues/> and of *Life In, Life Out* (Matter Press). She is the winner of Margaret Atwood Studies Magazine Prize and The Hawthorne Citation Short Story Contest, twice a finalist for the Iowa Fiction Award and a six-time nominee for the Pushcart. Her stories have appeared in *The Dr. Eckleburg Review*, *Iron Horse*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Ambit*, *McSweeney's Quarterly* and *Glimmer Train*, and anthologized in W.W. Norton's *Flash Fiction International* anthology, *Best Short Fictions* and elsewhere. Her PhD in English Literature focuses on minorities, gender and trauma. She grew up in Israel and lives in Brazil.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in *Penumbra*, *Poetry Salzburg Review* and *Hollins Critic*. Latest books, "Leaves On Pages" and "Memory Outside The Head" are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in *Lana Turner* and *Held*.

Christina Hoag is the author of novels *Law of the Jungle* (Better than Starbucks Press), *Girl on the Brink* and *Skin of Tattoos* (both from Onward Press). Her short stories and essays have appeared in literary reviews including *Lunch Ticket*, *Toasted Cheese* and *Shooter*, and have won several awards.

Maggie Nerz Iribarne is 52, living her writing dream in a yellow house in Syracuse, New York. She writes about teenagers, witches, the very old, bats, cats, priests/nuns, cleaning ladies, runaways, struggling teachers, and neighborhood ghosts, among many other things. She keeps a portfolio of her published work at <https://www.maggienerziribarne.com>

Valerie Hunter teaches high school English and has an MFA in Writing for Children and Young Adults from Vermont College of Fine Arts. Her poetry has appeared in publications including *Wizards in Space*, *Room Magazine*, *Other Voices*, *Deep Overstock*, and *Edison Literary Review*.

Christopher Johnson is Assistant Professor of Visual Art and Director of the Visual Art Program. Prof. Johnson, a resident of South Georgia for most of his life, is a visual artist that typically works in the mediums of wood carving, printmaking, painting, drawing, and sculpture. In 2008 Prof. Johnson received his Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in Studio Art from Clemson University in Clemson, SC with a focus in printmaking and a minor in ceramics. He later received his Masters of Fine Arts degree in Studio Art from the University of South Carolina in Columbia, SC in 2011 with a focus in printmaking and a minor in drawing. Prof. Johnson developed a love for teaching artistic process and technique during his time as a graduate teaching assistant and continued to teach as an adjunct after graduating. In 2013 Prof. Johnson became an Assistant Professor of Visual Art and Director of the Visual Art Program at Andrew College where he has begun to grow the visual art department into a regionally-significant program.

Marek Kulig is a Polish-born writer who immigrated to the U.S. in 1992. A co-founder of the Network of Eastern European Writers, his poems and translations were published or are about to be published in 86 Logic, the Under Review, Seneca Review, Cagibi, National Translation Month and elsewhere.

Raimondo Rossi, also known as Ray Morrison, is an Italian photographer and stylist, living between Italy and LA. After graduating with a mathematics degree, he shifted his work to photography, specifically the emotions of the models to tell their stories. See his project *Le Note Della Moda*-The Emotions of Fashion- on YouTube.

Lucy Zhang writes, codes and watches anime. Her work has appeared in American Literary Review, The Rupture, The Offing and elsewhere. Her chapbook HOLLOWED is forthcoming from Thirty West Publishing, and her micro-chapbook ABSORPTION is forthcoming from Harbor Review in 2022. Find her at <https://kowaretasekai.wordpress.com/> or on Twitter @Dango_Ramen.