

ADANNA
LITERARY JOURNAL

Founder/Editor
CHRISTINE REDMAN-WALDEYER

Adanna accepts poetry, fiction, essays, and reviews. Please send a proposal for reviews. All submissions are electronically accepted in one file, preferably a word document file with a cover letter and a three to four-line bio.

Visit our website for further details: www.adannajournal.blogspot.com

Adanna Literary Journal
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Credits

Front Cover Artist: Francesca Leader

Front Cover Title: 女食 (*joshoku*)

Artist Statement

女食 (*joshoku*), 28" x 60": mixed-media collage constructed primarily of magazine clippings and packing tape on a foundation of four repurposed movie posters. The title of this piece is a play on words using Japanese kanji which, when phonetically pronounced, sound identical to a word meaning "lust for women" or "feminine charms" (女色), but when read visually employs kanji that clearly represent the word "woman" and the word "meal." This piece was inspired by the Japanese practice of *nyotai-mori* (女体盛り), which involves serving sushi on the body of a naked woman at all-male parties. My intent with this piece was to illuminate the fundamentally misogynistic nature of *nyotai-mori*, which requires a woman to lie still and silent, regardless of what may be said about her, or done to her, by the men dining off of her exposed flesh.

— *Francesca Leader, Cover Artist*

Adanna's Mission Statement

Adanna, a name of Nigerian origin, pronounced a-DAN-a, is defined as “her father’s daughter.” I chose to name this literary journal *Adanna* because women over the centuries have been defined by men in politics, through marriage, and most importantly, by the men who fathered them. In college, I was inspired by women such as Anne Hutchinson who had the opportunity to study under her father. Today women are still bound by complex roles in society, often needing to wear more than one hat or sacrifice one role so another may flourish. While this journal is dedicated to women, it is not exclusive, and it welcomes our counterparts and their thoughts about women today. I only ask that your submissions reflect women’s issues or topics, celebrate womanhood, or shout out in passion.

— *Christine Redman-Waldeyer, Founder*

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Biographical Notes

Nickie Albert

A Man Can Do That

Put on sneakers, jeans,
a soft cotton t-shirt,
lock the door
and walk out aimless
into the hot night.
A man can wander
into the night
walking miles, hours
alone.
Into the darkness
punctuated
by streetlights
by headlights.
Walks without worry.
Walks without purpose.
Without keys between fingers,
without fear.
Confident, oblivious
of needing that fear
for comfort or shield.
A man can walk
without provocation
without catcall
or comment.
Paved or dirt
a man has purchase
over the road.
A man owns the road.
A man owns the night.

Nickie Albert

Other Sidewalks

Maybe you're walking on Main Street in Montpelier, past the spot
where I threw the ring. Weeds sprout up through the tarnished band.
Some crevice in the spotless sidewalk holds our vows.

New York opened to me, hid me deep in canyoned streets
where I'm free from the shadow of you. Free from my heart
rushing up through my mouth. Eight million people protect me
from having to forgive you.

Emma Andreini

Cheese Grater

Six in the morning at SFO was a busy time. People brushed past as Molly and I said our first tearful goodbye. Our friendship never involved any sort of physical affection; throughout my life she had felt like a little sister. We argued, we laughed, we spent nearly every minute together. She handed me a handmade card and asked me to open it on the plane. When I had said goodbye finally and made my way through the terminal and onto the airplane, I opened it. She wished me well, promising she was only a phone call away, and had drawn a cheese grater writing *“Next time I see you, I’ll finally get you one of these.”*

A year before our somber goodbye Molly stood in my kitchen as I sat at the island scrolling through my phone, picking the perfect song to put next on the queue. I’d occasionally glance up at her as she grated a large block of cheddar cheese with a microplane. It was designed for zesting a lemon or grating garlic not a 2-pound block of hard cheese. Molly would dramatically explain her arm felt like it would fall and I encouraged her to keep going through my laughs. Cooking together was something we often did but almost everything we made came from a Betty Crocker box. While my parents were away, we took full advantage of the kitchen to make a mac and cheese recipe I had found on the internet. Through Molly’s giggles and theatrical complaints, she said, *“Your next birthday, I’m buying you a cheese grater.”*

Life in Boston was different and isolating. I’d sit on the sofa in my apartment for hours trying to find some courage to get off of it and try and meet people. It always seemed to fail and soon my phone was up to my ear, listening to the rejected rings on the other side. On the rare occasion, she would answer—our conversations were brief and shortly followed with a poor excuse as to why she had to go. Molly had moved to Oregon and was flourishing. She had joined a sorority and had made what seemed like a million friends. I had encouraged her to join when she first moved and struggled to make friends. Now I sat alone on a Friday night eating my words.

I didn’t make a friend until I got locked out of my dorm room and asked the boy at the front desk to let me in. I shared with him that I was looking for a friend and he was quick to offer himself up as a candidate. Our friendship was quick to flower into something much more. The absence of Molly felt less heartbreaking. I was no longer

sitting alone on Friday nights wondering if Molly would ever call and wishing we were sitting in my living room re-watching Practical Magic for the millionth time. He and I would cook dinner, drink wine, and talk all night long. He invited me to his parent's house for the weekend during the first month of us officially being a couple. When his parents said goodnight, he and I went into the kitchen to make popcorn to go with our movie. He asked me to grab a bowl and pointed to a drawer where I could find one. The drawer was a cluttered mess full of miscellaneous kitchen items. Worn out plastic Tupperware, shiny metal mixing bowls, and in the back was a small cheese grater. I grabbed it and pulled it out.

"I've always wanted a cheese grater," I told him. He smiled and replied, "Maybe I will get you one for your birthday."

I had heard that before. My birthday was in April; it was only November.

When my 23rd birthday came I was home; COVID was at its peak and I hadn't seen anyone in what felt like years. My mom put together one of those weird COVID birthday parades. Cars filled with family and friends would inch down my street honking and cheering, which to some was sweet, but for me it made me want to run inside and bury my head into my pillow. As cars of my high school friends drove by, I anxiously waited for Molly. We hadn't spoken in weeks, but I hoped she'd still come by and just say hello. I waited for her bright red truck but the last car to go down was her mom's olive-green Subaru. My hopes were high they'd be together but soon let down when only her mom was in the driver's seat shouting "Happy Birthday!" She informed me Molly had gone to Oregon for her sorority sister's birthday. After this humiliating parade, I sat on FaceTime with my boyfriend who had sent me a box of presents. He mentioned constantly that there was one gift he couldn't wait for me to open. I opened the rectangular box revealing a polished, metal cheese grater.

Christine Arroyo

Amman

The two men lift the dead goat from the taxi's trunk. As they walk away they make eye contact with me, gesturing towards the taxi's open door.

Once inside, I nod hello to the driver, pointing toward the looping curves and dots of the Arabic word in my travel book. "I'd like to go here," I say.

The thickly bearded driver nods after a glance back at what I'm showing him.

"Ajloun forest reserve?" I emphasize, thinking he hasn't understood. The loneliness I feel earthquakes my words and my voice drops out before I can finish the sentence. I clear my throat, searching for the confidence I'm still learning to inhabit, counting down the hours until my friends arrive from Syria.

The driver nods, finding certainty for the two of us, and starts the engine. The heat somersaults in through the taxi's open windows. Men in long kurtas walk toward a mosque where the booming voice of the Imam recites the midday prayer. I notice only one woman, fully covered, walking with a basket of vegetables in hand. She looks out from the slits in her abaya, making eye contact with me as I watch her from within the taxi. Unblinking, I wonder what she would say to me if we could speak – two women alone on these streets filled with men. She looks away just as a swirl of smoke from a sidewalk grill wafts in through the open window. The sharp mustiness from the grilling meat takes me back to the barbecue.

"Don't you want to come inside?" he asked, the alligator on his Lacoste shirt practically winking at me. "Not really," I wanted to say but instead I said, 'sure.' Before long I was in his room like a Houdini act – me the nice assistant who would soon be cut in half.

I blink into the desert heat as the sharp pinging of Arabic words race against my ear drum. Indecipherable symbols like the words Lacoste boy whispered in my ear. It takes me a minute before I realize where this swirl of sounds is coming from. The taxi driver is facing me even as the car wheels crawl forward, stuck in the cacophony of life on Amman's busy streets. My smile becomes wide-eyed confusion, lost in the somersaulting curves. The driver speaks again. This time louder, more forcefully. My heartbeat skitters in panicked flips.

Lacoste boy kissed my neck. He shoved his hands up the front of my shirt, squeezing my nipples even as I squirmed away. His fists clenched me tight against him, “I like it – you playing hard to get.”

“No, no, I don’t want this,” I tried to say but the words wouldn’t come out.

Panicked heat rushes over me. “Where are we going?” I say to the taxi driver because back then I couldn’t find the words to ask, “No! Stop!” Even as Lacoste boy reached his hands down my pants.

The taxi driver’s looping curves and punctuated dots are now louder, more frustrated. He gestures toward the meter and back to me and I have no idea what any of it means. I hold up money. He shakes his head from side to side and says something else. We are two people shouting into a void. The desert heat is suffocating, reaching inside me, prying at my skin, tugging at the buttons on my shirt, yanking at the zipper on my pants, crawling up and over me. I scream, “STOP!” and pull at the locked car door just like I wanted to yank at the locked bedroom door. My fists pound on the taxi window for someone outside to hear.

The taxi driver’s words become softer, placating me just like how Lacoste boy whispered in my ear. The doors simultaneously unlock, and I yank the car door open, ready to fall onto the moving ground, only to discover the taxi driver has stopped the car. He watches me through the passenger window as I tumble out tangled in the strings of my backpack, travel book askew, nearly strangled by the money wallet hanging from my neck. The driver’s eyes blink with concern.

My face is splotchy red from heat and shame. I throw a fistful of bills and coins in the open taxi window before turning to find my way back on my own.

Giuliana Barletta

Payday

“Fifty dollars for every ten pounds you lose.” My grandmother has said this line after almost every New Year’s toast for the last five years. I always smile and nod my head. I refused to continue fighting with her after the third time. Instead, I make promises to eat better, work out more, and set a goal to fit into my size ten jeans. My family won’t let me throw out. Sometimes I find myself searching the pockets for a time when I could seamlessly wiggle them up past my thighs. I only find denim that no longer can withstand the width of my hips, and then spend a week skipping lunch in hopes payday will come soon enough.

My fluctuating weight has been a very important subject for my family since I was seven. It started around the time I received First Communion. My mother bought me a saintly white dress, made of very unflattering material and decked with sparkling embellishments. The dress was snug a week after, and I was never able to wear it again. It still hangs like a distant memory at the end of my mother’s closet. After that, I started the cycle of continuously dropping 10-15 pounds and gaining it back just as quickly. There has never been a Sunday dinner where my grandmother didn’t portion my plate while making sure my heavysset brother was well fed. She’d have conversations and go off on tangents about how she made my mother work out every day after school. Part of me believed my mother would say something or cut her off. Now I’m realizing she was me; she took the weekly reviews just like I did. I still do.

It’s never been easy being the fat girl that came from generations of skinny girls. It wasn’t easy when my prom dress didn’t fit and they sent it back. It wasn’t fun watching my friends get asked on dates and go to dances while I stayed home nursing my loneliness with a sleeve of cookies. It’s not easy feeling the sickening guilt of them later. I pretend it doesn’t bother me when men fetishize my body, calling me fat but immediately reconciling that comment with telling me I’m hot because I’m fat. It isn’t easy believing love was not meant for this body. And it’ll never be easy going shopping, buying clothes I hope will look good on my body and hearing from my mother that I shouldn’t wear a crop top. I grew up thinking showing a sliver of my skin on my stomach was illegal.

The summers are the worse part of the year to this day. Stretching a bathing suit over my body or trying to pull my shorts down

enough to make sure my legs don't rub together. Summer attire was not made for my body, and every time I sweat in my skinny jeans I'm reminded of how envious I am of sizes smaller than me. I was often very partial to sundresses, even the ones on the shorter side. As someone who doesn't usually dress very femininely, wearing frilly sundresses often made me feel pretty and sexy. My grandmother did not think the same. I still remember the day; I was going on a date with a guy I try not to mention anymore and decided to wear a floral, yellow sundress. I can still picture the scene of my grandma sitting in her beach chair calling me "disgusting" for having my thighs shine in the sun. I remember running away, crying, hearing her scream after me as I walked off. I even remember taking off the sundress before the date, holding onto the small victory my grandma didn't know she had won.

All of my friends were skinny, especially in high school. My best friend was a blonde, size-two athlete. And in all honesty, as much as I hate to admit it, she was a really good friend. In my experience, everyone wants to hate the size-two perfect girl, but she was too nice to hate. We had a lot of good memories for the first three years, but senior year she started getting boyfriends and asked out on dates. My hopefully romantic heart was shattered with envy. In my head, I found it unfair. I was the one who had seen all the movies and read all the books. I knew the roadmap for love, yet no one wanted me. And by being her best friend, I got to hear about all of her boy troubles and insecurities in her relationships. I'd listen to her while imagining what my face would look like on her body. I'd be the one who could shop anywhere, have the date for prom, and receive happily ever after. Instead, I watched her go to prom, kiss her date, and slow dance to whatever high school cliché slow dance track was playing. I had gotten so used to the sidelines I never tried to fight my way to the front. It would result in a lot of shoving to get through anyway, especially as a size 14 in high school. And when this friend and I stopped talking, I didn't feel like I'd lost much—just another person who used me as their comparison.

Right on my 18th birthday, I downloaded Tinder. I genuinely believed I would find love on an app with a flame as the logo. I allowed men to fetishize my body, my fat body. Most guys started their messages with "wanna fuck" or "did you just fall in from heaven? I heard a loud thud in my room." I played along—played nice—as men continuously asked for pictures of my body. For years I allowed myself to be treated like a sex object only accessible through a phone screen. I had confused that with confidence for a very long time, and only realized it was my

thirst for attention crawling up my throat to the surface. There was a “skinny” girl inside of me; I just had to bring her out. Most of the men I talked with didn’t get to know my favorite book or movie. They didn’t take me to dinner or a movie or on a walk. I entered college hopeful of love, hopeful someone would look at me and understand me immediately. I wanted someone to think I was pretty, even though I didn’t believe it myself. I grew up being told I could always look better. I had a beautiful face but an unfortunate body to match.

Shopping with my mother and grandmother was always a test. If I didn’t buy something they liked, then I was disrespecting them and the whole family. Showing my body in a certain way would bring only shame, and so I was expected to dress like an established adult when I was only a teenager. Special occasion shopping was always the worst. There have been times when I left the store crying, wanting to punch the reflection of myself in a horribly lit dressing room. Whoever invented the formatting of a dressing room was definitely skinny because the lighting in a Macy’s dressing room can only flatter a select few body types. I hated buying clothes at department stores while people I knew went to actual clothing stores. Buying a dress for a party at a store where you can buy a couch never felt fair. I wanted to look like the models in clothing advertisements and imagine myself in that outfit. Then I remember wearing a low-cut shirt can border on pornographic if I were to go down the stairs too quickly. Passing by Victoria’s Secret always felt like passing by a club I wasn’t old enough to get into. Their bras never fit me, and for most of my life, I bought bras that had cups as big as my head and straps that almost always show under any summer shirt. For a long time, I never wanted to get naked in front of anyone for fear of them seeing the industrial bras I wore. In my mind, they weren’t for view; one day there’d be separate bras for feeling sexy for a chest like mine. I vowed for a long time no one but me would ever see what was underneath.

I never suspected a man would like me for me, but then I fell in love. I waited 20 years for the prince to come around and sweep me away. It wasn’t that he never commented on my looks, it was that he mentioned other things first. The way I make him laugh or the way my cheeks blush when I see him coming towards me. Of course, he never withheld comments about telling me how beautiful or sexy I am. After over a year of dating, I still have a hard time believing he isn’t daydreaming about me knocking off 40 pounds. But he isn’t. He continuously shouts about how he likes me just the way I am just like

Mr. Darcy would. He makes me feel like the main character. Like I'm beautiful and allowed to have stretch marks. He makes me feel like I can have a second helping of dinner or dessert. He marvels at my stretch marks as if they were a work of Picasso's. He loves me like he's been a man starved of love for centuries. Yet, I still have trouble when it comes to wearing the right clothes or convincing myself I feel sexy. I still sometimes look away from him when we're in bed or hide in his neck when I'm feeling self-conscious. He doesn't push me to be comfortable with my body, but he tries. He will point out everything perfect about me until my cheeks are absolutely aflame. He gives me love I never knew existed for a body like mine.

Love has helped me understand it is not only bodies like mine suffering from these insecurities. The way somebody feels as a size 0 is just as valid as the way someone feels as a size 30. No one's flaws or insecurities should be diminished based on what size they are. They are emotions and they are valid and everyone deserves to feel frustrated. I grew up wishing I was a size 2 because then I'd be satisfied, but I've learned my problems in my size 16 body would be just as valid and visible in a size 2 body. There are days now when I look in the mirror and compliment myself, admiring how my butt looks in a pair of jeans or how a top compliments my boobs really well. I give myself more love each day as I realize diminishing all of the beautiful things about me doesn't make any of the insecurities go away. As I give my body more and more love and appreciation each day, I begin to understand the roadmap to healing and how I might've been standing in my own way this whole time.

Susan Naese Barreto

Hard boiled

The sun was high in the sky. Higher than she would have liked, given that she was just finishing up with the pullets. The field work had to move forward, yet it waited. Even his dad from the old country cursed him in some angry foreign tongue she didn't understand when the corn wasn't in. He would only nod his head. The Farmall that her father bought them last year sat out waiting for its purpose to be revealed.

The children hopped and shrieked around the old shed out by the red barn, as Mabel took solace in the low murmur of the disgruntled hens – nearly fifty in all. She sighed loudly enough for only the hens to appreciate as the flock jockeyed for position at her feet – sometimes Jerry, Myrna, Shirley and John seemed the same way around the dinner table.

“Mornin’ Ma!” Ferd chirped, red-eyed and disheveled from the night before. He wanted some eggs and bacon for breakfast, the later was in short supply after butchering the hogs last fall. Alcohol remained on hand, as if he had figured out how to turn water into whiskey.

Mabel tried to muster a smile as the kids all swooped in around him ready for a ride on his back. Myrna was the most precocious, the oldest and yet the lightest in addition to being his favorite. He scooped her up and her dress flipped up above her waist as she straddled his shoulders.

“Ah, come on, pa. Myrna always gets a piggy-ride first!” whined the youngest, John, who kicked up a clod of dirt in protest.

“I’m the oldest that’s why ya gotta wait your turn,” she retorted from her queenly perch.

His turn probably wouldn’t come until Pa was done in the field around four or five, Mabel thought as she remembered being the youngest too only of 12, which had to be worse than the youngest of five – even in these times.

Ferd smiled as he marveled at the little brood’s home-made sand/dirt box. He had slapped it together last week from some scrap wood from Mabel’s Pa. “Hun, why don’t ya fry me up some eggs and I’ll be in tha house in a few. That buckin’ bronco needs to bounce!” He began to hop around to Myrna’s delight. She hung on tightly around his chin and unlike other mornings he didn’t seem to mind as her fingernails seemed to dig in.

Mabel trudged to the house and kickin' off her work boots at the front door put on her house shoes. Washin' up at the kitchen, she spied Ferd pick up Emma as he continued to run around the sand pile that was littered with old rusty square Saltine cans and broken wood scraps. Old feed sack bags that held the baby dolls sometimes, flapped in the light morning breeze.

At least it was quiet in the kitchen. She would relish this moment. She mumbled under her breath a prayer asking for God to provide enough for this day – sort of like the Lord's Prayer only modified for special emphasis. Two eggs would do and they sizzled in the freshly made butter that came from the neighbors – the Walkers – who were a childless couple that seemed to take pity on Mabel and her brood. She contemplated a possible farm sale in the fall and what it would do to Ferd.

“Breakfast's nearly ready dear!” she yelled out the window as Shirley squealed in delight for her turn. Ferd kicked off his boots upon entry still smelling of sweet whiskey, but truly rested and happy. Mabel determined to not be sour about the day's prospects watched him swallow quickly as the kids squealed outside.

“Say, hun...,” Ferd gulped mid-sentence. “I'll get to the field now that it's dry but uh I thought I would head up to Joliet to deliver those pickled eggs ya done last week for old man Stumpy's.”

“Ya, but you know the corn needs to be in soon. I'm just worried that if we don't pay our full bank note this year that'll be it...” she leaned against the stove and sighed pitifully with the last of her morning energy.

“Oh Mabel, not this again...,” he groaned and got up to pat her shoulder. “Ya gotta trust me it'll work out and if it doesn't least-wise we've got the chickens. They'll make it good. They purt-near always do.” She quietly dabbed her eyes with an old church hankie from her pocket.

“Wait your not?? Uh, you know...”

“Good grief Ferd, no!” He held her tight as she waved him away with the hankie.

He snickered. “That's not to say we can't have the Walkers mind the kid's today and me and you deliver those eggs. I remember how you used to like a beer every now and then,” he gave a sly smile. “I'll talk to the old man before I hit the West field.”

He waited. Mabel was quiet and then she waved him on with a dish towel, “Okay, “I'll go.”

What could she say that would make things work out? The power of prayer seemed to be a fleeting dream only coming to life on Sunday mornings. By afternoon the story was the same. More chores, lower crop prices and more bad weather and problems a plenty.

“Myrna, get in here!” she shrieked out the kitchen window.

“Okay mama!” answered a dutiful little girl with smudges of dirt on her face where rouge would have been if she was ten years older. She skipped in her tattered blue dress, wiping her face with her hands at the kitchen door.

“Now I need you to clean up at the sink and when ya come back I’ll tell you what you will need to do for me today.”

The instructions were simple. Mind Walkers if they come over. Feed the other kids bread and apple butter from the cellar for dinner. Be in bed by 8:00pm. Lunch would be fried sausage with potatoes. The ice box would need to be restocked with ice from up town on Monday, so there was no use letting the milk from Walkers go to waste either. Who knew, maybe they would bring some sweets home.

Ferd was back at the shed, dusty and tired but joyful as ever. Mabel took down the wash from the line and moved quickly to draw a bath for him and then take a dip herself. The kids could wait ‘til Sunday morning. His willingness to let her tag along suggested that the red-head she suspected he had in Midway City was a phantom of her imagination.

Mabel took comfort in Myrna who could be depended on to share the latest news with the other kids. They knew to mind her orders or pay the consequences at dinner time with one less serving. By the time the old Ford Model A had pulled out of the front yard loaded with pickled eggs, everyone had been holding their breath and on their best behavior in case Ma would change her mind and stay. They all waved.

“Now what?” Asked Jerry two years younger, tugging on Myrna’s sleeve. “Go play, I suspect Walkers may check on us any minute fer sure.”

She waited and waited on the front porch. She paced stick in hand just to make sure the rest would listen. “John-Boy, you go check for eggs out in the pen with Shirley. Make sure you shut up the pen behind you this time,” Myrna pointed out the work with her stick like a little general. “Emma, do you think you can check the waterers?”

“Yeah, I did it for Ma before.”

“Ok. Then that leaves you Jerry. You get the straw in the chicken shed roosts for evening.”

He nodded his head, and all seemed to be a well-oiled machine as she heard Grandpa Hermann say once.

She took up her perch again and looked to the West for Walkers coming with candy or butter or maybe even more fresh milk if they were lucky. Ma and Pa wouldn't be back before dark and if they didn't take their baths, no one would be the wiser.

Then came the shrieks. "Emma it's all your fault, jes look!" wailed Shirley at the top of her lungs. Myrna stood up and chickens were running every which way. Everyone ran making their own ruckus, but Myrna held back the tears she wanted to cry in anticipation for the whoopin' she would get at the hands of mama if any of the chickens were to be lost.

"Jerry, fire up the tractor. We need speed!"

Dumbfounded, he ran to the machine shed and started cranking. The Farmall sputtered as if it was telling them, *No don't go, no don't go*. The 10 or so hens that were at the head of the pack only moved faster upon hearing the motor. Jerry hooked up the tractor to an old cart that Pa used sometimes to haul feed or seed bags.

Myrna took the wheel and let the clutch go. Jerry hung on for dear life as he jumped clumsily into the cart. It was bumpy, but Pa never seemed to mind so they wouldn't either although she clung to the steering wheel to ensure she landed back in the seat after each rise.

The red speed demon continued to bounce over the back path and toward a ravine. Before Myrna could say whoa, the chickens had reversed course. She jerked the wheel and felt the lower half of her eight-year-old body lose control. She lost her death grip on the wheel and closed her eyes as the ground appeared to get closer and closer.

She heard Jerry call her name and squeal in terror from his perch behind her in the cart.

The next thing she knew, Mr. Walker was cradling her in his arms and put her in the backseat of the car. She couldn't feel her left hand and her once blue dress was a deep red, just like the tractor. "Oh hun, I'll get you to Dr. Darby, in a jiff. Now Jerry you be an upright young man and clean up on in the house with the others and Mrs. Walker will get your dinners."

"It wasn't my fault, she wanted me to start it up," Jerry cried. He was reluctant to leave Myrna's side and he noticed the throbbing pain in his own ankle as he started to run to the house. The tractor was stuck in the ravine and Mr. Walker had shut it off as he saw the accident as he

turned into the driveway. The chickens seemed to be way off in the distance, oblivious to the pain they had caused.

It is a story that Myrna would carry with her throughout her life, especially whenever anybody asked about her missing fingers. She used to say her ma chopped 'em off when she didn't do her chores. She would laugh at the other kid's confusion. Ma and Pa weren't too angry at her and in fact Ma kept her inside to help with the wash and such instead of tending to outside chores.

Ma never went to Joliet with Pa again and in fact they ate every one of the ornery old hens they could wrangle back into the coop that night or so the story goes.

Pa sold the tractor that autumn, after the third crop hay was in from the North field. He decided selling eggs next year to the local A&P was a better option. That winter they lost the farm and were forced to rent an old drafty farmhouse out on Route 5. Walkers helped them move and that was the last the family saw of them.

Sure, there was another batch of hens to feed, but none of their eggs were to be hardboiled again no matter how hungry anyone would be.

Norma Ketzis Bernstock

Is House Cleaning a Hostile Act?

My mother, a reader not a writer, only had time
for Readers' Digest Condensed Books,
cleaned with a vengeance.
brow scrunched, lips pursed,
red-faced she attacked,
purged memories of Europe's death camps,
swiped at cornered crumbs,
the difficult husband, hell-bent kids.

My sister loves order.
Collectible cups on a shelf
spaced two centimeters apart.
Her house is spotless, neat to a fault.
Beds made right after awakening
dare anyone to disturb the drape of the duvet.

My husband who never cleaned
always had time for himself.

To me he'd say—
 Ignore the dust.
He'd say—
 Let the dishes be.
He'd say—
 Don't bother with the beds.

I'd rage
then fling
his words
upon growing mounds of dirt.

Norma Ketzis Bernstock

Her Lover's Wife

She's envious
of her lover's wife
who shares a bed with him
whose body touches his
beneath the quilt
brushing backs
rubbing elbows, knees.

She's envious
of her lover's wife
who is the first
he sees in morning sun,
the last at night.

*Who dreams
of daggers
slipping*

Who sees him
shower and shave
pull on his slacks
straighten his tie
fill up his pockets
and empty them out

*Whose hollow
dreams
echo in her head*

She's envious
of her lover's wife
who knows
the books he reads
the music that soothes
and the songs he sings

*Who dreams
of drum beats
louder than
her heart*

She's envious

of this woman
who is his wife
who is his wife

she is still his wife.

Ann Boaden

December Moth

She has had the headache for five days now, and the doctor can't see her until next week.

Call ER if the pain is unbearable, the receptionist said. She sounded as if unbearable pain were a term she'd memorized, not a reality she'd faced. As Mary Alice had learned to call the professors "faculty" and not all of them "Doctor."

Mary Alice said, "Thank you very much" to the receptionist, who'd already hung up.

Strange, she thought, that the headaches should start now. She hadn't had them when she was working.

Headaches can be brought on by stress, she read. Facing new situations, encountering challenges you're not prepared for. But she'd prepared for retirement. She'd read articles. *Stay Active*, they said, *Do Not Vegetate*, because vegetating kills brain cells and brings on dementia. The articles offered Strategies on How Not to Vegetate. She made notes of these Strategies in her tiny careful print-writing. And followed them.

Rise at seven (Keeping a Regular Schedule). Put on coffee. Eat oatmeal (fiber). Dust and vacuum apartment. (It had seemed larger when she was working.) Walk every day (exercise, 30-60 minutes.) She takes the sidewalks outside her apartment building where cars roar in their windy passing. (She remembers her morning and afternoon walks on the green-hilled campus. She'd meet students sometimes, majors in their department, and they'd wave and ask her how she was doin'.) She tries to listen to NPR (Keeping Up with Current Events). But the news is so terrifying just now that she feels distressed rather than enlightened, and she shuts off the radio when serious-voiced on-site reporters invite her to listen to bombs going off and children crying in the background. She goes to early Mass, when it's quiet and few people kneel in the shadows, and prays about the world, and gives to charities.

Do Not Become Anti-Social. Reconnect with Old Friends. That one isn't so easy. She is reserved because that is how her parents were and she has always been shy. In high school she had few friends, just classmates really. She doesn't know where they are now, and in any case they'd be grandparents, she supposes, absorbed in their own lives and

families. They probably wouldn't remember her. She'd been mostly a loner, until the job...

She always knows when it's 8:30. That's when the first of the faculty arrive, the new hires who get the unpopular class hours. Sitting at her kitchen table, she can see them clearly as if she were back at her desk. Some charge by like comets, damp-haired from six a.m. runs. Others shuffle in, tousled and puffy-eyed as waking children. Mary Alice feels a great tenderness toward them, so young, with so much education and so much of life to encounter.

Nine o'clock, ten, the senior professors: scurrying or ambling through her office as their schedules and personalities dictate. They are all, she thinks, curiously childlike. They fuss and rejoice over small things. Their class times and office hours, their demands and their preferences, their voices and their vocabularies, their massive and vulnerable self-absorption, move in her deeply as muscle memory.

She loves them all.

And as the afternoon slides down her small kitchen window, she knows exactly when it's 4:30 and most of them leave, bookbags slung over their shoulders, and the halls outside her office grow silent.

She loves it all.

She ended her own education with high school—considered sufficient preparation back then for women who would of course marry. And so, when she first arrived on campus, this strange menagerie of faculty and students with their peculiar attire and often incomprehensible language seemed like entering a foreign country. Puzzling, a little intimidating, yet fascinating at the same time. She pondered over syllabi she keyed in from profuse illegible scrawls, or photocopied from pale printouts that she adroitly darkened. Secretaries were allowed to enroll in classes at reduced tuition, but it never occurred to her that she'd be qualified. She simply imagined the deep significance of those classes, with the heady, abstruse words of their descriptions, their books with intriguing titles. And she permitted herself to believe that, in a small way, she was contributing to this great enterprise of American Higher Education.

She did not in fact marry. If she'd had a poetic lover, they'd have compared her to the first spring wildflowers with their mothlike beauty that you hardly notice before they disappear. But there had been no poetic lover, and so she faded quietly, grayed early, acquired silver-framed bifocals and sensible shoes, and looked fifty at forty. And the gentle years passed.

They arranged a nice little retirement tea. The college gave her its traditional retirement clock (nobody apparently asked why you'd need a new clock just when your time became your own). The Department gave her a Greyhound bus pass so that she could travel (though not very far), and the few students who had a free period came, and the faculty, most of whom now looked about fifteen, said kind appreciative things with quotations she didn't understand but was grateful for. She had tried to think out something to say about what those years of working had meant to her, even wrote down a few notes, but after all their words, shiny as new coins, hers looked dull and worn and didn't really convey what she wanted to, so she said "thank you very much."

It didn't feel so odd in summer, while school was on vacation and she'd be home anyway. But when classes started, and the rhythm of them pulsed in her, it was like being unbalanced, out of synch with life...

The headaches began then. Not every day, but often. She'd be at her kitchen table, gazing out the small window to the stunted tree beside her back stoop, remembering what classes would be starting, and a tendril of pain would crawl down the side of her head. If she got up and walked around, it usually went away.

But not always. Sometimes it would bloom into full-scale throbbing, last for hours. Sometimes she couldn't sleep at night. Over the counter remedies, as she'd told the busy receptionist at the doctor's office, didn't help much.

It's December now. Campus buildings will be draped with spruce branches and the students will wear goofy Santa caps and wrap twinkly chattering lights around their waists. She prays every day for those students, soon to be gone, and for the faculty that has a new young secretary, and for the college that gave her a clock.

And the headaches have been coming every day for five days. She is thankful she didn't have them when she was working. She could not have done the job she wanted to. For them.

This evening after supper she feels as if the apartment is crammed around her head. She swallows the Tylenol that does no good and steps out onto the tiny back stoop. The night is warm, too warm for December, and she stands there with the half-moon above the dark neighboring roofs and a star just beside it, and then she sees movement. And looks at the stunted tree with dead curled leaves beside the door. It has rained and the leaves glisten in the porch light and the moonlight, and a moth flutters round the leaves in an odd, erratic circle, as if one of its wings were clipped. She wonders if it is searching for summer.

Bri Borrego

Querrelle de Femmes-

the question- of women

for the organ of women's existence
naturally bleeds into
the landscape of debate

liberation is fought for
those ten additional steps
 in opposition to the leap
 of a masculine innate.

querrele de l'eau
querelle de air

the question of water
the question of air

Sally Brown

Interview with artists: Ghi Fremaux, Michael Hubbard
and Olga Alexander

Ghi Fremaux, Michael Hubbard and Olga Alexander were featured artists in *Feminist Connect*, at Charles Adam Studio Project in Lubbock, Texas, in March 30, 2022 and part of a larger online exhibition by the same name. The artists, all painters, share with co-curator Sally Brown their artistic and conceptual process, how their work informs each other, their next projects and more.

Sally Brown: Each of you pays tribute to women in your work in a different way, all to artists with an attention to the body. Tell me about your processes—both artistically and conceptually—in bringing your tribute works about.

Olga Alexander: In the work I submitted here, I used materials that were culturally loaded, such as old sewing patterns, Barbie dolls, industrial materials e.g. Plexiglass, (some examples of my artwork can be viewed on Les Femme Folles site); anything really that can serve as a metaphor or alludes to contested perceptions of the body in a space that is experienced as fluid, ambiguous and in constant flux.

I'm inspired by a diverse group of artists such as Eva Hesse, Christina Quales, Phyllidia Barlow and Amy Sillman. Because I do installations and have worked in a series of paintings, I find Nalini Malani's use of iconic images to activate a space, very interesting. Generally, I look at artworks whose narrative is located outside of itself and references various areas of interest in a non-didactic and non-literal way, the body being just one of those areas.



Olga Alexander: *Past Futures*, acrylic painting on canvas, 12"x12"
\$200.

Ghi Fremaux: My work originates in portraiture. Portraits give accounts of specific persons and testify to the experience of seeing and being seen by them. For me, making a portrait is always a form of worship, an act of holding space. The portrait should prioritize the subject's autonomy; they should not be instructed or posed. The portrait is never a picture of a person but of a relationship.

To begin my work, I photograph my friends and/or partners. This only happens when we become vulnerable to each other in some way, and the encounter has to be spontaneous, consensual, and communicative. I am a poor photographer, which is important. The camera *should* fail to capture the complicated thing happening between us.

The drawing/painting searches the photo for a way to reinhabit and/or make sense of that experience. I take the photo under desperate scrutiny and assemble the forms of my friend's or partner's body, intensifying the scale and the color so much that the data is scrambled by the end.

In the works showing in the brick-and-mortar Feminist Connect exhibition, before I began painting, I tampered with the photos. I crossed them with images from my friend's endoscopy. I wanted to ask myself about the bodies of lovers, what they are made of, which parts we love, what we are willing to know and accept about them.



Ghislaine ("Ghi") Fremaux: *corpus absconditus*, Oil on canvas, 28in. x 40in., 2021, \$400, *Revelations*, 30in. x 40in., Oil on canvas, 2021

Michael Hubbard: The paintings included in the show are part of a larger body of work representing my personal feminist heroes. That work includes activists, writers, and musicians, as well as artists. All of the artworks are representations of people I deeply admire. For these paintings of Ana Mendieta I chose stills from some of her performance pieces. I was initially drawn to her *Facial Hair Transplants* performance because it resonates with my interest in nonbinary identity and disruptions of gender norms. But I liked the idea of making paintings based on performance because I was trying to imbue the artworks with a sense of movement and visual complexity. I layered images of the artist with images of the foliage of Cuban fig trees to honor Mendieta's Cuban heritage.

The paintings are made with watercolor on plastic. I was drawn to this medium because the surface doesn't interact with or absorb the paint. The watercolor seems to float above the surface acting as a clearer record of the painted marks.



Michael Hubbard: *Mendieta Elogy 1*, watercolor on plastic, 2017

SB: Why is/was it important for you to honor these women through your work? What do you hope viewers get out of your work?

OA: Artists who identify as female, have mostly been left out of the larger art historical canon. I feel strongly that women need to write their own canon and reclaim it anew for themselves. As an artist I feel I do that with every piece I create and support others doing the same; inclusivity changes everyone's perceptions about what is possible.

GF: The feminist lineage suffuses my whole practice, precisely because I'm dealing with the body. Without a grounding in feminist philosophy and art history, there is no responsible or productive work to be made with naked bodies, gazes, desire, and pleasure at stake.

I hope my work promotes empathy, does right by the people I am portraying, and offers up ways of thinking sex, nudity, and vulnerability that run counter to patriarchy's straight line.

MH: My interest in representing feminist figures came from questioning my own place in the history of art, wondering if I can be a feminist artist. I wanted to not only honor powerful anti-establishment women, but also point out connections throughout history. My work started with punk-rock musicians of the 1990s and quickly jumped backward and forward in time finding similar moments of fierce feminist energy. My hope has always been that viewers will see the care and intent behind my artworks and be inspired to learn more about the subjects of the paintings.

SB: What inspires you about each other's work?

OA: The interplay of subject and object in Fremaux's work is rendered in such a fluid way which makes their intimacy visceral and all the more palpable for me; I seem to gaze at them, not as someone peering at them but as one that can locate myself in them.

Hubbard's use of materials e.g. watercolor on plastic! is extremely interesting and full of meaning on so many levels, that I want to hear more about her intentions. I share Hubbard's admiration for Ana Mendieta and wonder if Hubbard's next work will be more performative! Both artist's offer interesting takes on female empowerment and agency!

GF: Both Olga's and Michael's works act on me physically first, through gestures and materiality. That's what I want most from paintings – to feel them with my body, to understand them in preverbal ways, before my brain goes to work parsing them (which then yields very rich intellectual content from both artists' work).

MH: In both Olga's and Ghi's work, I love the tactility and physicality. In Olga's pieces figures seem to swim through the paint or emerge out of interwoven abstract forms. In Ghi's paintings the brush strokes and energetic marks constantly remind the viewer of the painter's presence.

SB: What has it meant for you to be a part of Feminist Connect?

OA: During Covid most of us worked in isolation; making meaning or sense of this period was even more difficult than usual – having a community that was interested in my work and in a feminist connection, was encouraging and a welcomed platform as I abandoned myself to time!

GF: It has been profound to feel this connection with other artists. Too much of my life in art has felt lonesome and competitive. It is moving and motivating to show in such brilliant company.

It has also been important for me to (re)assert my feminism by taking part in this exhibition and forum. I never intended to conceal it, but instead took it to be obvious, and let the term slip from my vocabulary. I'm very happy now to overtly re/claim a feminist identity for my work.

SB: What are you working on next?

OA: I continue to work in non sequiturs! I'm concentrating on mark making and materials that interest me without thinking so much of producing a series or an installation right now but concentrating on the dialogues that emerge from the various pieces I create. Since I like working on multiple pieces at the same time and in various formats, I continue to diffuse a lot of my sculptural / installation ideas into my jewelry designs too.

GF: These days, I devote most of my creative bandwidth to my collaborative enterprise with my husband, Lando Valdez. Together, we are investigating the relationship between grief and desire, as well as the experiences of medicalization and surgical intervention. I also have a project underway with a gastroenterologist and will be making some paintings of the insides of people's bodies, which should be weird (hopefully in a good way!).

For more information on Feminist Connect, visit: <https://www.les-femmes-folles-feminist-connect.com/>

Bios:

Olga Alexander is a multidisciplinary artist and jewelry designer from New York. She obtained her MFA from the University of Tennessee and her undergraduate degree from the University of California, Berkeley.

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Ghislaine Fremaux (b. 1986, Washington, DC) holds her MFA from the Pennsylvania State University, conferred in 2012. She is Associate Professor of Art and Area Chair of Painting at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, TX. www.ghislainefremaux.com

Born just outside of Detroit, **Michael Hubbard** currently lives and works in Midland Texas. As a non-binary artist, their work aims to create an imaginary vision of non-binary gender identity, in all its ambiguity, joyful freedom, and contradiction. www.michaelhubbardart.com

Bella Capelli

Bubble, Bubble, Bubblegum

Danica has pink, bubblegum hair that shrinks into spiral curls that look like I could pop! them with my forefinger.

She says to call her Dani. This summer, in cheap, tiny tank-tops and worn jean shorts, she and I dyed her hair in her mom's bathroom sink.

"You should go purple," she said. I felt like I was a part of something.

I ran my fingers through my frizzy brown hair in the smoky mirror, "My mom would kill me if I did that."

"So let her," Dani giggled, trying to scrub dye off of her fingers. It sat like cherry juice, wrapping around her skin. It took a week or so to come off, but it gave her bragging rights of the battle to pinkify her hair.

Dani never cared what other people thought of her. Her mother shouted at her for staining the sink, and Dani flipped her new hair and brushed off the grievances like it was nothing. It was worth it for her.

She and I have sleepovers, where we eat buttery popcorn and lick the residue off of each other's fingers. We watch and rewatch *Pretty Little Liars* and when we get bored of all of their lies, we spill secrets with a warm whisper to each other's ears.

I kiss her ears and she kisses my legs. We kiss and kiss but never touch lips.

Desma Caputo

Post-Reconstruction

Ridge of white puckered scar
delineates new left breast from old skin;
smooth purple-tan tissue equators the au naturale
saline teardrop curve of the right;
nipples made from thighs' flesh
grow embarrassing dark hairs within their irregular shapes.
Minus any feeling beyond the pressure of a rigorous squeeze,
I make believe,
try for still-recalled phantom pleasure;
force myself to leave the lights on,
pretend they are still beautiful and
more Woman than Monster.

Bess Cooley

Forgiveness

My dad's dad
flew planes over Germany
World War II & Dad says

he wouldn't talk
about the war except

one thing:
when one plane he piloted
got hit he was the only man
to survive,

watched the clean-up
crew pressure-wash
parts of his comrades from the cockpit
then came home

a violent alcoholic, beat
my grandma and my dad. How could
those not be related?

I ask my partner, another
man in my life, the only one
who shows emotion
more than rarely.

Bess Cooley

I Worry about My Future Nephew

My sister is thinking of names,
putting together a nursery,

picking out the crib
and colors. The squirrels in my garden
eat old tomatoes thrown onto the makeshift—

for now—compost heap.
The cabbage plants get eaten by bugs.

I wonder what Becca will do
with her baby after it is no longer

a baby. Having enough
diapers is one thing, but
what about when the time comes to teach

the little one how to cleanly pluck off each slug
from the cabbage plant

and spray it down with water
to rid it of hundreds of tiny

eggs and feel only a little guilt?

Bess Cooley

Rock Climbing

As a kid I rock climbed indoor walls:
a multiplex board, polyester climbing holds.
The rocks were not real rocks.

I knew it then. Fourth grade,
the year in art class we copied

Dalí's melting clocks, their faces not yet
indistinguishable. It was before mine
became the face of a woman. Climbing,

I would grab on, claw my way
up a straight wall, touch the ceiling,

ride the rope back down. When
I finished a wall I'd hit my hand to those
high boards. Like if I didn't touch

the unattainable thing
I wouldn't have climbed the wall at all.

Puberty for girls is about how we are seen
by others. Boys. It's not even about
the interior workings of our bodies.

More who's staring at us and why.
When my mother said a boy had noticed me

she meant it was time to look nicer. Look
like a woman, make myself pretty. Instead I never
wore that shirt again. I left it hanging in the closet.

The rocks are not real rocks. The boy
may have been a real boy but he was fourteen.

He was having trouble figuring out how

I was going to be human this time.

Daun Daemon

Home Invasion

when she was younger, my aunt pretended
she was house hunting, wandering through open houses,
querying agents about appliances and disclosures
with no intention of buying, wanting only
to walk through the lives that other people lived:
hear the echoes of voices, shadows of personalities,
know them by their lingering perfume of curry
in the kitchen, their towel shelves labeled for little girls
Olivia and Hannah, their cameras and televisions
everywhere in a house that was otherwise empty,
their cat doors to the outside and to inside spaces
like the attic offering a dead wren that conveyed,
their angel ornaments hanging in a maple tree
with a nailed-on plaque *For the lost children*,
their curio cabinets stuffed with collectible junk,
their ornate moldings that crown the maze of
colorful walls curated like a paint store display,
or their décor without personality, their discount store
wall art, discouraging gray carpets, and tired sofas.

offensive to her were the empty houses devoid of any hint
that meals were served, that babies crawled, that dogs
grew old, that bad news rang the telephone, that marriages
shattered like the smashed clay pot on one brick patio;
the worst, the worst of all possible open houses,
were those staged like a magazine shoot, belongings
stuffed into cabinets, attics, and garages, the common spaces
open and too clean for any family of four plus two cats
and a gerbil to have inhabited — she wanted the stench, the
messy laundry piles, cracked linoleum, crud wedged
into corners of countertops, cat hair fuzzing carpets —
the owners should show themselves to her, not engage in
this domestic deception as she called it, a deception
that would make her harumph out of the house,
slam her car door, and speed back home, where —
snug in her neat and tastefully appointed condominium

with a view of the 14th green — she could sip
a cappuccino and put herself in her place.

Daun Daemon

Turning 60 in a Pandemic

6/10/2020

I decorate my nails with colors a twentysomething would wear:
bright lemons and limes, or ombre blueberry blues dusted with glitter.
Who cares if a woman my age flashes neon fruits on her fingertips
and wears too-long hair frosted with powdery mildew?

These days merge into strange stretches of my garden's greens,
of vining things reaching, embracing twine or spreading over feverish
mulch,
becoming longer and fatter, pulsing toward bud burst and flowering,
anticipating the tender touch of tiny insect feet alighting.

Digging my hands into the dirt, clutching clumps beneath the surface,
I churn the soil as an earthworm would; the lacquered cherry tomato tips
of my nails push up like sprouts of blood, new growth that yearns
for an open sky, but sag in the still and stagnant air.

Daun Daemon

Twirling

when the doctor asks why I don't want to do it anymore, I tell her
it's like being a majorette, twirling a baton,
which I did when I was younger

look, I say to her, in my most sincere patient voice that reassures her
I know she's trying to help, but I really don't have the desire
to try coconut oil — too slippery and messy

*when I was young, I could toss a baton as high as any twirler,
spin around like a ballerina, catch it, toss it again, again,
and continue marching down the field*

*I even twirled fire a couple of times, thrilling at the danger,
escaping burns, sweating with the exertion,
proud of my fearless skill*

she doesn't understand my carefully crafted analogy —
I can tell from the scrunched eyebrows,
lowered gaze, and the snort

*I still have my baton, I say, these forty some years after high school,
on occasion I give it a spin when no one's looking,
but real twirling? that's done*

I'm over 60 now, the days of performing for even one person have
passed,
no squeezing into skintight sequined swimsuits, no forced smiling,
no gritting my teeth, just relief when the routine is done

Mia Day

My mom always had a fat ass

& my father knew how to make sex
appear in everything—

the flowers that blossomed in our front
yard & in my underwear, the leather

seats in his truck always fueled off fumes
of compensation,

the way my friends looked in
high school when he wanted a fuck.

The predator seduced its prey when my
mom said *I Do*

back in 92' though it took me years
to understand why I always keep magnifying glass towards the
shadows—

why I am always the momma bear
to her cub. *Why am I not gay? I*

find myself circling the porcelain,
asking the question.

Men, with their satin's-temptations-eyes & lingering
hands like fog after a Mississippi

tornado leaving everyone effected searching
for their family photos in the broken

glass & their birth
control that's now

sprayed across the front yard like sperm
on a woman's back.

Why does the smell of cologne
give me goose bumps & why

don't I taste vomit on the back of my tongue at the
sight of a man unbuttoning his shirt?

Questions for
death, I guess.

Mia Day

Butterfly of the Bible Belt

based off the non-Denomination church in Jackson, MS—Jackson Revival Center

A White woman leading a Black church,
preaching to the people who God would resemble most if He
returned. Her arms outstretching the lines of
segregation across the Delta planes and through the Civil
Rights Museums. A Black choir singing the hymns
of their ancestors— melodies sent from
Heaven, birthed into bellies that echo past the pews that
are older than freedom. Black church, White
woman who accepts all skins, but who, with Anglo-Saxon
roots and low melanin in their epidermis will enter a church where their
heritage is not King, rather it goes quiet in the arena of
Black bodies that believed in God when
the world did not believe in them? The church, the
congregation of allies— I attend with olive
branches and white doves as a request for forgiveness and
an offering of celebration. A lion's roar, an elephant's

outcry comes from the Black people's, White woman's
lips and chests and fingertips.

Sophie Farrell

Fungus, Fungus, Fungus

Lily sat across from me and meticulously measured out 6 grams of psilocybin mushrooms, dividing them up between us before our “nature walk” through the conservation land behind our house.

“Yours are in the bumblebee bowl and mine are in the white bowl, okay?” “Got it.”

“Do not touch my bowl, okay?” Lily said these things to me more out of habit now. She knew that I would never break her rules.

My older sister lives by a very strict set of rules: No one is allowed to touch her, she will not touch anyone, and she will not touch anything that she hasn’t cleaned first. I had always assumed it was just a strange quirk of hers, until one day I stumbled across Lily in our driveway sobbing as she bleached the inside of her car. I knew then that this was deeper than just a “strange quirk.”

My parents have difficulty understanding the concept of being affectionate without physicality. Our family has always been close, and my parents constantly ask Lily if they can hug her. I think they feel like they need to show her that they want to give her affection, even though they know they can’t. I think Lily feels like she’s disappointing them whenever she says no. In order to appease them, Lily started implementing the “hand hug.” The “hand hug is essentially a more tender high-five where people hold the two hands together and wrap their thumbs behind the other person’s hand. Whenever Lily leaves for school, my parents line up for their “hand hugs.” I think on some basic level, sisters can read each other’s minds, because I never extend my hand. Instead, Lily and I will smile at each other knowingly while she rubs on hand-sanitizer.

According to Family Watchdog, the sex offender registry, we have three sex offenders living within a mile of our house. Normally this wouldn’t be too much of an issue, there are horrible people everywhere, but Lily loves going on walks. Personally, I always found walking to be dreadfully boring, but I pretended to love them so Lily wouldn’t be alone. She had a very fragile appearance; a thin, petite frame, wide brown doe-eyes, and persistent acne that always made her look far younger than she actually is. I constantly worried that any one of the nine sex offenders in our town would snatch her up and steal her away. So, I insisted we walk together.

Lily could tell that I hated walking at first. I saw no point in it. It just seemed like an easy way to trap myself into an insufferable conversation with any one of our neighbors. Normally our conversations followed a pattern: Lily would comment on how nice the warm weather was, I would complain that the sweat was making my thighs chafe, we would get into an argument, and about a minute later resolved it and carry on talking.

One time, the argument started before we even left the house. It was mid-October, and a cold and windy rain was pummeling the roof. I sat by the window, enjoying the comfort of listening to the rain tap against the glass as I heard Lily's footsteps trot lightly down the stairs.

"I'm going for a walk! I feel like I need to stretch my legs." I lifted my head from the window and prepared my argument.

"Are you serious? It's pouring out; you're going to get soaked and be cold and miserable."

"I don't care. I'll dry off."

"Ugh. The last thing I want to do right now is go outside and be cold and wet for no reason," I said, accepting defeat and plastering a pout on my face.

"Then don't come! Actually, I don't want you to come. You're always acting like a bitch, and I just want to have a chill time." Naturally this had the opposite intended effect on me. Lily quickly put on her shoes and jacket as she said this preparing to head out the door. I, on the other hand, was in terry cloth pajama shorts and a "Bigfoot is Real and He Tried to Eat My Ass" graphic t-shirt. Still, I quickly slipped on some crocs and dramatically grabbed the door in front of her.

"Fine! I'm going on my own walk then!"

For about 200 feet, we walked separately. She was about ten steps ahead of me. Both of us were soaked and freezing almost immediately but we both tried to hide it. After about two minutes Lily flung her head around to face me. I watched the scowl dissipate from her face as she took in my soaked bigfoot shirt and dramatic pout. She stopped, turned her body around fully, and started laughing. I laughed too, thinking about how ridiculous we must look. After a minute, we composed ourselves and I walked up and took my usual place at her side, comfortably three feet away from her.

"This rain isn't even that bad!" she said after a minute. I remember suppressing a smirk and replying with "It's making my thighs chafe."

Until her sophomore year of high school, Lily and I shared a room. I'm told that she taught me how to escape my crib as a toddler. I don't remember it, but I can imagine her sitting on our purple carpet and guiding me up and around the top bar in her assertive but calming tone. I do remember how she used to put on plays for me using a flashlight and stuffed animals. They all had similar plots to soap-operas; the teddy bear was cheating on the Webkinz with the Beanie Baby, who was their widowed neighbor. Lily would make me laugh so hard that my parents would scream at us from their bedroom down the hall to shut up. She also carried around a spray bottle of antibacterial Febreze until middle school. She would spray down her bed every morning and become enraged if I ever went anywhere near her side of the room. Sometimes, when she wasn't home, I would sneak over to her bed and lay down. I wanted to see how the room looked from her eyes.

#

I stared down at the mushrooms in the bumblebee bowl, eager to see how they felt. Their stems were thin and delicate. I remember feeling a faint sense of wonder at the thought of so much power packed into such small packages, at how something so fragile could evoke such a large sense of connection to the divine. Thinking of them now, I'm reminded of Lily: her frail frame, her whimsy, her ability to meet my gaze and immediately read my mind. I think there might be something divine in that too.

We walked through the woods after we took the mushrooms, enjoying the warm spring wind and watching the light green buds sway above us. Everything felt beautiful. I thought about the mushrooms again. How do they even grow? Did they sprout like plants? I asked this out loud and Lily was quick to correct me. "They aren't plants! They're funguses...fungi?" She seemed equally unhappy with each option, like neither fit right. The word suddenly seemed extremely amusing. I tested it out in my mouth.

"Fungus, fungus, fungus," I repeated. "Stop that! If you say it too much it sounds all weird and loses its meaning!" "Language is a total construct, I responded, filled with an entirely chemical sense of profundity, "We decide for ourselves what has meaning."

Nancy Gerber

Transformation

Begin
again.
You've done this.
A child who grew
then one day, your own—
a mother birthing
new selves. The child, the mother --

begin again.
The children are grown.
It's time to leave
the chrysalis you wove,
become a butterfly.

Begin again.
One step,
then another.

D. Walsh Gilbert

Mary Scintillates

Almost magical, I explain—

the night light is solar-powered.

No cord or plug.

No batteries.

It collects energy

in daylight and stores it

for later.

Mary fills every empty socket

and calls me at midnight

amazed—

The stars

are in her room.

It's as if the roof's been lifted,

as if

she's living

among St. Brendan's flickering

votive candles.

Oliver Gray

What Martha Carried A Response to “The Things They Carried”

Martha carried things as well, heavy things for such a small frame. She carried a small pad of paper and a pen in her purse or schoolbag. Often, she would reach into her purse or bag and retrieve the smooth paper, taking the cap off the pen and sucking on the end of it for a moment before jotting a few lines down for future reference, or adding a line or two to a letter already in progress. Something particularly interesting her professor had stated in his lecture that had sparked intense discussion, a patch of flowers that looked particularly lovely today with their reds and oranges blazing in the sunlight, many things inspired her to scribble notes to be used later. The letters went overseas. Far away. She signed them all with love, let her tongue glide along the seal, and addressed them without looking, without truly knowing where she was sending them or to whom.

She carried a terrified nation, ripped apart by war overseas and here on our soil. Death has always been on American soil, but now it is in the veins of every American man, woman, and child. The races were fighting each other. Black against white, American against Viet Cong. Each night the news added to what she carried: American soldiers torch an entire Vietnamese village to the ground... Six black men were shot in the back in Augusta... He's already got 3 purple hearts so everybody calls him "Hero"... What your president is doing for the War efforts and what YOU can do to help... The lone medic is scared, scared he's going to get killed one day picking up a wounded buddy... Race Riots tearing this Country apart... Now there is gunfire and the camera is dropped in the grass, the sound of bullets echoing in the living room bouncing off the cushions of the couch and finally being muffled by the soft carpeting in front of the television. Martha did not write these things in her letters.

What women carry in their purses changes daily, but for Martha, it varied little. A small brass-colored mirror so that she might stay just pretty enough to be seen throughout the day. That gold bullet that held her lipstick, just a shade too red for her father's liking. The face powder her mother had given her last Christmas, scented with last decade's most popular scent, White Shoulders. A few spare hairpins to fix flyaways throughout the day. A small, diminutive change purse where she could

keep the three dollars and seventy-five cents allowance her father gave her each week for adhering to his standards grade-wise. Another gift, this one from her grandmother, hand-sewn indigo lace ran around the edges of a clean white handkerchief. A silk headscarf, the pattern did not matter. White gloves, stiff with starch. Today there was also a movie ticket stub, she had gone to see a new animated film, *The Aristocats*. A receipt from the coffee shop at her school, a single cup of black coffee. And an unopened letter addressed from Vietnam.

Do the nightly death tolls include those on American soil, Martha wondered, or only those on foreign land? The American death toll is now at 45,626. Up and up it went. She carried the burden of knowing and not knowing. She carried the burden of being closer than ever before and yet so harshly and clinically separated by thousands of miles inside a television screen.

Sometimes, Martha's classmates would attend the war protests. Fights broke out between those who protested and those who proudly supported. Sometimes she would have to walk past dried blood and pretend she did not see, pretend she did not have to hold her breath so she would not be made sick by the sharp tang of the iron smell. The iron would linger so thick in the halls, would cling to her clothes and her hair, would follow her home at night while she lay in bed and be thick on the sheets, and she knew that it was nothing compared to how the whole of Vietnam must smell, but she did not know. She could not know. She did not want to know. One day the newspaper told everyone that three students protesting the war had been shot dead by our own National Guard. There were no more fights at her school. Even weeks after, the tang of iron still lingered in the halls.

She wrote the letters to distract herself. To carry with feigned pride the expectation that every young woman her age must be pining for a faceless soldier who may never come home. She filled the letters with sweet, shallow, happy things. She filled them with poems that fell on deaf ears, written by a hand that did not understand what it was writing. Her penmanship must be perfect. The artful wrapping of a gift that has been regifted a thousand times and never meant anything to anyone. The interior must be clean. Sterile. Safe. America was in as much chaos as they said Vietnam was in, or it seemed that way, anyway. Was one war better than the other? Worse? She didn't know and didn't have the strength to critically examine those questions. No, she would leave that up to the Philosophers. For the brief moments that her ink flowed over the page with such precision, carefully copying prose and poems that had

been hastily scrawled into her notebook onto the perfumed sheets of paper, the world seemed to quiet.

News broadcasts and newspaper headlines and the gossip of the neighborhood ladies eased into a low hum in the background of her reality.

More than anything, she carried expectations. Expectations that all women were subjected to. To be Soft. Sweet. Mothering. Sensual. Demure. Quiet. She carried the expectation from her father to raise him many worthy grandchildren while maintaining absolute virginity. She carried the expectation to be calm and composed in the face of complete and utter chaos. The expectation to love a man who could never love her back the way she needed. The expectation to love a man who was really every man in a way that she was not capable of. Every soldier was her brother. Every soldier was her father. Every soldier was the love of her life. And every soldier was all of the evil in America. She carried the expectation to love and be loved by a man, by a nation, who would never see her for what she was.

The letters she carried were hollow and empty, destined for a faceless hero who was really a villain who was really no one at all.

Gretchen Heyer

Tides

The body so full of water
the moon pulls into fear
and trembling Meaning my mother
can feel what I have to say Meaning
our inner oceans rub like a bowl
in which we are boiled

My mother has turned her head
to the wall twirling her thoughts
And still water like a knot
a state of aspiration a pressure
Still my mother leaks
pale and diluted enough to see through

How long can I hold all that passes
through me How many hours
Can I let go without letting go all
the way without bursting

I am glad to change my mother's bed sheets I no longer fit
in a bowl Think of all the conversations
on behalf of who enters whom And still
I hold on as if I will lose what fills us
Yesterday the water
thick enough to walk upon Today we sink

Gretchen Heyer

Vocation call

Bottled Fanta so hot it hurts
going down.

Mother says, *you should be a nun when you grow up.*

Bush rushes past
windows of the car, reaches out to grab
me. Bush spirits watch
from behind trees, half-finished walls of houses.

Mother says, *shame only Catholics have nuns, and Buddhists
have nuns.*

Lava rocks tower over the road like they want
to chew the car
and us inside. Rhino rock. Giraffe. Hippo.
Bumps
in the road jolt me
awake.

Mother says, *Buddhists don't believe in Jesus. That's out.*

Rock shapes silhouette
against sky and the blue and white microbus
sputtering, heaving
out of holes. Elephant
rock. Turtle rock.

*Convert to Catholicism to be a nun. You won't waste time on
children.*

The smell of petrol. Sandwiches taste of dirt. Giant
rocks
fill the horizon.

Lindsey Smith Hull

Say Amen

In the shadow of St. Louis— grand cathedral white no more
Flambeaux lighting quenched and feeble
Funeral flowers bear chagrin
Broken blooms, crosses damning; light is shaded— truth kept dim

Woods afire, jewels aplenty
Sparkling glassworks wink at ladies'
bound-corsets and shortened hems
Painted lips whispering, gleaming
Pleading her to say *amen*
Hands prim-folded, waists pulled trimly
Men seen preaching, speaking, rousing
Bringing forth the hordes to Him
Boisterous, rowdy, tough, and tumble
Cards and drinks and say *amen*

Precipice is slowly crumbling, charming manners all will mend
Mother Stella boldly growing, rounded figure caged up friend
Brute in home loves too thinly, fists a-tumble round the lot
Forward ask no gentlemen, nose in book they say *amen*

Anxious tear the rhinestones shatter; baby born to lesser man
In the shadow of St. Louis— caged up battered beaten wren

Azizah Curry Iluore

Azizah

My mother named me *Azizah* from a short list of Arabic names offered by my father. “It means precious and esteemed,” he’d say ever so often.

I have no memory of holding his hand or seeing my father embrace my mother with love. I don’t recall bedtime kisses, story time, or doing anything like families on TV. Instead, my youngest memories are singing, dancing, and playing in brown rivers with my four siblings and countless cousins in Belize. Belize City is where my mother and her mother were born. It is also where I learned to write my name, ride broken bikes, and go on vacation in my imagination. Together with other children from the neighborhood, we played lots of tag and Red Light, Green Light. We played these games any and everywhere because love and family were all we really had. It was a happy place and a happy time for poor children. Still, we never missed a meal - even if dinner meant just a slice of freshly baked bun, yellow cheese, and English tea.

In Belize, I also learned what bell hooks described as patriarchal lessons. My sister, Jam, and I had learned to sit and stand with our legs closed, walk lightly, chew with our mouths shut, and that we should offer to make our brothers’ plates. Mama (my mother’s estranged mother) was a tailor, she’d make us identical sets of beautiful, doll-like dresses. But Jam and I must have looked differently because we were often met with, “Same mah-dah, same fah-dah?” Was it because Jam was much taller and slimmer? Or was it because Jam looked “Indian,” and my hair and nose made me *just* Black?

I prayed to Allah about this - to be worthy of beauty - while my extended family prayed to Jesus. Although that was confusing, it was clear that we did things the way my father expected them to be done. He was American, well-read, and dangerous. We left Belize in 1996 when he almost killed Mommy. I guess he didn’t get his way. There was nothing she could have ever done to deserve a leaking forehead and the added shame of learning he would pay himself out of an arrest. I would find my own justice. I rejected him, his country, his jokes – I loathed the way he drank, left, returned, and raged. I rejected him so much that I began praying to Jesus.

It was complicated. The culture of patriarchy and its commitment to people living in and with pain. For years, that was my

family – breathing, eating, laughing at, with, and around my depressed veteran father’s pain. And there I was, the youngest, best “behaved” and most “esteemed,” soaking up the trauma and carrying with me the only two things I knew for sure he had given me, my names.

Azizah Curry

Somehow, I was placed in an all Spanish-speaking first-grade classroom when we arrived to South Central, LA. I remember the secretary calling my first and last names over the intercom like I had been missing or something. Moments later, an older white woman wearing oversized black and white polka dot pants saved me – or so she thought – from the loud office and guided me to her classroom full of Black students. I learned then that I was too different to adjust easily to either classroom setting because although I was with African American children who looked like me, I became “the Jamaican girl.” Still, I didn’t stay in that school long because it was a matter of time before my well-resourced father found us.

In the Bronx, I learned I was smart. I attended the only elementary school that would waive one required vaccination because of my Muslim faith. It was a private school. A Christian school. In class, we simply read assigned chapters and answered comprehension questions. My mom had no idea recess was longer than math class, that science only existed in March in time for the science fair. She always had so much going on with her own students, my older siblings, and of course, she needed whatever time was left to exhale. Mommy simply knew I was at the top of my class, surrounded by other Black children from the “West Indies,” and we both loved it. Azizah Curry, valedictorian.

Imagine a 3.9 GPA meaning nothing when the time came to take the SATs. I was angry. Angry at my Black school and angry at my Black brain. While my parents had told me life hadn’t been fair for Black and Brown people, I hadn’t yet understood how institutionalized racism had already plagued my American Black life. I studied for my SATs before or after school and sometimes both. I was desperate for a scholarship because Mommy deserved a break. I applied to one school, Syracuse University, where my brother had applied and got in. They let me in too.

College brought my first white instructor (since the woman in the polka dot pants) and exposed me to white classmates for the first time in my life. They asked if I ever washed my dreadlocks and other things that ranged from strange to outright racist. Admiring the time they had

for ignorance, I used The Writing Center and attended course office hours like they were my home, my right. It paid off because I would later graduate Magna Cum Laude with the security of an elementary teaching job. But I had another accent – I was “talking white.”

Miss Curry

I trotted lightly during my first years of teaching, doing very little to ruffle the feathers of tradition at my school. But my presence alone broke tradition since I was the only Black teacher (and just the second person of color to ever work as a teacher in the building). The other Black woman worked in the kitchen, and every year students asked if she was my mother.

My students were honest and repeated things they heard at home about their young, Black, female teacher like, “Miss Curry is eloquent like Obama,” “Miss Curry should hurry up and get married before it’s too late,” and “Miss Curry ate a lot of chocolate when she was younger.” One time the gym teacher looked at me and said, “Miss Curry, that’s the type of girl to get pregnant at sixteen.” Less than three feet away stood the victim, one of my students that happened to look like me. My body froze and I could say nothing even though I wanted to. I became more and more aware of these loaded comments; they were heavily rooted in racial and gendered stereotypes – and maybe terror. Why were these people, particularly the adults, so comfortable talking like this around *me*? I had to consider what I had been portraying to my students, their families, and the administration. Who was I? I remember praying to find my voice - both figuratively and literally- and for strength to enter spaces as my authentic self, no matter the consequence. I prayed to whichever God would listen.

I found the courage to speak up in faculty meetings about the ways students of color and students labeled with disabilities were marginalized in our school; it took me just five years. In my final year I shared articles with faculty about the lies of their beloved annual “first grade Thanksgiving play” and pushed back that February’s school-wide reading theme center Valentine’s Day. They ignored me. Like many Black teachers, I left the classroom feeling emotionally and physically exhausted. In doing so, I relocated to follow my fiancé to The South.

I thought a lot about my father when I first got engaged. I called him over Memorial Day weekend in 2019 to invite him to my wedding the following summer in Houston. I don’t remember wanting to hurt him,

but I was clear when I told my father that he hadn't earned the right to walk me down the aisle. He'd be just a guest. He played it cool, "All right, Miss Curry" and we got off the phone shortly after a few sad laughs. It was complicated but he had agreed to come to the wedding. I never heard my father's voice again. He died two months later, alone in the Bronx where he was born – "accidental suicide."

Everything came full circle. He had rocked my world again. I would get married in a Houston courthouse six feet away from my partner. Nobody walked me down any aisle. "I now pronounce you, Dr. and Mrs. Joshua Iluore." Where had I gone? Who had I become?

Mrs. Joshua Iluore

I got married in Houston during the first summer of the COVID pandemic. This was also the summer we screamed through face masks for George Floyd, Ahmad Arbery, and Breonna Taylor– one of many summers of "say their names!" Temperatures were high, but so were feelings and deaths. Joshua and I chose to be in the middle of it. We had no choice but to leave our apartment and protest. But while there, walking for Black lives, we miscommunicated terribly. I was by his side when blasts of plastic police bullets terrorized the crowd. We also argued because we understood protesting in downtown Houston could kill us – either by COVID or Southern police. This was such an unhappy time, living in an uncertain place.

I later called a friend to check in with her and ask how things had gone at the protest in her city. She needed milk for her eyes but was otherwise okay. I told her about my fight with Joshua, and like many women had done before, she shut me down before I could fully share my side of what had happened. Her message was clear – I was lucky I had a man to love, much less marry me. Whatever it was, it was over and not worth her time to unpack. "You are a doctor's wife," she told me with a loud laugh. Honestly, I am still figuring out what that means because I hear it so often and with different tones. Even he reminds me. Yes, I am his wife but not any more than he is *my* husband. I changed my last name and my city for him. I will not change every damn everything. Will I?

I change the bedsheets and the throw pillows on our couch often. Still, I am not the traditional wife that he or I grew up seeing at home or on TV. For one, I hardly cook, and when I do, it is average at best. Our house is not as tidy as the ones either of us were raised in, but I'm a doctoral candidate - I am busy. Thank God he helps cook and clean and

we are flexible with expectations. I am grateful that after ten years Josh is still kind, gentle, and respectful. So, I do it, “marriage” with him, with an open, and an ever healing heart. Joshua understands that I’m not my mother (or his) and that he is not my father. Upset or not, he calls me by my legal name, Azizah Curry Iluore.

Azizah Curry Iluore

Precious and esteemed, Of Lamont, and Wife of Joshua. Is that me? Who am I without these names? Would I even exist? How would I exist without these names and borders assigned to me by men?

Alshaad Kara

"Slut"

Scarface on her high school wall,
She was insulted.

Guilty and red in other minds,
Social media marketed her shame.

See the same sky that she had to face,
Girlfriends are not toys,

Her vagina is not a virgin's validation.

Sex is her choice.
Without her, we would not be born boys!

Scratch this high school wall,
See the same sky that she had to face,
Sex is her choice.

Gloria Keeley

Driving Red Riding Hood

I'm driving on a lonely,
country road
the radio jars silence

there's always a farm on the prairie
where I can imagine lives being lived.
a girl builds xylophones,
bone by bone,
cars disintegrate beside the barn
rust and steel shine like diamonds
on an old tin type wedding ring

row after row of crops
workers in caps plucking
feathered fruit
threads of corn husks sway
like hula skirts on hips

over the front porch hangs
a bird in needlepoint
a constellation of seed
sprinkled on cloth

scent of bacon wafts
through my open windows

grandma howls in the distance

Elaine Koplou

Listening—A Night Picture

The room is freckled with moonlight
As she lies listening
Listening
For the branch that breaks in the storm
For the tree that bends in the breeze
For the child that cries in the night
Trapped in its dream of fear

She lies beside him
A chasm wide between them
His back stiffened
His face facing away
Silent
But for his breathing—
Distant yet near
Unyielding

Beside the bed
The dog whimpers in sleepy chase
Of rabbit or chipmunk

Leaning down to stroke his side
She feels his heart beat
The soft rise and fall of his chest
The warmth of his fur
He sighs
Unreservedly

Somewhere an owl hoots
The wind whines

In this interlude between dark and dawn
She belongs to herself

Elaine Koplou

The Hang of It

My neighbor, newly widowed,
is out on her lawn with the shrub-
trimmer. *It's not that hard to use,*
she says, but doesn't quite have
the hang of it yet. *One of those things*
he always did. Like setting traps
for mice and chasing bats
out of the bedroom. She kicks idly
at the weeds in the grass at her feet.
We don't use chemicals on the lawn.
She means "I" but the word is ingrained
from decades of use.

Might have to hire someone for some
of it, though that's kind of costly. But
she acknowledges she can afford it
if she has to. She's sure she can manage
it though. Figure it all out. The work.
The grief. She wipes her eyes
on her sleeve—faded denim
blotting her sun-burned cheeks—
adds *Now's not the time*
for luxuries.

Once we had a snake
in the basement, she laughs. So creepy.
But she'll get the hang of it. She's
alone now and fear is a luxury
she can't afford.

Eustacia Leone

Genista

Sasha woke to the crashing of a metal utensil drawer opening and slamming shut. It had taken years, many perplexed doctors, and finally her own research to figure out the sound was generated by her heartbeat, amped up on anxiety. The B&B room was over-air conditioned yet she felt hot and clammy, while being overwhelmed by a familiar free falling sensation of being left behind, abandoned for doing something unforgivable that she couldn't quite grasp. Sasha opened her eyes, pushing the spiral of dread and shame to the background, as a shadowy weight landed around her heart. In the thin light of dawn, she lay awake, her nervous system on full throttle, pondering, ruminating on why she still felt this way when her life was finally settled, when they were on vacation for god's sake, when she'd even managed to successfully pitch to her editor a feature on the ancient Goddess Demeter temple excavation in southern Sicily. All was well. There was no reason to feel on edge.

Knowing her obsessive worrying was creating the wrong sort of neural pathway in her brain, wearing down her immune system, and upsetting her digestion, didn't help. Worst of all, Sasha thought, was that she'd wasted so much vacation time already worrying instead of relaxing. Exhausted by her own mind, she put a hand on her heart and visualized placing her thoughts in an imaginary container, a deep well somewhere in the middle of a lost desert. Maybe it was the heat and lack of available vegetables on their trip so far. She needed to find something besides pasta to eat soon.

Raspberries were the only fresh fruit Sasha had come across in Sicily so far, and raspberries reminded her of the news she'd read the day before of mothers, desperate to feed their children, who come to Sicily from Eastern Europe and other countries to pick raspberries, make barely enough to survive, and are routinely raped and beaten by their bosses.

Sasha gazed up at the B&B's cracked plaster ceiling. To keep from waking Aaron, she quietly slipped out of bed, and with a remnant of dread still lingering in her chest, tiptoed past her sleeping daughter and opened the door onto a wide stone balcony. Guilty pleasure flooded her at the prospect of being alone for a few moments with the rising sun. To her left, spilling out like chess chips, was the plateau of red clay rooftops of Giardini-Naxos, and beyond those a vast aquamarine sea,

already turning white with sunlight. Intense light reflecting off the water seemed to confirm the weather forecaster's predictions that this was to be Europe's hottest day on record. To Sasha's right, Mt. Etna was still smoking, and did give the illusion of being "on the move," as seemingly everyone in Italy had suggested. Sasha relaxed into the sounds of her favorite hour, when only birds, cooks and truck drivers stirred. She inhaled the scent of genista, a flower that had astounded her during their tour a day earlier, more even than the sight of Mt. Etna.

Their guide, an unemployed geologist, had taken them to a cave at the foot of the volcano to show off millennia of accumulated rock formations, claiming it was the cavern through which Hades abducted Persephone, the daughter of Demeter. As interested as Sasha was in the legend, being underground had brought on the clicking and whistling in her ears that told her she was emotionally exhausted and in dire need of a break. She'd left the tour group to examine the unusual tree, which resembled forsythia and smelled like juniper, but sweeter. Genista's fragrance was so strong that, standing near the peak of black and barren Mt. Etna the day before, with a desolate landscape of nothing but dark grey ash spreading out for miles, Sasha had pictured Persephone – before she was kidnapped and forced to marry the devil – dancing there with the nymphs "on the plains of Enna," intoxicated by the flower's sweet smell wafting up from the valley below.

Sasha had fallen in love with genista, and, sitting on the balcony of their B&B now, feeling finally at ease, crossing her fingers for Aaron and Emmy to stay asleep a little while longer, she made some notes about the plant to include in her article about the Goddess Demeter temple... it's the first living thing to return after a devastating volcanic eruption...thrives on gritty ash... grows into trees as tall as 10 meters immediately below the active volcano but only reaches the height of an average bush in other, non-volcanic areas. Sasha began outlining the story. Her mind felt clear, in the flow and on a creative roll, when, from inside the room she heard a loud cry.

"Ma-ma?"

Sasha was used to being wrested out of her thoughts this way and had gotten through single parenting for the first five years of Emmy's life by learning how to take deep breaths instead of going into emotional reactions. She had read every parenting book she could get her hands on, from attachment parenting to reparenting oneself, and had practiced the prescribed techniques for enough years now that it required little effort to manufacture a serene voice even while being so frustrated

she could hardly breathe. Still, shelving her anger required intense focus and constant vigilance.

Sasha felt heat rising in her belly. One drop of anger can infect the heart of a child...divert angry impulse. Divert angry impulse. Deep breath. Create new neural pathways, think loving thoughts... but my throat feels tight... parental anger causes lasting pain, years later... Soon she'll grow up and leave home. Be her source of joy... At minimum, stay neutral. Another deep breath. Mothering is the most important thing right now, maybe raising a balanced child is my contribution to the planet. So why do I feel like that's not enough, why am I'm hyperventilating?

"Just a minute, Sweetie," Sasha replied, capping her pen-- when what she felt like doing was pounding the metal table with her fist then pitching it, along with her notebook into the smoking volcano like the stones hurled into the Ionian Sea by Polyphemus, the blinded, enraged Cyclops.

Sometimes she had an inkling of what leads parents to commit violence, while her own angry impulses allowed for some sympathy for her mother, who'd already been trapped in a terrible marriage with small children when she was only half Sasha's age.

Growing up behind the Iron Curtain, her mother had never fully recovered from the trauma of hunger, violence, and daily uncertainty. It had taken Sasha many therapy sessions to link her own experiences as a child – her mother's screaming and slapping, tempered by bouts of overbearing tenderness and demands for affection that had made for a terrifyingly claustrophobic childhood – with Mom's trauma. Compared to her mother, Sasha knew her life was a piece of cake. Except more often than not Sasha felt it was just that: cake; too sugary, too rich, and, on its own, not a nourishing meal. Since Emmy's birth, she had put her own goals and desires aside so thoroughly in order to raise her child that she'd lost sight of herself. The only thing that truly mattered was giving Emmy the loving, nourishing childhood she had missed herself. Since meeting Aaron, when her daughter was small, Sasha had let go of survival mode to some degree, and it was true, she had recently ticked the boxes – good job, loving family, supportive husband, beautiful home – yet she still felt wracked by daily anxiety. Some part of her brain was on constant alert for the moment that everything good, the whole cake, every bit of comfort, including Aaron's love, could be smashed or snatched away from her in an instant.

But solo parenting had also forced Sasha to be resourceful. By the time her daughter had turned two, they'd fallen into a routine in

which Emmy would sit quietly for hours after breakfast and “read” her picture books, mouthing the stories to herself, while Sasha worked in the next room.

The memory made Sasha’s chest feel raw and full, like something wanted to be let loose. She allowed herself a few tears, exhaled the heaviness and anger she’d held a moment earlier, and, putting her notebook and pen down on the balcony table, stepped inside the darkened hotel bedroom. Aaron was still sleeping, snoring lightly on the other side of the room. Kissing Emmy on the temple and running her fingers gently through her daughter’s sleep damp hair, Sasha persuaded her to read a little while longer.

Back outside on the balcony, Sasha picked up her pen and opened her notebook again.

Eve F.W. Linn

Painted at the Hotel La Belle Aurore

*It was summer, trees sky, sea.
I saw nothing else.*

Embowered in a twisted olive tree I curve
above a blue chair. I draw myself drawing.

Only colors, paintbrush...

A succession of Charlottes.
String held in a swallow's beak for her nest.

*I had to go further into solitude, completely away
from everyone, then maybe I could find what I
had to find:*

Sunflower petals explode above succulence of pears tipped gold.
Wait— that first bite—teeth marks on grained ivory flesh.
My barbed tongue laps heat-streaked juice.

Namely myself— a name for me.

I am happiest when I can fly. I leave three discarded sketches
in lost luggage.

*I become my mother, my grandmother, in fact I was all
the characters who take part in my play....*

I turn on a whirlwind. I am already gone.

Note: Italicized lines are extracted from an unpublished letter written by Charlotte Salomon to a former lover in the archives of the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam. Charlotte Salomon was a German-Jewish artist (1917- 1943) who fled Berlin and created her multi-media work, *Life or Theater*, while hiding from the Nazis on the French Riviera.

Giana Longo

A Letter to my Father on My Autonomy

You say it's dangerous
to raise my voice,
so how come you are allowed to
when the ref's whistle is the wrong call
and when you can't figure out
how to fix your phone?

It's not safe for me to walk
in a pack of girls once the sun has left,
and dark cool air fills the
streets our heels clack
against; sending out
signals
They can pick up on.
Bats using echo location to track
their prey

*Don't look back and throw
up the bird when you hear his
whistle, I'm told
It will only infuriate him
and you don't know how to
put out those types of flames*
As if I have forgotten only those
Who can build fires by
send air between their cowardly
lips are capable of dousing the
heat the sound emits.

I will not sit
 silent
as the world around me takes
away first the hope, then my
purpose. My hands will fly,
my voice will rise, and my eyes will
burn through those flames you

are sure I cannot handle. Forgive
me, but you have no idea what it means
to lose what you have never
been allowed to have in the first place

the danger of that scares me
more than maintaining my safety scares you

Hala Louviere

spring break

in spring,
when crisp snow wilted into matted grass,
when I could not imagine planning for next weekend or next year,
I called my mother.

my voice croaked.
then it shattered. my inhale, my exhales, my vocal cords became the
rough cement roads just before repavement.
and I waited.

and I waited.
she did not drive the two hours along the highway to me, she did not stop
at the maverick to buy a cherry coke with two straws, she did not bring
my long-lost handmade quilt, she did not open my unlocked door, and
she did not pull me into her chest like when I was four and I fell down
the stairs and cut my thigh.

she did nod. she did tell me to call back. she did cry when she put her
phone down on the dining table, her face pressed so hard against the
shining varnish that her cheek nearly stuck when she finally pulled it
away, several hours and stages of grief later. she did tell me that she was
fine, that I was fine.

eventually, the matted grey became fluffy green blades again,
and I bought a planner.
but I never lock the door, in case she comes, quilt and coke in hands.

Betsy Martin

Sovereign Realms

My father's white shirts from the cleaner's
smell of flowers from a faraway kingdom.
I'm allowed to open the dresser drawer

and pluck from the folded bud of each shirt
the bright cardboard
for drawing zebras on.

He stands at the mirror
to button the collar and cuffs
with crisp strokes
and comb his gray fringe of hair.

The sun now fills the house
because it's late, it's always late,
as he leaves for work
in a small storm of resolve,
his shoes immaculate,
his dark suit slicing through
the sticky jelly of home air,

my mother hovering nearby
in her own eddy of envy, but also
relief, released from the world
to enter her intimate queendom
of books and cooking,
while I
watch the cat sleep in a sunbeam.

Celia Meade

Happy Hour

The waiter set down what was essentially a mug of port on the coaster between Saul and I, next to a glass of chardonnay. Saul drank wine these days, regardless of the hour or occasion, such was his devotion to the grape.

“Cheers.”

We clinked our glasses and he grinned the grin of the wicked.

We met at a bar in the university. I was there with another man. The people there were past inebriated by the time we showed up, and my date melted into the crowd. Then Saul was there beside me. He offered to buy me a drink. At that time, I drank rye and ginger. He handed me a stein full of liquid and ice.

“Its *4-for-1 night*,” he said, clutching a pitcher of beer to his stomach.

“You can get a single, even if it is *4-for-1 night*,” I said. I lifted the heavy mug, unaccustomed to such weight and dribbled the drink over my hand.

“Alcohol abuse!” he said, grinning his grin.

The problem with port is it slides down the throat without me noticing it. The hotel bar murmured with contentment, people like us enjoying themselves, stopping for nightcaps on the way to bed, not wanting the evening to end. In fact, we had begun our evening there, at a wine-tasting event. We each drank four different wines, paired with local cheese. It was, after all, Sonoma. Not the place to drink port, but we liked to mix it up.

And the margaritas we drank before supper! Of all the brands of tequila on offer at that bar, the last one was butter. Tequila made me feel good, it was a drug, a refuge, not like the whiskey I used to drink in college because I thought it was the drink of a sophisticate.

Back in my *rye and ginger* days, Hugh, the man I had arrived at the bar with, came up to us, eyeing Saul.

“Let me know when you want to go back,” Hugh said, “I won’t let you walk home alone in the dark.”

“Thank you. Yes, I will want to leave soon.” I flicked hair off my forehead and swept it behind my back. I never took my eyes off Saul.

Hugh stood with us for a few minutes before he wandered off to join a group of students, politicians in the making, all shouting at each other.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” Saul said into my ear. He tipped his beer to his mouth.

“I’m going to *Out of Africa* with a friend, but you’re welcome to come along.”

“Nah, I wouldn’t do that to your friend.” Saul gazed around the room. “But I’ll prolly be here tomorrow, if you want to come by after.”

So that’s how we met. Hugh walked me home.

“That was close!” he said. “You nearly got trapped by Saul.” Hugh was feeling smug, but he did not gain entry to my apartment.

The next night I went to the movie with my roommate. Melissa was a dullard, but we helped each other through our first years at school. I wasn’t the type to ditch a friend when a guy asked me out. I was a feminist. I went to the movie with her and feigned fatigue, then slipped out and circled back to the bar.

Saul was there, like he said, seated with a large table of men.

“Would you like to dance,” I said. The others hooted.

“I don’t really dance,” Saul said, but he got up and followed me out to the dance floor. He put his arms around my waist and pulled me to him. I pressed my face into the warmth of his neck. The boys at the table continued hurling abuse at us. Whatever it was we were doing, we continued, until Saul broke up with his girlfriend, until Hugh moved away and Saul and I ended up in Sonoma ten years later with another drink.

In the California heat, we stumbled past the pool to our room, down a path lit with glass lanterns. We were drawn down the path, past our room and we backtracked to the pool to try and get our bearings. Saul veered onto the grass by the pool, widening his stance to regain balance at the water’s edge.

“So blue,” he murmured, “how do they make it so blue?” He bent forward peering down at the lights in the deep end, swaying and then falling in with a splash.

I lay down on the pool deck in my cream-colored silk shirt. My hand grasped towards Saul who was sloppily treading water.

“I fell in the drink! Haw-haw! Do you get it Cheryl? Do you get what I did?”

Little black bats flitted over the surface of the water like swallows and Saul flinched away, drifting towards me. I grabbed the

back of his shirt and twisted him around to face me at the pool deck, then towed him to the shallow end, stepping out of my jeweled sandals to help him climb the stairs. The path led away from the pool into darkness in all directions and we couldn't remember the way to our room. Oh well.

The waiter came up to us with a smile fading off his face and took our order back at the lounge. He walked up to the bartender, their heads nearly touching, as if in a tender exchange, and the bartender called someone on the phone. I looked down and brushed the pebbles off my blouse, hoping the water wouldn't mark it permanently. A doorman skittered towards us with the front desk woman, her hands clasped tightly in front of her blazer.

“Are you buyin? Cause I'm drinkin!” Saul drawled, snorting.

“This way,” The front desk woman said like a schoolmarm, and when it was clear the nightcap we ordered was not forthcoming, we followed her back down the garden path to our room. On the way I scooped up my sandals, glittering there in the grass where I had abandoned them.

Tragedy. This must have been how those people on the Titanic felt. They bought their ticket and felt so good, so lucky to be going on this fantastic trip. They would have dressed up for supper in Italian wool and considered themselves fortunate to be on that ship. They must have had plans, too, that were never carried out, all kinds of plans.

Our next day's slate of activities included touring Stag's Leap vineyard and stopping in Yountville for lunch. I imagined a craggy bluff overlooking the grapevines with tidy red rosebushes at each row end. Of course, in my mind there was a magnificent stag, a wild male like my Saul.

I wanted to go, see what these places were really like, but it was not going to happen. When had we last followed through with plans? I remember going to the movie with Melissa, but since then... *happy hour*. Melissa, the plodder, my old roommate, was doing a master's degree in English at NYU. I remained in retail, a job I told myself was a *transition to the adult world*. I worked at a gas station, but I had not divulged that information to Melissa or anyone.

I could see what tomorrow would bring. Saul and I would hold our heads still and avoid opening the drapes until afternoon. I'll slide a hand over the sheets to stroke Saul's back in the room. My magnificent stag. He will perspire, sweat out the alcohol, one drop at a time. We will moan and wish we had never dropped by the hotel bar, or any bar, ever, including the one where we met. There, where we thought *4-for-1* was

such a steal. Where we thought the bargain we took part in was getting us something sweet.

Carole Mertz

An Interview with Renee Rossi



Carole Mertz: I encountered your work by way of Kallisto Gaia Press and soon learned your *motherboard* collection was a runner-up in the 2021 Saguaro Poetry Chapbook contest. This chapbook and your full-length collection *TRIAGE*, from 2016, offer poems that tend to miraculously enter empty spaces between one concrete element and another and often bring marvelous abstractions to the fore. You use nature, motherhood, body awareness, physiological functions, and mythology as themes. When did poetry become a part of the creative impulses in your life and when did you first begin writing poems?

Renee Rossi: Thank you for reading my poetry! I do like to juxtapose the concrete with the abstract and you mention themes that I gravitate toward. Creative acts have always been a part of my life for as long as I can remember: painting watercolors, collage, sewing costumes, planting rock gardens, making “things.” I consider poetry just another extension of the impulse to create: it’s just part of the continuum. I first began writing poems when I was in my 30s right around the time I had my first son and took some essay and poetry classes at the Harvard extension program in Boston.

CM: What influences in your early life fostered development of this skill?

Renee Rossi: I read a lot early on. A little bit of everything, including the encyclopedias in my bedroom. As a child, I read novels and Scientific American, and other arcana including fairy tales.

I love the use of imagery in poetry, but I also am really drawn to all the moving parts that happen simultaneously in good poems: syntax, diction, imagery, meter, sound etc., and that it is a venue for the creative expression of feelings. There is no one right way for me to write poetry. I've also painted in water media (collage, watercolor, acrylic, etc.) for almost 40 years and this act of creating transfers well to writing.

CM: As a musician I find it interesting to see how my early training in music and performance transferred, to an extent, into my practice of writing poetry. It's obvious your professional interest in medicine, the body, and healing likewise plays a part in your writing. Could you speak to that?

Renee Rossi: I consider myself a "facilitator" of healing, since the real healing comes from within the individual. And healing is an art form that we all partake of in our lives until we don't. I hope to shine a light on suffering; it's part of all of our paths, and so is the transcendence of suffering.

I also believe my work serves as an investigation of our transience. In medical school, they told us we would be adding 20,000 new words to our vocabulary...how could I not use some of those words in my writing? I think it is kind of magical to weave medical terminology into poetry; sometimes, it almost feels like code switching to me.

CM: Your poem "Movements" will remain in my mind as an unforgettable poem. Please tell us about the impetus for creating it. Especially intriguing are your lines, "I'm inside my old house exploring / new rooms added since I've left." The amazing effect of this poem is one of both confining and enlarging the psychological vista, so to speak. I think readers would love to know more about what the poem means to you. Your terms "trembling cave bridge," "large windows," and especially "eggshell inside the heart," might be symbols or might be concrete signifiers. They provide endless potential for rumination for me. Do you care to comment about it?

Renee Rossi: This poem comes from a braiding of both experience and dream, but this mix creates a type of surrealism in the poem. For instance, “trembling cave bridge” comes from walking on a bridge in a cave underground in the Alps. “Eggshell inside the heart” is both figurative and literal—sometimes the heart has these calcifications especially in premature babies. So, there’s this mix of abstraction and concrete signifiers, though I think these things really converge in this poem. It needed space and segments to breathe it all in. At times, I have an active dream life in images. I have a recurring (Jungian) dream of new rooms in an old house and what they represent. It’s a fascinating journey and this poem, hopefully, brings the reader on that journey. This poem went on to be in the Best of the Net Anthology.

CM: Could you name some poets or mentors you particularly admire?

Renee Rossi: I admire the work of Elizabeth Bishop, Emily Dickinson, WS Merwin, Hafiz, and so on. It’s hard to narrow it down.

I’ve had many mentors, too numerous to mention, over the years but am particularly grateful to mentors from Vermont College where I completed an MFA in Creative Writing.

CM: Were there specific instances in your professional life that caused shifts, caused you to become more active in either of your professions? Have medicine and poetry always run parallel? Do you view your creative efforts as bifurcated or as a single entity?

Renee Rossi: This is a great question. When I was practicing in Boston in the early 90s I was able to take some night classes in essay writing and poetry. I was also writing some technical medical articles at the time for medical journals. I have always written in personal journals, and sometimes it’s just snippets of images, found language from reading, or overheard conversation bits. I see myself more as a creative person than anything. But, I think medicine and poetry kind of go together. I definitely see my creative efforts as a single entity. I know some writers have a set writing time every day and I think more in terms of being creative every day, however that might be expressed. Performing surgeries was a creative act and I left the practice in 2018. There was also a shift in the early 2000s to studying holistic medicine (Ayurveda,

the oldest extant recorded form of medicine) and I started to see that holism reflected in my poetry.

CM: Are there any events in your writing life that represent to you public or private milestones?

Renee Rossi: It was a writing life milestone to have my first chapbook, *Still Life*, winner of the Gertrude Press Poetry Prize published, and the other milestone was the publication of my first full length collection of poetry, *Triage*. I really started writing poetry in earnest after an NDE (near death experience) from a rollover accident in early 2000s, after which I worked part-time again as a surgeon and was able to devote more time to poetry. I also received an MFA in Creative Writing in 2009 from Vermont College.

CM: Was your poem “Buddhist Slogan #21” a difficult poem to form? Since it appears to travel back into your personal history, what effect did that have on your shaping it?

Renee Rossi: It seems that each poem is difficult to write. Memory is so subjective as we all know. But, this is why I think image narratives can be very powerful: our own imagination fills in the gaps. This is a poem that weaves personal experience with universal experience, hopefully. There is something really undefinable about having grown up in Detroit at the time I did.

CM: What else would you like readers to know about your writing and where can they learn more about your publications?

Renee Rossi: Some of my poetry has been published in online journals and I also encourage people to read *Triage* from Lost Horse Press at: www.losthorsepress.org/catalog/triage-2/ *Motherboard* is available from Kallisto Gaia Press at: www.kallistogaiapress.org/product/motherboard/

About the Author: Renee Rossi has served over the past 25 years as volunteer physician with the Cape CARES Central American Relief Effort, a non-profit humanitarian organization providing healthcare to rural Hondurans. Her recent chapbook, *Motherboard*, was a runner-up for the Saguaro Poetry Prize. She has published the full-length collection, *Triage*, and two other chapbooks: *Third Worlds*, and *Still Live*, winner of

the Gertrude Press Poetry Prize. A native of Detroit, Rossi teaches integrative medicine and currently divides her time between the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont and other places she finds compelling.

Carole Mertz

A Wintry Verdant Rose

After a painting by Natascha Graham

The woman stands enveloped in her feminine nature. Where the florals end and her female self begins, you can't discern. The two evolve

as one, indistinguishable as snow on the mountain's rocky scarf, its gray face painted white by sunlight's

morning sheen. You see her posed as from a bath, hidden or exposed. Her secrets hers alone. You see

resolute nature in her beauty, and power in her feminine tone. You ask that she remain singular and alone. Not yet touching another—a lonely, blooming, verdant rose.

Joyce Meyers

Why I always cry at weddings

though I barely know or never met
the happy couple, and the bride
and groom and all the parents
are dry-eyed. It isn't that I've known

the promise of rosebuds, the heady scent
of blooms, have battled aphids and blackspot,
seen the petals brown, then drop.
It's that despite the odds

that love will slowly fade
to dust, or worse, when I see
the rings slip onto those young fingers
a cactus flower opens in my heart,

compels from hidden wells of hope
my reservoir of rain.

Ilene Millman

Coming to America

after a photography by Joseph Rothenberg

Not for the proportion
or symmetry recognized as beauty
but shadows, the fine facial lines
that hold onto every feeling,
the soft body of need
folded more tightly than blanket corners
and your resolve, it also matters.
We never spoke of practical nightmares
not how you changed but how things do
how you can stand firmly planted in a hurricane
of events, but only in the eye,
how you can wrap your past tense
in a heavy woolen scarf
fling it out over a molten sea

Ilene Millman

Lilith Goes to Coney Island

I can still picture us in-your-face red dress covering
my serpentine body and Judith lemon yellow miniskirt
vinyl Go-Go boots. Father-God always whispered
we were a bit brash and seductive—
maybe that's why He removed her story edited mine.

Q train to Coney Island my idea of course—
didn't think Miriam would come
but she's changed those years waiting
for Him to speak through her then finding
herself shamed for what speaking up

I remember how Jephthah's daughter
danced to Miriam's tambourine that day
the other nameless ones trailing after her quiet as usual—
the ones who begat unto who begat unto who begat
and the Egyptian princess the hospitable Gentile woman—

and how we didn't even ask Eve to come
Eve with her *yes dear no thank you dear*—
we left her in that bland paradise
crocheting yarmulkas though truth be told
she was never dumb or evil.

Fresh off the train we hit The Cyclone
I can still feel it wind rushing through my hair
blood pumping in my veins, yes, no faster
don't look, must look a scream escaping
hiss of brakes

how I dared them the Parachute Jump
the long slow lift climax on top
release and free fall Adam would never do this
but damn, it had closed down too much risk
not enough security

By then we were hungry.

Noses pressed to a candy store window
they coveted cherry-red candy apples
so much sweeter than the Garden ones

Nah,

I said, *we already know what we need to know*

And how claiming ourselves

we strode up Surf Ave. and up
onto the Boardwalk

munching salty Nathan's French fries
before an open sea.

Ilene Millman

Scaped Clean in Istanbul

All dusty day shopping
she wants a spa
 hygienic modern
and I want an epic
 Cagaloglu Hammam Turkish Baths den of indulgence
since 1741—

no haggling here we pay and plunge
 into a domed room marble fountain center stage,
through high eyelet windows slitted light white as paper.
First the getting bare
 not as difficult as it once was
old bodies unnoticed like old people.
 We slip into place
 on a communal marble slab.
We wait. Sweating. Naked.

In comes a Turkish warrior disguised
 as a woman
packed in a bathing suit
 and speaking not a lick
 of English

massaged
mashed
muscles leg to head
 tremble beneath her hands like a horse
 quivers beneath its rider,
she starts again
 her hand now covered with a coarse cloth mitt
 scrubbing scrapping raking —
the years slough off lay on the tile floor
 and then a deluge of doubled soapsuds
 over our heads.

An hour gone in flying particles

bodies vibrating like the aftertone of a struck tuning fork,
our hair frazzled frizz
our eyes raccooned by runaway mascara
she smiles had we never realized how beautiful we are?

Linda Johnston Muhlhausen

My New Coat

My coat is the color of underripe lime
An in-your-face green that says I dare you
To look, blink, disapprove.

A violent green, my daughter observes.

Not violet, as the flower
But violent as in assault
Not her mother's soft receding beige
But a homicidal, take-no-prisoners green

The giddy green of cheap crayon
Of nightmare chartreuse lizards
Venomous mamba, green bottle fly
Toxic iridescent algae

A blade of light, green and sharp
To pith the pupils of a hostile world;
Like sun caught in grass, it will shine.

Violent, yes, I say. Violent as birth, and as necessary.

I don't tell my daughter how wonderful,
How terrifying my selection
This green that says I am finally ready to be seen.

Linda Johnston Muhlhausen

Why I Didn't Tell

Because hiding in the bright breakfast nook
Papered with daisies their orange centers popping
I was smoke and ash, edges curled like brown leaves
Burned in the center of the backyard.

Because at 7 years the word was murky but bad
Maybe bad as you could get, and when Barry caught up
With my furious pedaling and said the man gave him money
To get me to cross the log to their side of the swamp

Because he wanted to rape me I cried without exactly
Knowing why and pedaled faster without looking back until
Red-faced and burning but safe in the daisies, when Mom asked
Is anything – I could form no answer, no truth but to breathe –
No, I'm fine.

Eve Ottenberg

The Confession

When she asked, “well, what’s next for me?” and the doctor replied, “we’re going to make you comfortable,” she and her elderly children understood that she was going to die and probably soon. The daughters investigated hospices. The sons made financial arrangements. Within two days, she was moved to “a facility,” whose quiet, melancholy atmosphere and discreet, retiring nurses filled her children with unexpected hopes that perhaps she would live longer than the month the physician predicted. After all, it was so different from their father’s death, sudden and violent in the cold, white sterility of the hospital. Maybe she would recover! Learn to live again in this domestically inviting, tree-shaded, old mansion. People with congestive heart failure could live a long time. But then she stopped eating. Entirely. Nothing aside from lemonade passed her lips for days on end. Darla Steinberg had decided to die – sooner rather than later.

Her five children rotated the vigil. But because the northern New Jersey hospital was far from Boston, the eldest, Ellen Steinberg, tired, gray-haired and having gone to seed, only came to do her stints once a week. The other four, living in New York and Connecticut, were in and out constantly. Darla complained that it dizzied her, that she couldn’t keep track of who was there, but they chalked that up to her being 94 years old and also to the confusion of her self-imposed starvation.

It was summer. Heat smothered the suburbs and thickened the air like syrup on a stove. Assorted Steinbergs arrived in the lightly air-conditioned hospice, perspiring, wilted and grateful for the cold lemonade that was obviously the specialite de maison and that the nurses’ aides offered them. The sons came only in the evenings after work. All three daughters, retired, had much more disposable time. The middle daughter, athletic Amy, constantly warned the others, with some irritation, to stop trying to convince their mother to eat. Because inevitably that was the first question on every new arrival’s lips: “Did you eat anything today, Mom?”

Darla Hollingworth Steinberg’s previously fine, alert, commonsensical, Anglo-Saxon mind now wandered. She sat up in bed, gaunt, gray, eyes closed, murmuring. When those sharp eyes opened, they took in the sunlight dancing across the ceiling as well as whoever happened to be there in a brief moment of comprehension, before they

closed again. And so it was one roasting August afternoon, that she discerned her oldest child, frazzled Ellen, thoughtlessly and somewhat unattractively attired, as always, seated beside her bed, tired and worried, while Amy sat nearby, knitting.

“You were not his child,” Darla said to Ellen, whose heart sank, not at this news, which had, unbeknownst to her siblings or mother been revealed to her by the now deceased Harold Steinberg, 33 years earlier in a moment of despair, but at the presence of Amy, who heard this astounding announcement and stopped knitting, staring. “You were the other guy’s child,” Darla continued. Amy gaped, first at her mother, then at her older sister.

“Amy, could you leave us for a moment?” Ellen asked in tired, distant tones.

Amy gulped, nodded silently and walked to the door, followed by Darla’s acute, purposive gaze. “You were the other guy’s child!” Darla called out loudly. And then, thankfully, her sister was out of the room with the door shut behind her.

“What was his name?” Ellen finally asked the question that had haunted her since what others euphemistically referred to as her nervous breakdown at age 30, but what she had known full well then was utter madness, as Harold, too, had known. This knowledge tormented him, and, sorrowful, guilty, he had informed his psychotic daughter that he had long secretly believed she was not his child. “A wise child knows her father,” he had told her. And so, all through the ensuing decades, through her recovery, her return to work, her brief relapse, Ellen had wondered who that father was. Only her mother knew. And she dared not broach the topic with frosty Darla. She ransacked her memories of Darla’s tales of her pre-Harold beaux. She settled on one, a young man from a Mayflower family like Darla. Now she waited to hear his name.

“Sidney Blum,” her mother replied. “You are Sidney Blum’s daughter.”

“Who is he?” For this was the first time Ellen had ever heard this name.

“He travelled in our set. He was gregarious, delightful, charming,” Darla waved a withered hand, “and a little unbalanced. Harold thought maybe Sidney had psychiatric issues.” Darla’s gaze travelled to the patch of yellow sunlight shifting over the ceiling. “Harold never knew.”

The words “on the contrary” hovered on Ellen’s lips. Instead she asked, “why did you never tell me?”

“I just couldn’t,” Darla said simply and with the hint of a sigh.

“You coward,” Ellen thought, remembering her own experience, pregnant and unmarried, the scandal she caused wherever she went, her determination to have the baby at age 32, regardless of what people said, in part in angry revolt against Harold, who had affirmed to her, years before, in her early twenties, with a significant, meaningful and not entirely friendly look, his undying support of a woman’s right to an abortion. “No woman,” he had said pointedly to her, “should be forced to bear a child she doesn’t want.”

Later, aware of his doubts about his paternity, that conversation returned to her, along with the years of his brittle, distant, sometimes hostile fatherhood. “He basically told me my mother should have aborted me,” Ellen thought from the vantage point of age 32, of having survived a psychotic depression only to flounder into unwed motherhood. And this thought caused the long dormant rage that had burned through her in adolescence, to flare up again, but only briefly. For in her heart she thanked her step-father for telling her the truth, for enlightening her, enabling her finally to understand what had blighted her childhood and teen years, what had rendered her psychologically homeless in her twenties. She felt as if a bag had been taken off her head; and thanking Harold mentally, promised both her parents, in her heart, never to reveal their secret.

“Can I find him?” Ellen asked her dying mother.

“No. He died years ago,” Darla paused. “He was unreliable, not a suitable father.”

A tear ran down Ellen’s cheek for this father she had never met. Darla saw it and scowled.

“So I guess I got the better deal,” Ellen said gamely.

“Oh yes, you definitely got the better deal.”

Amy tiptoed back in.

Darla turned her fierce, skeletal head and frowned at Ellen, wiping away the tear with the heel of her palm. “Maybe you should go for a walk,” she said to her.

“No. I’ll stay,” Ellen said.

Amy resumed knitting. Ellen sat quietly; her mother drowsed. Shadows lengthened over the ceiling like a shroud. That night Ellen returned to Boston, driving through the dark, alone along highways that led back to the remains of her life, her grown children, her aging husband, her garden, her languages, her hobbies, night highways of

unknowing, years of unknowing, uncertainty finally resolved, truth finally, at age 63, given a name: Sidney Blum.

#

Two evenings later, deep in the night, Ellen's phone woke her from dreamless slumber. It was her sister Amy, telling her, as she stood in the dark, that her mother had died. They talked briefly, and Amy let drop that none of the children believed Darla about this Sidney Blum business, she had been delirious, at death's door, and that if Ellen was unsure, bothered in any way, she should get a test. "No," Ellen said, deep in the dark. "I don't need a test."

"It was a beautiful death," Amy said bizarrely.

"That is surely false," Ellen thought and returned to bed.

She could not sleep. She tossed and her mind raced. Finally, impelled by she knew not what, she rose, went downstairs and pulled a framed picture out of the cabinet, a picture of her parents some 30 years earlier. They were in their early sixties and smiled for the photographer as they sat in Harold's basement office, the rows and rows of bookshelves behind them, betokening their rich, deep and doggedly intellectual lives. The picture dated from the year before they saved her life from the torture and death that her loss of sanity had surely marked out for her. For when Ellen cracked up, she had gone home, recovered, learned the truth about who Harold thought he was to her, then returned to her Manhattan apartment, to work and, shortly thereafter, to a child, never fully mentally whole again, but back, she knew, about 80 percent of her previous, lucidly sane self.

The bedroom, indeed the whole house, featured dozens of photographs of Ellen and her husband's children. No one else. She paused in the dim light of the night-table lamp and gazed at the picture of her parents, before the catastrophe, before they were called upon to save, at no small emotional cost, their dying daughter, dying of mental agony as surely as any cancer patient. This, she thought, was as she wished to remember them. This and only this. She placed the framed photo on her night-table. Then she switched off the lamp and went to sleep.

Hailey Paetzel

Citrus Sunset

Throwing up on the Malibu beach in a floor-length dress was surprisingly an expected action for Mila. And with each heave, she had only one name on her mind—*Michael*. After steadying herself, she walked up to her destination, a lavish beachside restaurant she always found coming back to. She spotted his grey curls out of the others at the entrance.

Besides one small group next to them, the outside deck where they sat facing the ocean was empty. It being a Wednesday night, Mila assumed Californian socialites had more important things to do.

Nevertheless, the inside was on its way to being full.

“We can’t keep meeting,” the frazzled girl said.

“It’s okay,” the man said as if trying to reassure himself. “It’s okay.” Michael stared at her. Mila assumed he was waiting for her to perk up into one of her usual witty moods, but if he were smart, he would know those days were long gone.

Mila studied the group of four next to her. They all looked so happy...so content. Mila envied them desperately, but she understood it was only a temporary feeling.

“I’m not mad,” Mila explained, knowing exactly what he was thinking.

“I don’t know what you’re feeling anymore, Mila.”

Mila imagined two thin red rubber bands pulsing between her and Michael, ready to snap from the tension.

“You know I can’t thank you enough for doing all this,” he said. “Jane is so happy.”

Mila raised an eyebrow. “Is she?”

Michael gave her a weak smile. “Of course. She trusts you to do this. You know this.”

“I don’t know anything, Michael.”

“Oh, come on.”

“Expect maybe your liking of the younger generations.”

“Michael’s fingers slipped on his water, nearly dropping the expensive glass.

“I’m not dumb. You think I don’t notice.” Mila gestured between them and then frantically around them.

“Whatever you’re thinking ended a *long* time ago. I mean *years* ago.”

“Is that why we’re meeting in secret?” Mila smirked. “Listen, I don’t care what you feel for me anymore. I just want you to admit I’m right,” she said.

“About what?”

“You’re an awful person.”

Michael had a stunned expression. Then he slowly started laughing. “Is that why I’ve been in your life for almost seven years?” he asked.

“I never said you’re not interesting.” Mila looked at the sunset, pretending to look bored.

“That seems to be the only compliment you can give me lately,” Michael said.

“What? You want me to get on my knees and call you the most beautiful person alive?” Mila questioned.

Michael chuckled. “Unfortunately, I think you might believe that.”

“Never said I didn’t.”

The waiter arrived at their table, describing the specials, while Mila continued to observe the group beside them. “And what will the young lady have” The waiter addressed Michael. Mila looked the waiter up and down and glared.

“I’ll have the lemon pasta with salmon,” she said.

The two were silent after giving their orders.

“Are you not hungrier?” asked Michael.

“No.” Mila looked around like she was trying to find an escape route in case someone pulled a knife on her.

“You don’t eat anything besides pasta.”

They didn’t speak again until their food arrived. “How’s your new fashion line turning out,” Michael said.

Mila sighed. “I’m a little behind. “It’s hard to keep up here since the nineties began.”

“Well, you do have to work for it in L.A. At least you had a lot handed to you unlike me.”

Mila dropped her fork in anger. “You always have new ways to say that you’re better than me.”

She laughed in disappointment and disbelief as she ran her hands through her long dark hair. “Just because you’re some semi-known

director doesn't mean you made my career. You just liked what you saw."

"I liked you for who you were...what you had to say," Michael spat out.

"I'm just your muse...and you still haven't said I'm right."

"You're not. I've only loved one younger girl the whole time I've been here." He gestured quotes with his hands, rolling his eyes. "And you know who it is," he said while putting his hand on hers.

Mila stared at him with wide eyes of disgust. "How-how can you say that with that fucking ring on your finger." Michael looked down at his left hand. "God, I'm scared to look on the other side of the mirror if I get married," Mila finally said. She sat in silence, filling with rage, watching the oranges and reds in the sky turn purple and blue.

A waiter passed their table. "Cigarette?" she offered. "They're specialty made with special herbs and spices."

"No, we're good," muttered Michael.

"Wait," Mila stopped her from leaving. "I'll take one."

The waiter lit one for her and placed it in Mila's hand. After she left, Mila took a long drag of the cigarette, making searing eye-contact with Michael and blew the smoke in his face. The cloud smelled of oranges and coffee. Michael stared at her like he had seen the devil itself in front of him.

"Who the fuck do you think you are?" Michael hissed. "How are you going to look Jane in the eye at the doctor's tomorrow?"

She stared at him, taking another drag, then looked at the other table as a waiter carried a cake with showering silver sparkles and placed it in front a woman while the rest cheered. "*Birthday*," Mila thought. "Let's go down to the beach," she said, drowning her cigarette in her water glass. She left the restaurant with Michael slowly following behind her.

They sat on the beach. Mila had her head on Michael's shoulder as he rubbed her stomach. She looked up at the sky, seeing the stars slowly making their appearance and wondered if he were imagining the child forming inside her. She looked up at him, tears ready to become constellations on her cheeks.

"I don't know what to do with myself after this is over," she said.

Andrea Potos

Go Where the Door is Open, She Said

Turn away from
the hurdled thresholds,

the shut doors and folded shutters,
those places where there isn't any washing

on the lines strung from windows—
no voices of the grandmothers chiming from within,

no tablecloths or towels, no trousers or nightgowns waving
in quiet breezes like invitations to arrive.

Beth Brown Preston

A Rainbow

For Miss D.

We were driving on the parkway headed for home.
Our talk about the music blaring from the radio.
Raindrops spattered the windshield with a spring shower:
Then came a rainbow!

We talked about the good old times:
When she came to visit my house
To prepare a special dinner.
We rolled sushi and concocted a vegetable lasagna.

I thought she wanted to be my slave.
She was so fragrant with cocoa butter soap & yogurt.

I wondered if any man had ever known her?
She needed to be worshipped like the Blessed Virgin.
And, since I too needed worship
I could do no more than surrender.

She walked strong and proud as the sun.
Still living in my conscious at this morning hour.
Her slender waist and staccato hips
Moved with rhythm,
For she was such a capricious coquette
The pleasure of being loved prevailed
Over her ride at being no man's slave.

Her sun soaked the city with saffron:
Perpendicular and blinding
With its illuminating rays.

Beth Brown Preston

An All-American Girl –for Gwendolyn Brooks

Topeka, Kansas, June 7th, 1917

Keziah:

Our baby girl's birth was not an easy one. She lingered low inside my womb for days and nights. Stubborn. Defiant even. Willfully against a world she someday would come to know. The midwife and her sister arrived singing to comfort me sweet gospel hymns I recalled from those church Sundays. "Push. Push." My baby girl loosened her grip upon my womb and entered this world squalling up a storm, telling us of her own pain. David and I, we named our baby Gwendolyn Elizabeth – the tigress, the fierce.

David:

I hear Gwendolyn's voice at birth coming on strong. We wanted her to own her mother's gift for music, hoped for the songs already to live inside her, to imitate the sound of Kezzie playing Mozart or Haydn on our old upright piano while she floated in the waters of her belly. My poppa never lived to greet his grandbaby, my father, a brave man who fled his destiny of chains and slavery to join the Union Army and fight in the Civil War. Poppa would have been so proud of our infant girl.

Keziah:

Washed clean of my blood, she nursed at my swollen breast, lapped the milk of our songs. Baptized in holy and sanctifying grace, at home, sleeping in my arms, she seemed to know all wisdom. Gifted of a thought deep and wide as the waters of the Kaw or the watershed of Shunganunga Creek, she was moistened with our kisses as we celebrated her born day, already knowing whom she might become – so beautiful of regard, so righteous of language.

Beth Brown Preston

Marriage

For Otis W. Brown Jr.

First there was that run in with the law in North Carolina.
You served your time down south
and bounced back to New York City.
Your zen moved you south again
from the bosom of the Big Apple into my arms.
You brought with you Chico, your calico cat,
an ancient leather suitcase full of poems in draft,
a change of clothes, and the clothes on your back.

We first met while you were poet-in-residence.
While you were surrounded with an audience
Of astonishing beautiful and intelligent Black women.
But I was the one who waited calmly in the wings
for you to look up from your poems
and to perceive who actually you really were.

Late nights you wove tales of life in Greenwich Village:
Adventures of you and your mentor Tom Weatherly
who clerked at the Strand Bookstore while you shined shoes.
And friends: Sue Childress (the only white woman
you ever slept with), Anne Waldman, Patti Smith,
Bo Breeden, Marty Watt, the chef Franks Wooten;
and the elegant Sandra Chapman who visited us
in South Philly only to make me jealous.

You told us how Wooten taught you to cook
Restaurant style without burning your knuckles.
And Weatherly taught you the craft of poetry:
the simplicity, the authenticity, the rhythm.
Poetry was the other profession you learned
to practice with extreme caution and sincerity.
“The poem must flow with music,” you insisted.
But the person you were to become
mixed romantic passion with a desperate violent anger:
a lethal combination of emotion.

Yet I remember your tenderness
and your quiet murmur of syllables and kisses,
the midnight roar of our typewriters
and the creak of the old bed
as together we fell to.

Allie Reichert

Divinity & Desire

I paced back and forth on a patch of slippery sidewalk, my winter boots squishing on the slush beneath them. The sky was gray with slices of pink, the sun impatient to join me on this January dawn. My hair fell alongside my face in matted clumps, and my shirt held the faint smell of dried Keystone beer. Drinking in the crisp New Hampshire air, I delighted in the sensation of walking home after a night of revelry. I smiled to myself. My heart raced as I remembered. His smile, his hair. His smell on my skin. I didn't really know him, no. And that was the best part. It was fun, anonymous, empowering. I felt cute and wanted. But here I was, pacing. I craned my neck, eyeing the steeple above me. The cross at the top whispered that I should feel guilty. But I didn't. I felt alive, excited, thrilled. But I should feel guilty. Guilty that I didn't know him. That we did things I couldn't confess on Sunday. I should feel guilty that I liked it.

I walked home to my dorm and perched in my single bed lofted above the ground, leaning against the cinderblock wall plastered with 6x8 photos of giggling friends. I attempt my third try at a practice confession. Forgive me father for I touched a...I type out. No, no. That's too graphic. I hit delete. Forgive me father for I have sinned... But did I sin? Do I even need to go to confession for this? I'm still a virgin, so I'm good right? I'm good, I'm holy, I'm pure. I'm saved, because I haven't actually committed the act meant for procreation. "Halleluiah. Saved from what exactly and from whom?" I scribble into my journal furiously. Now I'm angry.

A few weeks pass. I lay on my back. Above my dorm headboard hung a hand-painted canvas with a Mother Teresa quote. It read, "I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love." Next to it dangled a beaded pink and green rosary from a high school mission trip to the Dominican Republic. I'm sweaty. It's 2am on Valentine's Day, and I'm relishing in sexual delight. My red crop top and his black checkered flannel lay tossed atop a shiny leather skirt I borrowed from my floormate. We kiss and turn and roll and twist, enraptured. Through the cloudy haze, I feel a different paradox. I feel shame and I feel divine.

Dawn comes and Sunday arrives. I fidget with my coat. I sit in a pew next to an older girl I have a class with. In seminar, we talk about

white supremacy, women's health, and reproductive justice. I look up to her, admire her, want to be her. Does she have sex, I wonder? Does she feel guilty? We chant the responses in unison, "and with your spirit." I desperately want to believe in these words. I do. I look at the priest's face and I think "I'm a hypocrite." I listen to his words, and I scream silently, "I don't belong here." I sing the responsorial psalm and scenes from my newfound sexual life roll across my mind like movie scenes. Red crop top. Checkered flannel. Sweat. Desire. Confusion. Confession. Words from our class ring in my ear. Colonization. Power. Genocide. Manipulation. Missionaries. Men. I recite the Our Father and I think, I don't want to be here anymore. I don't want to *belong* here anymore.

Now I'm complacent, disillusioned, disinterested, an outsider in an institution that was once my home. Religion is something I *study*, not something I *do*. Disassociate. Decolonize. Dechurchify. Denounce. Distance.

Dichotomy.

It's now summertime and I sit on the porch of my cabin, my campers dreaming inside. My face is hot with sunburn, remnants of glitter linger in my tangled hair, and my tinted-green hands tell the secrets of color wars week. I swing softly in the breeze in my blue nylon hammock, drink in the crackles of bonfire in the mountain air, and sit with my big feelings. Where is the line between sexuality and holiness? I demand to know. What rules apply to me, now that I've denounced the church? I think about the staff party the weekend before, a sea of Blue Light, Birkenstocks, and summer love. I found myself upstairs in the family guest room with my summer crush, a dreamy co-staff member. Lying on top of the floral sheets, I blurt out that I don't want to have sex. I don't know why I said it. He looked at me in disbelief, sweaty and excited, and then said, "It's fine. You have rules. I get that. It's just...you see...it's like driving to a football game and finding out that the other team forfeited." My face flashed hot, and I scrambled to find my clothes. I tried to think of some cool retort like, "Cool thanks, I'll see if the home team is around next week" or "Talk to my manager," but my mind goes blank. Instead, I mumble something about looking for a friend and slip my yellow sundress back on over my sunburned arms. I flash him a weak smile and escape back into the party. He shouts an apology after me, reminding me he was only kidding.

A few nights later, my “best friend,” a gangly co-counselor with a sweet smile and all of my attention, swung by porch with an announcement. He leans forward, whispering across the candlelight, to tell me that he stood up for me earlier in boys’ senior counselor bunk room. “Because, I mean, yeah, you were being discussed.” “Oooh, grrreat, love that I was a topic of conversation,” I attempt to flip casually. “No no,” he protests, “I really did. I told him that he should have asked me before he tried to hook up with you. Because I could have told him you wouldn’t have sex.” I attempt to cover up my horror and keep my facial response even. I smile and nod. I’m saved by the fear of missing curfew. He jumps up to jog back to his cabin and flashes me a smile. “Anyways, see ya tomorrow morning, bright and early, Al. Love ya.” How did I become this... virgin Allie? I’m just following the rules. I feel a rupture between my old self and the new one I’m trying to build. Who am I performing for? Why does purity matter? Why is the line at sex? And why does no one else seem to care?

Decry.

It’s been four years. I denounced my way into a philosophy major and a global health minor, and I sit inside a giant, grandiose, gold-plated basilica in a city where I get to speak my second language and work on health problems. It’s cold and quiet. Tourists whisper in hushed tones as they shuffle along, taking photos of the radiant stained-glass windows. The ceiling stretches for miles above us, reaching for the heavens in grand arches. I sit in stewing silence. I think about the Indigenous slave labor that surely built this church. The building as a tool in destruction and death, of oppression and control. I think about the time I spent obsessing over virginity, sin or not sin. Allowed or not allowed. Pure or un-pure. I think about the weeks of mission trips and school-sponsored visits to DC to shame and blame women. The signs we crafted in high-school religion class, scripted in block letters, “Team Life” that we carried to DC to protect the unborn, like the advocates of justice we thought we were.

I laugh at myself for once feeling something for this institution. I’m shameful. How did I participate for so long? I promise myself to not feel anything but anger. And yet, I do. I sit in the silence and I yearn to feel a god again. A god, any god. I yearn for its comfort and direction and purpose. I covet a god with no strings attached, no racism, no xenophobia or patriarchy. A god without an institution that commits

genocide and silences women. A god who loves true justice. A god who likes good sex.

I leave the basilica as dusk begins to set in. I breathe heavily as I hike up to a vista in this 8,000 foot city. I look out over Quito's dancing quilt of lights below and the magnificent Cotopaxi volcano beyond. I gulp in the thin air and think, this is it. This is my church.

My church is without walls or canon or shame. My church is built on cabin porches and January sunrises. It breeds beauty and demands vulnerability. It has untamable hair and soft curves and strong muscles. My church is my body and oh do I let it be loved. My body lets me fold it up into car trunks en route to 4am after parties and onto two-person airplanes headed for the jungle. It takes me beyond shame and fear and shows me my power. I package it into business suits and muddy boots and red crop tops. I patch it up after I push it up mountains, across glaciers, and now, into a relationship. I let it love and be loved. Touch and be touched. My body, my church, my god, my peace.

A tapestry now hangs above my bed in the room I occupy in graduate school. "F*ck the patriarchy," it yells, written in embroidered pink cursive letters and decorated with small yellow flowers. I curl up beneath it next to a body that curves to fit my own. We swap metaphysical arguments and plan out our dreams in organized spreadsheets. A partner to question, plan, and conspire with. A person who shares my anger, fills doubts with courage and dreams with purpose. He reminds me that I can do it on my own, but he makes me not want to. Our bodies, our churches, our dreams, our peace. I no longer type out confessions. I refuse to feel guilt. I will spend a million Valentines' days beneath this tapestry thinking, typing, questioning, sexing, loving before I again feel shame. I wish the road here wasn't so long. I wish my pit stops didn't involve guilt, confusion, loneliness, godlessness. But it was and they did and you know what, I wrote it down.

I write this for the girl standing in the steeple's shadow, never to enter again. I want her to know that holiness and sexuality can be held together in messy entanglements. That purity is not a virtue and that godliness can be found in a sweaty dorm room. That feeling sexy, eager, coveted, does not cut off your direct line to divinity.

I write this for her because I think she forgot. Somewhere between that incandescent dawn and the years of irreverent, hot dancing and girls' nights out and hook ups and halleluiahs, she forgot that she could be holy, too. She forgot her ticket, seat got stolen, hopped off the train going anywhere with a steeple. She packed her backpack, studied

philosophy, trotted through streams, and whispered to the mountains, God are you in there? He didn't answer, but they did.

Maybe one day the steeple will feel holy once again. But until then, I want her to know that yes there is a god who wants her to scream in rapture and revel in her body. That there's a spirit who hopes she dances until her clothes fall off. Who cries in unison with her as she shouts, "Bans Off Our Bodies!" on the Supreme Court steps. That love can feel like home and sex can feel like love. That churches are not confined to stained glass ceilings. And maybe one day the anger at the steeple, that will lessen too.

Terry Sanville

Penelope's Odyssey

We all got the email from Penny; she'd be back in Santa Barbara on the third Saturday in July and would love to reconnect with us. She didn't know how long she would stay. I felt eager to see our old high school friend. But Nicole and Angela seemed ambivalent and maybe even a little hostile toward the idea.

"I don't know why you're so excited to see her, Jess," Angela said. "It's been over 25 years since we graduated and she's never taken the time to come home, not even once."

Nicole nodded. "We promised that the four of us would stay in touch. An email from her at Christmas and on the 4th just doesn't cut it."

Except for the years spent away at college, the three of us met once a month at Petrini's off De La Vina Street for Saturday lunch. We'd gossip about family, local politics, science, art, and the sad decline of our sex lives. Nicole had become a thoracic surgeon with a husband, kids, and a way-cool house on the Riviera overlooking the city and the yacht harbor. Angela struggled to make headway in the art world, with too few gallery showings but with a patient and loving family. My CPA business stayed steady through booms and busts. But it was pretty lifeless work. Maybe that's why Penny fascinated me.

"So why do you think she's coming back now?" I asked.

Angela gobbled down the last forkfuls of Chicken Bruschetta while talking. "Probably just . . . to rub our noses . . . in what she's . . . seen and done."

"I don't think so," I replied. "Unless she's changed, Pen was never petty and to a fault, generous. She was the one who helped me with my college entrance essay."

"You could have asked me," Nicole said. "I can write."

"Yeah, but Pen had that flair . . . and that's what I needed."

Angela scrubbed at a spot of tomato sauce on her voluminous bodice and grinned. "Yeah, you're right, Jess. I still remember the stories she wrote for English class. Never did understand why she joined the Army."

Nicole scoffed. "Probably because, like art, it's too damn hard to succeed as a writer."

"Hey, ya don't have to get nasty. I'm doing just fine as an artist, finally finding my vision, my style."

“Yes, well good ole Pen still hasn’t found a home, bouncing around hell’s half acre and sleeping with every devil.”

I couldn’t understand fully why Nicole put Pen down. Maybe because she was an easy target, one that couldn’t respond from far off Morocco, Borneo, or some Island off Tierra Del Fuego. Twice a year her emails came from different places, with photos attached of the locals and landscapes that made Angela gasp with envy, wanting to paint those unreachable worlds. But Pen also liked cities – Paris, London, Cairo, Buenos Aires, Capetown, and Sydney.

“I think she’s coming home because of the pandemic,” I said. “It’s getting too tough to globe trot when every country has its own travel restrictions. And she should know how dangerous it is.”

“Maybe she can’t find a boyfriend,” Angela said and chuckled. “That last selfie she sent shows she’s no spring chicken.”

“You should talk,” Nicole shot back. “You just ate the spring chicken.”

“Well, she’s always attracted handsome men,” I said, trying to smooth things over. I had a feeling that both of them felt threatened by Pen. Would she come back and hit on their husbands or even my partner? Back in high school she could bag any boy she wanted, maybe because she had no moral hesitations. It seemed strange since there were plenty of girls more attractive than Pen. But she had this off-kilter sexuality, call it a bit of craziness, and she put out those come-hither pheromones that even attracted ole stick-in-the-mud me. I always wondered what it would have been like to be her partner and travel the world for a quarter century. Although, joining the Army? Forget that.

We ordered another carafe of burgundy, spent the afternoon gossiping about Pen, and debated what we would do when she arrived in Santa Barbara.

“We all can have lunch at my place,” Nicole said. “I can have it catered by Bouchon.”

Angela glared at her. “Oh sure, be a big ole showoff why don’t you.”

“How about my place?” I offered. “I have a large dining room and I’m a good cook.”

It turned out that none of us wanted to yield home-field advantage. So we settled on having lunch at Petrini’s and asked the kitchen to make their special dishes normally reserved for wedding receptions and anniversaries.

Penny arrived on a puddle-jumper flight from San Francisco. She had self-quarantined for two weeks at her father's place in San Mateo after flying in from French Samoa via Hawaii. I figured two weeks with her Dad would push anyone onto a plane and out of town.

The three of us had promised not to dress up or go to any extremes to make ourselves look our best. We all broke those promises. So I felt a little stupid in my makeup and custom-tailored suit when Penny showed up at Petrini's. She wore a simple blouse, skirt and flats, her hair cropped short with Asian-looking tattoos curling down her neck and disappearing under her clothes. She was brown as a Latina. But her blue eyes still shone schoolgirl bright. She gave us her patented crooked grin. We all hugged and with a clatter of chairs sat at our favorite corner table, partially screened from view by the ubiquitous rubber tree plants.

"I can't believe you guys are still eating at this joint," Pen said.

"I can't believe it's still here," Nicole said. "But the service is good and the food delicious."

"And plentiful," Angela added.

We sat quietly for a moment, the three of us gazing at Pen, trying to reconcile our memories with the current reality sitting before us.

I broke the silence. "We're so glad to see you. Twenty-seven years is too long."

"Yes, yes it is," Pen said and smiled. "I'm sorry I haven't been back. But the world is so big and full of both wonderful and terrible things. I couldn't help myself."

"So why . . . why are you back now?" I asked.

"My mother has cancer. She's being treated at UCLA Oncology Center. But she'll need home health care. So I'm it."

"Is she going to be all right?" Angela asked.

"No. It's stage IV pancreatic cancer."

We murmured our condolences. The wine arrived and we paused to contemplate parents, some living, some not. The cabernet tasted bitter but I drank it anyway. Pen sipped from her glass and stared at us, waiting.

"Your emails gave us clues," Angela said. "But they definitely didn't tell your story. You were always good at telling stories. So what's up with that Army thing?"

Pen leaned back in her chair. "Jeez, that was so long ago. Well, you all knew my family was barely making it. And I was no genius in high school. So I joined the Army and they paid for my training as an

RN. Spent a couple of tours in Afghanistan working in field hospitals, helping surgeons piece soldiers and civilians back together.”

“That sounds grim,” Angela said.

“It was. I kept my head down and did the work. But I started having crazy nightmares. They were really ugly, about things that I couldn’t tell anyone. The Army shrinks didn’t help and the meds they prescribed made me feel stupid.”

“Sounds like PTSD,” Nicole murmured.

“Yeah, maybe. But I felt that same way sometimes . . . when I was hanging out with you guys in high school. I acted a bit crazy back then, thought it was just rioting hormones.”

“Jeez, Pen, we didn’t know,” Angela said. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

She ignored the question. “Anyway, when my hitch was up I left the Army and started my odyssey. Seeing new people and places seemed to help, made me focus on what I experienced at the time. I got used to that life. I need that life.”

“But how can you live, support yourself?” I asked.

“Having an RN license meant I could find work just about anywhere. Sometimes I got paid with room and board.”

As if on command, we reached for our wine glasses and took generous gulps. I struggled to say something, to break the silence, to pull us away from thoughts about how we might have mistreated Pen back in high school, our false assumptions, things we overlooked.

Finally, Angela succeeded. “Did you make any close friends?” she asked and grinned.

“You mean, did I shack up with any great guys? Sure. There was a barrister in London that I got close to. He let me wear his wig. In Cairo I fell for a tour guide who took me places I hadn’t been in a while. And then the roustabout working the oil fields at Prudhoe Bay. He was somethin’ . . . an expert at drilling. But none of it really serious, nothing stuck.”

“Why not?” Nicole asked. I knew she disapproved of Pen’s bed-hopping and saw it as a major character flaw, not tolerated in her social circles – or maybe just not acknowledged.

Penny sighed and played with her empty wine glass. “I have no Odysseus back home waiting for me, you know. I’ve become a different kind of Penelope, free to roam the world, to experience love on *my* terms.”

“But don’t you miss . . . miss home, or ever having a home?” Nicole asked.

Pen thought for a moment. “This may sound corny but maybe my home is where I am. And my loves are the people I’m with.”

I stared at Angela and Nicole, their gazes fixed on an unseen horizon, heads nodding. Pen touched her throat, touched the blue tattoo of a stylized panther that descended toward her heart. She must have realized that she had struck at the solemn heart of the matter because she quickly smiled and her voice brightened.

“But I’ve slowed down in recent years, not as young and flexible as I once was.”

Angela sighed then chuckled. “Yeah, sister, I can relate.”

“And I’m afraid multiple orgasms are a thing of the past.”

The three of us sat there stone-faced for a moment before breaking out in giggles.

“You do remember those, don’t you?” Pen cracked and our laughter grew louder, a relief from thinking too much about her ramblings and our own anchored lives. For a brief moment we were back in high school, talking about taboo subjects and feeling naughty. The waiter stared at us and smiled and our laughter got even louder.

“Shush, shush,” I said. “They’ll kick us out for disturbing the customers.”

“Yeah, that’s happened to me a lot,” Pen said, “in London, some of the small pubs upcountry, in Sydney, in Arles, in San Palo, and once in Seoul.”

“How could you live in all those places and talk with the locals?” I asked.

“You guys probably don’t remember but I aced Spanish and French in high school and could actually speak a little after three years of it. And when you immerse yourself in a community you can pick up enough to get by.”

Plates of food arrived and quickly cleared. Carafes of wine served and emptied. Pen found her storytelling voice and regaled us with tales of the Amazon Basin, the Kamchatka Peninsula, life in Yellowknife and riding circuit for the oil camps north of the Arctic Circle, and stories of skipping across Europe during Oktoberfest, ending up in Arles and giving birth to her son.

“You have a son. How the hell . . .” I stuttered.

“How do ya think,” Pen said. “I lived with Alan for almost a year. Got close to getting married. But the ole wanderlust got the best of me.”

“So why have you kept this a secret from us?” Nicole demanded.

Pen grinned. “Probably because I knew *you* would think me careless for getting pregnant, Angela would be mad at me for leaving a son behind, and, well, Jess would just be envious.”

I could feel my mouth drop open.

“Ah, come on, Jess. Haven’t you talked with your partner about adopting a child? Weren’t you the homemaking queen back in high school?”

Before I could answer, Angela came to the rescue. “So where is your son now?”

Pen thought for a moment. “Well, that was fifteen years ago, plus or minus. He should still be with his father’s family. They’re good Catholics and didn’t approve of me, hated the way I spoke French.”

“Well, at least you tried,” I said.

“Yeah, the French. Whaddaya gonna do,” Angela said.

The three of us laughed, feigning knowledge of France and its culture and knowing that we had none.

Our waiter asked if we desired anything more from him. We were the only customers left in the restaurant. The lunch shift had ended and the place had closed in preparation for dinner.

“No, that will be all,” Nicole said. “Bring me the check.”

“How long will you be in Santa Barbara?” I asked.

Pen leaned back and shook her head. “Don’t really know. Could be days or weeks before Mom passes.”

“If I can help in any way, Pen, let me know,” Nicole said. “What are you going to do after that? If you want to stay in town, I know of good places that are hiring RNs, maybe even my clinic.”

“Thanks, but not yet. When my hair turns gray, I’ll be ready to return.”

“What are you talking about?” Angela complained. “You already dye it dark to hide the gray. We all do.”

Pen smiled. “Yeah, but when gray becomes okay, I’ll come back.”

Pen’s Uber ride arrived and we said our goodbyes, Nicole being the stoic while Angela and I sobbed.

Us *tre amici* continued our luncheons at Petrini's. But before another month passed, Pen's mother died. She turned her mom's East Side bungalow over to a property management company to rent out and took off, toward Asia this time. Once-a-month long emails followed with photos and short videos attached for Angela to use as artistic inspiration. Some guy in Shanghai became her lover. Her trek across Asia and through snow-clogged mountain passes into India seemed nothing short of heroic. She disappeared into the masses there for a while, only to surface again in Rome with a new lover and a job providing care to tourists.

I assembled Pen's emails with photos and kept them in an electronic journal. Pen's latest video showed her with a full head of gray hair, grinning crookedly, while behind her crocodiles slid into an Amazon tributary. I figured the journal would be as close as any of us got to our friend.

We seemed to relax, Nicole becoming less critical and Angela and I less envious. Maybe we too realized that our homes were where we are and our loves the people we are with. It didn't feel corny at all.

Dipanwita Sen

I Wish

I wish you would not compare
My spots to stars
My hair to nights
My skin to silk
But say—
'Yes, you have spots—your hair is thin—
Your skin has better days—so what?'
And go on speaking of
Night, sleep, death, grocery bills—
Beautiful, ordinary things.

Jacquelyn Shah

No Complaint

This hevye lif I lede for your sake . . .

Why lyketh yow to do me al this wo?

Geoffrey Chaucer, "A Complaint to his Lady"

No heavy life for any hombre's sake,
no woe. Sharp eyes are mine, a lucky break;
they've shown me dogs and dogma. Bellyache?
No. I'm free of every garden's snake
when multitudes of women feel (or fake)
a passion for the charlies jacks joes johns toms jakes . . .
but we couldn't all forsake them—heaven knows
there'd be hell to pay. Thank you, womankind!
Dodging bondage as they serve, I'm kind
to captive women, while I censure mankind—
brutes incorrigible and disinclined
to *civilize*, amend and be the kind
of animal *refined*: peaceful, kind.

Jacquelyn Shah

Pipe Dream

Wrong gender, they think:
the men who wish they were
women, and women,
men. Wrong life form, I say.
I'd be tall, a stately oak replete
with birds and squirrels, placid
and unperturbed by winter loss.
Maybe maple, spring-bright, autumn-rich
with a voice of nothing, going nowhere.
Or elm, sycamore, chestnut . . .
but not a shrubby chinkapin—no!
I'd be massive and happy, incognizant
of grapple and brawl.

How I'd love to be still, quiet
in some bug-busy woods standing alone,
or swaying in a wind-blown field,
my leaves fluttering, impervious
to imminent ice storms,
never lifted from serenity by the traffic
of a mind winding like some road
through rough patches,
grit, gravel, potholes, manholes.

Yes, I'd be tree, but not beech—
thin-skinned, subject to carvings
and blight or aphids.
Tree, but not birch, to be ridden
down, subdued, brought low
over and over by some swinging boy—
*Once they are bowed so low for long,
they never right themselves,* wrote Frost.
(One could stay human for that.)

By choice, I'd be not woman aware
of her bonsai state, living

in a tangled world of tyrants,
but tree. Preferably
Sequoiadendron giganteum.

Betty Stanton

All Shimmering Flesh

For Elizabeth Spires

The day after my abortion I write a paper on "The Bodies" – I trace the metaphor of your mothers through their cold, expectant world, their love for those little moons who circle them. They are constant, stable, their great bodies anchors for the young women, stopping their spinning violently away. They are large and firm, lush, the only force holding their moons in orbit. I think of my mother, of the dark spaces in her closet, of holding my face to her soft formal dresses where her perfume still hangs to the threads. In them she would spread her arms, become a silk bird, her body, like yours, all shimmering flesh -- I think of my empty skin, my quieted child, taken by the dark into the great body of the world.

Betty Stanton

Ēostre/Easter

Say her first breath was a goddess walking
through flames, singing destruction and birth.
Say she was the great mother goddess weeping
for all tribes, for fertility, for the ancient word
for spring.

Say she is a spring like a field of wildflowers
glazed with wet dew before they are burnt away.
Say she is the spark of that fire inside of us
and that we are each made out of violence
and hope.

Diane Stone

Arms Reaching Out

My mother and her best friend
are telling jokes, laughing
at life's calamities, including
their unlucky draw of men.
In stockinged feet, they teach me
how to Charleston. And shimmy.
Ice cubes clink while they wait
for Judy Garland on TV.
Nothing, they say, beats watching
Judy with a best friend who knows
the words to *Trolley Song*.

That frail figure on the stage
belts out a lifetime of hurt,
her own life a sorry mess—
theirs easing into early disappointment.
Happiness blinks just out of reach,
but Judy cranks up her heart a notch,
launching a song to the dark and to them.
They love her for that—arms reaching out.
I can still hear the three of them singing

Katherine Szpekman

Ode to my daughter

A tap undulates across my belly.
You flip, little mermaid,

and wave to us in the ultrasound.
Already, you laugh oceans.

I dream you in blue light.
Cochlear spin sleeps,

ears translucent
pink fuzz.

And when you come to us,
your hair is curly.

Your eyes are green,
and your mouth is a single

blush tea rose,
a Fibonacci spiral,

moist and fragrant
with milk and spun clouds.

In ink night I go to you,
hover in the hush,

bend to brush my cheek
to yours, watch for the rise

and fall of your chest,
listen for the tiny accordion music.

There is no softer skin
than your arms thrown back

as you sleep in surrender,
your toes ten gumdrops I nibble.

I cup the air, feel the weight
of what is invisible.

I love as if gravity
can be denied.

Kathryn H. Thurber-Smith

At the threshold

(after Vievee Francis)

to wake with fear and step tip-toed
first through flags and flowers
careful to stay on manicured paths

to grip the handlebar of the baby jogger and lock the brake in place,
as a woman whose control over when her cargo is born
has suddenly been stripped.

to find him at the threshold
before all wombs
heralding news of yesteryear.

to embrace broken battered uteruses
the heat of the night
and its rolling

backward
backward
backward on three wheels.

Kathryn H. Thurber-Smith

Losing sleep worrying about the safety of my children

unmade bed ripples
with blankets and bunnies tucked in the sheets

faded and pilly
barely cover the mattress

only a tug will get them to fit
trim tattered probably from a pup

who is now an old dog
remember the time we starfished

in our sleep our toenails tearing
threadbare fabric

crumpled quilt looks old to you
you've never seen the bed without it

i still feel its freshness unfurl
spread over linens stained

from tears shed over dead
black mollies and lost cats

always i prefer a percale
longer cotton staple carded and combed

stiff and sturdy
it will always hold its shape

Chidiebere Udeokechukwu

Sachet-Water Condom

They plundered us like Bingo dogs
in a police van parked behind
the National War College.

I was cuffed and gagged and *banged*
by a lanky looking constable,
wearing *a pure water sachet*, like a condom.

Through silent teary screams, he rocked
and banged until I slipped away
to be roused in a cell.

The cell was dark, lowly and dank
reeking of filth, sweat and shit.
They huddled us there, two nights

in a row,
and banged us again—
like tireless Bingo dogs.

I had no bung to buy my release,
and they took shifts again and again,
again and again.

Kayden Vargas

Capitalist Confusion

A fallen star
Can never understand
Human currency.
They hand her a dollar.
They say spend it well.
Unaware of their wanting
She took that paper
And created poetry.
Burning foliage
To keep the world warm.
She is currency
Of the gods.
They will never understand her.

Meghan Vigeant

Take Your Shoes Off

Let me be the lazy woman
walking mid-morning
through farmer's woods

the one who leaves mugs
of green tea on the counter
and emails unanswered

tiny notebook and pen
tucked in her skirt's big pocket
bare arms catching spider silk.

Let me sit on the fallen red pine
watch the reflection of shoreline
ripple through pickerelweed

like prison bars opening.
The gates are opening
The inmates are free.

All souls to the water.
All souls take your shoes off
and wade in these shallows.

The pebbles feel good.
The minnows kiss your knees.

Elizabeth Weir

On the Greek Island of Hydra

The heady smell of crushed oregano
and thyme scents the heating air
as we hike a rocky path, worn by pilgrims,
to monastery high in the hills,
the sun already hot at this early hour.
The further we climb, thirst plagues us.
Our guide assures, the monks will provide.

We pass through monastery gates,
and Evangelos raps on wooden doors.
A young monk in a brown habit answers,
beckons to our men and bars the women,
eyes averted to avoid looking at us.
Heavy doors close. Within, a latch clanks.

We wait in the shade of an olive tree
until our men return bearing beakers
and a pitcher of chilled well water.
We drink and drink, forgive the slight
to our gender, conscious of our power—
certain as the moon's pull that impels
ocean tides to rush the thighs of the land.

Elizabeth Weir

Seen and Unseen

Nothing but sea fog and office blocks as six-year-old Satya and I lurch through Long Beach on a 7B city bus. “Grandma,” he asks, “what would it be like if there were no humans?”

We think about it, watch a heavy woman heave aboard, muttering to herself, her canvas bag stuffed to spilling, watch her toss a chewed pizza crust to the bus floor.

“Everything would be clean and there’d be no more concrete and lots more trees and birds.” I agree, our world would be more lovely but ask

whether beauty could have meaning with no one to see the world’s untouched beauty? He thinks. “It would still be more beautiful, Grandma!”

I hear reproof in his voice, our roles of elder and questing youngster reversed, his mind a young sapling, thrusting rootlets into new thought.

Elizabeth Weir

This Moment

at Chion-in with you —
swirles of raked gravel,
ancient temple pines
plucked for perfect form.

Stillness.

Wings flutter beneath
clouds of white azaleas,
as low sunlight fingers
fish-rippled water,
sends glimmers dancing
along a moss-cushioned wall.

On the Buddha rock,
a golden-faced bunting
alights and a great bell
shivers the air....

Geraldine Kloos Weltman

Adages

Every day something good they say, the sun
will come out tomorrow, you're my heart beating
outside my body, Covid continent
between us, I'm knocked down missing baby's
second birthday, hope I'll get back up, be
there for his third, saying to myself
omelets from broken eggs lemonade from
lemons, things falling apart maybe they'll
fall into place, like the glittering light-
beam on your kitchen floor, the baby saw
it and said *triangle* and I saw him
say it on FaceTime, not what I want but
after putting up with rain a rainbow
a stroke of luck, every cloud its silver

Ron Wetherington

The Interview

We sat across from each other at a small conference table in a room at the end of a corridor lined with offices. Brian, my interviewer, had asked permission to allow a trainee, Candace, to observe. My heartbeat was almost audible. Having Candace there would be a plus. She was young, maybe twenty-two.

I studied Brian, a fortyish, clean-shaven guy wearing an off-the-rack tan suit, a white dress shirt nicely starched with monogrammed cuffs. We shook hands. I wondered if he would notice my moist palms.

“Please think of this as a casual conversation, Justine,” he smiled, his hands folded on the table, a lined notepad and pencil beside them. Notes filled the page. There was a water carafe with two glasses between us. “Do you have questions before we begin?” His smile seemed genuine; his words scripted.

“Thank you, Brian,” I returned his smile. “I’m fine.” I had rehearsed this, as most job seekers do, trying to anticipate the questions. Fingers crossed.

“Well,” Brian said. “Just to get started, why are you interested in this position?”

How many times had I sifted answers to this? “Job satisfaction,” I replied. For most applicants, of course, the best answer would have been the company itself. “Your employees seem to stick around,” I said. “That’s important to me.” I inclined my head. “How long have you been with the company, Brian?” I was hoping to push him office guard.

Candace sat in the corner, hands in her lap, smiling.

“We enjoy employee loyalty,” he said, absentmindedly tapping his pencil on the notepad. “I’ve been here eight years.”

“Oh,” I said. “I would have thought longer.” I looked at him directly. “But you do like it here, right?” I wondered if baiting him this quickly was wise. Confusion, not suspicion, was what I was aiming for, and there’s a fine boundary.

“Uh, yes, I do indeed.” Tap-tap-tap. He glanced at his notepad. “Tell me, Justine, how would your coworkers describe you?”

I hoped to segue from this one. “Well, Brian,” I creased my brow, “that’s subjective, isn’t it?” I paused. “Hardworking, I hope. Fair. Respectful, above all.”

But he didn't follow through. Instead, he shifted casually, scribbling something on his pad. "Is there a personal weakness that you feel you should work on?" Good! I could use this approach!

"Gullibility, maybe," I admitted. "I accept people at their word too easily." I leaned forward. "But you know this about people, Brian," I said. "Easily taken in."

"Why do you say that?" he frowned slightly. Candace raised a brow with a quizzical look.

"Well," I smiled and spread my hands, gesturing, "being head of HR, you surely see this from time to time."

"Of course," he replied, somewhat relieved. But a wariness now crept into his words. "So, Justine, how does the recognition of your gullibility affect your relations with your coworkers?" He was deftly asking how this character flaw curbed my effectiveness." Perfect.

"I'm more skeptical of others, I guess. It probably dilutes my self-confidence." I was handing him a second weakness.

"Can you give me an example, Justine?" Brian smiled, pressing the issue. "How can you be skeptical and respectful at the same time?" I paused, allowing him to savor the moment. My tension receded. Here was my opportunity.

"I guess Louise is a good example," I said, looking at him impassively.

"Louise?"

"Works in sales. You remember her? Short, blond, twenty-seven? Gullible."

Candace shifted uneasily. Brian turned a bright crimson. He picked up his pad, studying it. "Let's talk about you, Justine," he said. He cleared his throat and changed the subject, asking in a too-assertive voice, "How would you resolve a conflict with a team member?"

Inside, I was now relaxed. "Well, Brian," I said in a more professional voice, matching his, "this depends. Are we talking about a personal or professional conflict?"

"Your choice, Justine." He quickly caught himself. "Related to work, of course." He reached for the carafe, poured a glass of water.

"Of course." I gave him a wry smile before continuing. "I supposed I would first remind him—the team member—of the policy against intimacies between employees." I leaned back, crossed my arms. "Like between you and Louise."

"I don't know this Louise, Justine," he sputtered, fear and anger in his voice. "I believe you're the one being interviewed!" Tap-tap-tap.

“Can we please stick to the subject?” Candace, trying to disappear, fixed her gaze on the floor.

“I’m terribly sorry, Brian.” My tone verged on smarmy. “I was just answering your question,” I straightened, spreading my hands submissively,” using an example I knew you’d understand.”

“Just a minute!”

I ticked off the points. “One, Louise was gullible, trusting, when you came on to her.”

Brian stammered, “That’s...absurd!”

“Two, when you continued to harass her for favors, she became skeptical of your true motives.”

He was shaking his head in denial, both palms flat on the table as if preparing to pounce. “What are you doing?”

“Three, she has remained deferential and respectful to this day, fearing retribution if she spoke out.”

I was staring at him, now slumping in his chair, shaking his head. “Not true!” he exclaimed. “Not true!”

“She needs her job, Brian, but she can’t complain to HR, now, can she?” I planted the seed: “You need to leave her be!” Candace was now in a quiet panic, eyes like saucers, both fright and anger in her face.

I stood up, sliding my handbag over my shoulder. “Actually, Brian,” I said, as sincerely as I could make it sound, “I don’t think this is the right job for me, after all.” I walked out the door, glancing back at the defeated figure.

Outside, I leaned against the wall, shaking. My little sister, Louise, would never know.

B

Biographical
Notes

Nickie Albert's poems have appeared in publications such as *Burning Word*, *The Wild Goose Review*, *The MacGuffin*, and others. She currently resides in South Florida.

Emma Andreini is originally a Northern Californian native. She is a 2022 Emmanuel College graduate with a major in Writing and Publishing and is currently living in Boston, MA. This is Emma's first publication and hopes it will be one of many.

Christine Arroyo's work has been published in *X-R-A-Y Magazine*, *Flash Fiction Magazine*, *Dark Recesses Press*, *Beyond Words*, and *Variety Pack*, to name a few. She lives in New York's Hudson Valley with her husband and rescue dog and cat.

Giuliana Barletta is a senior at Emmanuel College located in the heart of Boston. Barletta has been writing young adult and prose pieces for over 6 years and has recently been published on *FreedomFiction.com*. Barletta aims to make the reader feel complex emotions through her work.

Susan Naese Barreto lives in Urbana, Illinois with her husband, son and three backyard hens. She is the editor and publisher of Alternatives Watch, an online news platform dedicated to private markets investing. She also edits and writes articles for a religion and science newsletter called Covalence that is published monthly by the Lutheran Alliance for Faith, Science and Technology.

Norma Ketzis Bernstock's poetry has appeared in many print and online journals and anthologies including *Stillwater Review*, *Connecticut River Review*, *Paterson Literary Review* and *Rattle*. Her poems have been featured online at *Your Daily Poem*, have been read on WJFF Catskill Radio and have received a Pushcart Prize nomination and been honored by the Allen Ginsburg Poetry Awards.

Ann Boaden (A.M., Ph. D.) is professor emerita of English at Augustana College, Illinois. Her work appears/is forthcoming in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *From SAC*, *Gingerbread House*, *Ginosko*, *The Other Journal*, *Persimmon Tree*, *Torrid Literature*, and *The Windhover*, among others.

Bri Borrego is an essayist and poet from El Paso, Texas. She writes for

both creative and technical audiences and her work has been featured in *The Acentos Review*, *Wacoan Magazine*, and *Art Avenue*. She can be found on Instagram @words.bybri or on her website: briannaborrego10.wixsite.com/website.

Sally Brown is an artist, curator and writer currently based in Morgantown. She holds a Bachelor of Arts-Studio Art, a Master of Public Administration and Master of Arts- Art History and Feminist Theory, and currently serves as Exhibits Coordinator for West Virginia University Libraries. To learn more visit: Sallyjanebrown.com

Bella Capelli is a flash-fiction writer and poet based in Philadelphia, PA. Their work centers around the human experience and explores themes of the body, sexuality, queerness, nostalgia, and neurodivergency. This goes out to anyone who has kissed their best friend and liked it.

Desma Caputo is a writer living in Upstate New York with her family. She has a Masters in English from SUNY Albany and currently works as a healthcare administrator in women's health. Her favorite days are those spent with her family and their dogs.

Bess Cooley won the 2017 *Mississippi Review* Poetry Prize, and her work has also appeared or is forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Western Humanities Review*, *American Literary Review*, and *Verse Daily*, among other journals. A graduate of Knox College and the MFA program at Purdue University, she lives in Knoxville and teaches at the University of Tennessee.

Daun Daemon's stories and poems have appeared in *Third Wednesday*, *Typehouse Literary Review*, *Remington Review*, *Into the Void*, and other journals. Daemon is currently at work on a memoir in poetry. She teaches scientific communication at North Carolina State University and lives in Raleigh with her husband and four cats.

Mia Day currently studies at the University of Memphis where she is studying to get her MFA with a concentration in Poetry. She is the Co-Editor of the Poetry section of *The Pinch Literary Magazine* at The University of Memphis this upcoming fall semester. Her work has been published in *Red Planet Literary Magazine* and *Sledgehammer Literary Magazine*.

Sophie Farrell is a current student at Emmanuel College pursuing a major in Writing, Editing, and Publishing. She was born and raised in Massachusetts and is currently living in Boston. "Fungus, Fungus, Fungus" is Sophie's first publication.

Nancy Gerber is the author of two poetry chapbooks, *We Are All Refugees* and *The Kingdom of Childhood*. Her most recent book, *Burnt Toast: A Memoir of My Immigrant Grandmother*, is forthcoming from Apprentice House Press in Spring, 2023. She lives in Connecticut and maintains a private practice in psychoanalysis.

D. Walsh Gilbert is the author of *Ransom* (Grayson Books), *Once the Earth had Two Moons* (Cerasus Poetry), and forthcoming, *imagine the small bones* (Grayson Books). Her work has appeared in *The Lumiere Review*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, and forthcoming, *Cordella Press* and *Amethyst Review*, among others. She serves on the board of the non-profit, Riverwood Poetry Series, and as co-editor of *Connecticut River Review*.

Oliver Gray is a poet and prose writer who had their first short story published in grade school. Raised in East Lansing, Michigan, Oliver grew up with their nose in a book and a pen in their hand at all times. When not writing, Oliver spends their time snuggling with their partner and two cats.

Gretchen Heyer is a writer and Jungian psychoanalyst based in Houston. Having survived being the child of Christian missionaries in countries of Africa, she often turns to the surreal and unraveling in her work. Her essays can be found in *The Florida Review*, *Compass Rose*, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, *The Journal of Analytical Psychology*, and poems in *Concho River Review* and *Juked*.

Lindsey Smith Hull resides in a small town on the outskirts of Roanoke, VA. She is a 2022 recipient of the Nancy Penn Holsenbeck Award.

Azizah Curry Iluore is a Doctoral Candidate in the Curriculum and Instruction department at the University of Houston. Her research interests center on intersectional social justice in education, focusing on the preparation of preservice teachers. Azizah enjoys traveling, reading

works by woman writers and writing creatively about her lived experiences.

Alshaad Kara is a Mauritian poet who writes from his heart. His poems were published in an anthology, *PS: It's Still Poetry - An Anthology of Contemporary Poetry from Around the World* and three journals, *The Suburban Review Issue #25: Juice*, *borrowed solace literary 2022 Spring journal* and *Deep Overstock #17: Beekeeping*.

Gloria Keeley is a graduate of San Francisco State University with a BA and MA in Creative Writing. She collects old records and magazines. Her work has appeared in *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *The Emerson Review*, *The Ocotillo Review*, *Adanna* and other journals.

Elaine Koplow, retired English teacher and union organizer, is Director of the Sussex County Writers' Roundtable and Associate Editor of *The Stillwater Review*. A three-time Pushcart Prize nominee, her poems appear in several anthologies and journals including *Spillway*, *Edison Literary Review*, *Adanna*, *Exit 13 Magazine*, *U.S.1 Worksheets*, *Tiferet*, *Journal of New Jersey Poets*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Lips*, and elsewhere.

Francesca Leader is a writer and artist interested in exploring the "edge" territories of the world in which cultures overlap, engendering an uncommon richness of thought that mirrors the biodiversity of ecological edges. Some edge territories are geographical places, but many others are contained within the bodies and minds of those who travel the world seeking to understand the unknown, and return changed. She thinks if anywhere, the edges are the places where we will find the seeds of our salvation. Find her on IG and Twitter@moon.in.a.bucket.

Eustacia Leone recently completed her first literary novel. She has an MFA from The New School. Her writing has appeared in *Serpentine*, *Literal Latte*, *Defunct*, *The Ithaca Times* and *The Guide Istanbul*. She lived and worked in Turkey as a freelance journalist and editor for several years. Leone grew up in Germany, and the United States. She currently lives outside New York City with her family.

Eve F.W. Linn received her M.F.A. in Poetry from Lesley University. Her first chapbook, *Model Home*, (2019) is available from River Glass

Books. Her poems have appeared in *Adanna Literary Journal*, *Cider Press Review*, *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, *Lily Poetry Review*, *Nixes Mate Review*, and *Thimble Literary Magazine*. She is a peer reviewer for *Whale Road Review*. She loves cats, strong coffee, and thunderstorms.

Giana Longo is a writer of creative nonfiction, poetry, and short stories in Philadelphia. She is currently working towards a masters at Saint Joseph's University. Her work has been published in *Blue Marble Review* and *Philadelphia Magazine*.

Hala Louviere is, in all things, a writer. A recent graduate of Utah State University's Creative Writing program, she seeks meaning in life's melancholic moments. Her poetry reflects not only the sadness that lies in them, but also the happiness.

Betsy Martin is the author of the poetry chapbook, *Whale's Eye* (Presa Press, 2019). Her poetry has appeared or is forthcoming in *Atlanta Review*, *The Briar Cliff Review*, *The Cape Rock*, *Cloudbank*, *Crack the Spine*, *The Green Hills Literary Lantern*, *Juked*, *The Louisville Review*, *The MacGuffin*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, *Pennsylvania English*, *THINK*, and many others. She has advanced degrees in Russian language and literature. Visit her at betsymartinpoet.com.

Celia Meade is a writer and painter from Salt Spring Island, Canada. Her chapbook entitled *The Ones That You Love* came in second place in the 2022 Raven Poetry Chapbook award. Meade's work has appeared in dozens of literary journals, including *Lake Effect*, *Lunaris*, and *Louisville Review*. She currently attends Sarah Lawrence College, pursuing an MFA in creative writing.

Carole Mertz, poet and essayist, is the author of *Color and Line*, a collection of ekphrasis and other poetry (Kelsay Books, 2021). Her reviews and interviews appear in numerous literary journals, including *Arc*, *Bangalore Review*, and *World Literature Today*. Her chapbook *Toward a Peeping Sunrise* is a best-seller at Prolific Press. Carole will judge the Poets & Patrons of Chicago 2022 Contest

Joyce Meyers' poems have appeared in *The Comstock Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *Evening Street Review*, *Caesura*, and *Glimpse*. In 2014 she won the *Atlanta Review* International Poetry

Competition. Her collections include *The Way Back* (Kelsay Books 2017), *Shapes of Love* (Finishing Line Press, 2010) and *Wild Mushrooms* (Plan B Press, 2007).

Ilene Millman is a poet and retired speech/language therapist. She works as volunteer tutor for Literacy Volunteers. Her poems have appeared in various journals including *Adanna*, *NewVerseNews*, *Nelle*, *Passager*, *Connecticut Review*, *Journal of NJ Poets*. *USI Worksheets*, Her poetry book, *Adjust Speed to Weather*, was published in 2018.

Linda Johnston Muhlhausen's poetry and poetry book reviews have appeared in print and online, and her first chapbook, *Boggling*, was published in 2021 by Blast Press. Linda believes in the humanistic potential of language in general and poetry in particular.

Eve Ottenberg has published 24 novels and two collections of short stories. Her stories have been published in many literary journals. She is also a journalist, who writes weekly political articles for *CounterPunch* and book reviews for the *Washington City Paper*. She has written a weekly political column for the *Village Voice* and covered the criminal courts for the *Voice*. She has published in *The New York Times Book Review*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *Vanity Fair*, *USA Today*, *The Nation*, *The Baltimore Sun*, *The New Yorker's "Briefly Noted" section*, *The Washington Post*, *Vogue*, *Elle*, *Truthout*, the *American Prospect* and many other magazines and newspapers.

Hailey Paetzel is a Texas-based writer with a passion for the California dream. She attends the Savannah School of Art and Design and has been writing since childhood when she was influenced by her avant-garde playwright father. Her love for modern art, classic rock, the female gender, and evolutionary studies have all added to her distinctive style.

Andrea Potos is author of several poetry collections, most recently *Marrow of Summer* and *Mothershell*, both from Kelsay Books; and *A Stone to Carry Home* and *An Ink Like Early Twilight*, both from Salmon Poetry. Her poems can be found widely in print and online. A new collection entitled *Her Joy Becomes* is forthcoming from Fernwood Press this fall.

Beth Brown Preston's work has been recognized with several literary

and scholarly awards. Twice she was chosen for the prestigious William Carlos Williams Prize of the Academy of American Poets (in 1981 and 1982). She was also a CBS Fellow in Writing at the University of Pennsylvania, and a Bread Loaf Scholar. She is a current member of the Modern Language Association, the College Language Association, the Poetry Society of America, the Academy of American Poets, and the Langston Hughes Society. Her work has appeared in numerous journals and previous poetry collections include, *Lightyears: 1973-1976* (Detroit: Broadside Lotus Press, 1982) and *Satin Tunnels* (Detroit: Broadside Lotus Press, 1989).

Christine Redman-Waldeyer is a Professor of English at Passaic County Community College. Christine's publications and experience include writing for magazines, newspapers, as well as publishing poetry and short memoir pieces. She has been featured in *Literary Mama* and *Pink.Girl.Ink Press*. She is a co-editor of *Writing After Retirement: Tips from Successful Retired Writers*, (Rowan and Littlefield, 2014), founder and editor of *Adanna Literary Journal*, and has earned her Doctorate with a concentration in creative writing at Drew University. She has worked in the field of higher education for over twenty years and is certified in Educational Leadership: Community College Leadership Initiative (CCLI), Rowan University.

Allie Reichert is a PhD student at Vanderbilt University, where she studies medical anthropology and global health. Her research employs decolonial theory to work toward health equity for women across the Americas, with special focus on Kichwa women in Ecuador. Allie loves talking about feminist existential philosophy, running up mountains, cooking veggies, and dancing to some reggaetón.

Terry Sanville lives in San Luis Obispo, California with his artist-poet wife (his in-house editor) and two plump cats (his in-house critics). He writes full time, producing short stories, essays, and novels. His short stories have been accepted more than 500 times by journals, magazines, and anthologies including *The Potomac Review*, *The Bryant Literary Review*, and *Shenandoah*. He was nominated twice for Pushcart Prizes and once for inclusion in Best of the Net anthology. Terry is a retired urban planner and an accomplished jazz and blues guitarist – who once played with a symphony orchestra backing up jazz legend George Shearing.

Dipanwita Sen is from West Bengal, India. She has a Master's Degree in English Literature from St. Xavier's College, Kolkata. Her works have been published in *Indian Periodical*, *Adanna Literary Journal*, *Better than Starbucks* and *Scarlet Leaf Review*. She dreams of publishing her own book someday.

Jacquelyn "Jacsun" Shah has A.B., M.A., M.F.A., and Ph.D. degrees in English and creative writing-poetry. Her publications include a chapbook, *small fry*; a full-length book, *What To Do with Red*; and poems in various journals. She was *Literal Latté's* 2018 Food Verse Contest winner.

Betty Stanton (she/her) is a writer who lives and works in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in various journals and collections and has been included in anthologies from *Dos Gatos Press* and *Picaroon Poetry Press*. She received her MFA from The University of Texas - El Paso.

Diane Stone lives on Whidbey Island north of Seattle. Her work has been published in *Crosswinds Poetry Journal*, *The Comstock Review*, *The Main Street Rag*, *Minerva Rising*, *Chautauqua*, and elsewhere. A book of poetry, *Small Favors* (Kelsay Books), was published in early 2021.

Katherine Szpekman's poetry has appeared in *Connecticut River Review*, *Juniper*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Sheila-Na-Gig*, *Hiram Poetry Review*, *Connecticut Literary Anthology 2020*, and *Waking up the Earth: Connecticut Poets in a Time of Global Crisis*, and elsewhere. She was a finalist in the Leslie McGrath Poetry Prize 2021. She lives with her family in Connecticut.

Kathryn H. Thurber-Smith is a clinical supervisor at Seattle Children's Hospital, mindful-self-compassion facilitator for caregivers of children with chronic health issues, and a writer. Her work has been published in *The Grinnell Review*, *The Suisun Review*, and most recently, she was a featured reader at the "Poetry Post Roe," event hosted by Rose City Book Pub in Portland, Oregon. She makes her home on the ancestral and unceded land of the Coast Salish people, now referred to as Wild Rose Ranch on Whidbey Island.

Chidiebere Udeokechukwu is an Igbo Nigerian lawyer. He was an Editor for *Cicero's Brief* (A student run literary periodical; then published by the Judiciary Arm of the Students' Union Government, University of Nigeria, Enugu Campus). He is a review writer for *Writers Space Africa*, a poetry reader for *Carve Magazine*, a poetry editor for *The Crusaders Magazine*, and very recently, a poetry editor again, for *Flare Journal*. His poems have appeared in *Irawo Poetry Anthology*, *Writers Space Africa Magazine*, *Small Leaf Press (Jaden) Magazine* and *Poetic Africa*.

Dr. Kayden Vargas (they/them) is a nonbinary psychologist by day and poet by moonlight. Their longest lasting love is the Columbia River. They currently reside as an activist, scholar, and therapist on Yakama Nation land and have recent publications in *The Shrub-Steppe Poetry Journal*, *The Raven Review*, *Bloom Magazine*, and others.

Meghan Vigeant's writing has appeared in *Stonecoast Review*, *Multiplicity*, *Hole in the Head Review*, and *WAIT: Poems from the Pandemic*. She lives and writes on the unceded territory of the Wabanaki Confederacy in midcoast Maine. With her Stonecoast MFA and teacher-wand, she guides young writers through the creative process at The Telling Room.

Elizabeth Weir grew up in England. Her book of poetry, *High on Table Mountain*, was nominated for the 2017 Midwest Poetry Book Award. Her second book, *When Our World Was Whole*, will be published by Kelsay Press later this year. Recent poetry has appeared in *Comstock Review*, *Evening Street Review*, *BoomerLit*, *Gyroscope*, *North Meridian Review* and *Adanna Literary Journal*.

Geraldine Kloos Weltman is a retired New Jersey government researcher and manager. She now lives in Chicago, Illinois, after living many years in Central New Jersey. Her work has appeared in *Adanna*, *U.S. 1 Worksheets*, and *Paterson Literary Review*.

Ron Wetherington is a retired anthropologist living in Dallas, Texas. He has a published novel, non-fiction in *The Dillydoun Review* and *The Ekphrastic Review*, short fiction in *Words & Whispers*, and *Flash Fiction Magazine*.