



# Chestnut Review

VOLUME 5 NUMBER 4 SPRING 2024

FOR STUBBORN ARTISTS

# Chestnut Review

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# Green Geode

(cover art)  
Acrylic  
24x24 inches  
2020

I created the Green Geode for a show with the theme of reclaimed, recycled, and reimagined. It features bright green molded leftover paint that was scraped from the floor of my studio and sculpted onto a canvas. I created this painting while awake at 3 am and knocked out the power to my entire apartment building using my heat gun. The original work is still available for purchase.

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FROM THE EDITOR

# Introduction

The vernal equinox signals the arrival of spring to the Northern Hemisphere and autumn to the Southern atmosphere. Here in our slice of the US, the trees bloom white and pink, leaving swirls of pollen like bee glitter and erasing our memories of the past fall and winter. Our Spring Issue marks the end of a season and a turning towards the next: a time of celebration and change as our fifth year comes to a close. We are as busy and buzzy as bees constructing new projects and sweetening old ones.

Our issue features artists whose work is inquisitive, sensual, experimental, familial. We hope you find shared experience in the language and art we present to you here. Whichever season you find yourself in, may you sense the shift inside and outside and take us with you.

SPECIAL THANKS

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# This Desire to Flee From People I Cherish to a Strange World Is a Form of Brain Disease I'd Be Lying to Say I Comprehend

A battle is going on between my īmān  
& the voices in my head. I try to make

sense of it, but my therapist told me  
not everything has to make sense

to make sense. I locked myself in the  
room because this horniness is

threatening to throw my soul in the  
fire of jahannam. I asked my friend

what being bipolar feels like, & he  
told me it renders him numb—like a

cadaver. An acquaintance informed  
me she self-harms to feel alive. Because

when the demons sneak in, her body  
feels lifeless, she craves for a proof

that she, too, like other humans, has  
blood streaming in her veins. Tell

me, will I swim in the waters of  
hellfire if this insanity has a hand

in me putting a full stop to my life?  
My Mu'allim said the ink is lifted off

a man living on the mat of madness.  
There is a body in my body telling

me suicide is selfish; had our  
lives belong to us alone, Allaah

wouldn't intertwine our hearts with  
others'. I'd be lying

to say I comprehend my desire  
to flee the people I love

& enter a strange world. There  
is a hole in my brain that devours

every single atom of happiness that  
falls on my body. But anguish, loss,

trauma, torment & everything devoid  
of joy feasts between my breasts.

A critic asked why every poem I craft  
walks through the gates of grief. & I

said: because my poems are a haven  
where men like me—whose headspace

are never free of noise—come to enjoy  
the therapy in knowing they aren't alone.

ZOE KORTE

## A Conversation with Abduljalal Musa Aliyu

**ZK:** In the poem “God Descends to the Lowest Heaven,” you write, “My friends do not recognize my poems/any longer.” Where do you see *Encyclopedia of Dolour* fitting into your work overall? Does this feel like a natural transition from your previous work or is this completely new ground for you?

**AMA:** This is utterly new ground for me. I mean, have you read my previous poems? Scandal—apologies to Myz—I wrote remarkable erotica. Even yesterday, a friend said: you, all you do is write erotica and submit them to magazines. I couldn't open my mouth and say: bro, have you read my new poems? I write something entirely different now. Erotica used to be my trademark.

**ZK:** How long did this chapbook take to write? Did any poem feel particularly easy or difficult to write?

**AMA:** Well, I never really set out to write a chapbook. I was simply writing my poems—one poem at a time. And then I saw CR's call for chapbook submissions and I was like: yeah, I should try this. So, I don't know how long it took me to write the individual poems. For the chapbook, I just woke up one day, put the poems together, and submitted them.

Writing the first poem in the chapbook—“A Shared Language”—was spectacularly easy. This would read like a myth, but I promise it hap-

pened: I woke up from sleep with the exact poem in my head, devoid of the small editing by the editors of course, bless them—and I just wrote it; right there, right then, in a matter of a minute or so.

But then, writing “Falmata” was hard. The woman in the poem was stiff to deal with. She was too traumatized, so talking to her was like walking through a museum of grief. I couldn’t finish the poem. Maria, while editing the chapbook, asked if I was sure that was the end of the poem. I literally just told her to move on because I didn’t know how to end the poem.

**ZK:** How has writing this chapbook helped you unearth new insights into grief, love, and faith? How do you hope it will impact readers?

**AMA:** I am someone who is on a quest for himself. So, writing this chapbook was a journey into myself. But because a man can’t live alone, this odyssey involved other people, this is why there are a lot of speakers in the chapbook.

So, through this journey, with myself and others, I was able to dig into anything and everything that is important to me. Which includes faith, love, grief, etcetera.

All the poems in the chapbook appeared in a way that the speakers were talking to another person. So, I want my readers to simply listen to those speakers, and bask in whatever story the speakers try to tell—or perhaps, escape from those stories—because, sometimes, even I write these poems as an escape.

**ZK:** Some of the poems in *Encyclopedia of Dolour* are written in couplets, others in a single long stanza, and yet others in numbered sections. Most, if not all, of these poems have relatively short lines, but several have lengthy titles. How are these choices related to the chapbook’s content and themes?

**AMA:** When I write narrative poems, I love having them as couplets. That way, I don’t see how long they get. I just keep moving till I finish telling the story. I write single, long stanza poems when I hold tight to one idea and I don’t want it to run away. But numbered poems? Call them the chaos in my head; whenever ideas are juggling in the mind of my muse and they refuse to be independent, I number them on pages. I write short lines because I hate when my poems get published and their form gets altered. And for lengthy titles, it’s just an obsession I’ve with metaphors. Sometimes I form the titles before the poems, other times, I pick the titles from the poems. I am sure you understand the relationship between the content and the themes with all these choices I made. The poems in this chapbook are concerned with Boko Haram, banditry, faith, love, and so many other loosely interconnected themes. It’s like a collection of short stories with the same setting.

**ZK:** The word ‘encyclopedia’ appears once in the text, in the poem title “Here, I Introduced Kotus to the Encyclopedia of My Grief,” but the word ‘dolour’ is only featured in the chapbook title. How did you choose the name *Encyclopedia of Dolour* to encapsulate this work?

**AMA:** The title came after I’d put the poems together. I wanted something different. I didn’t want my title to be too poetic, I also didn’t want it to sound like a prose work’s title. I read the whole chapbook one morning and I felt there was too much darkness in the poems. But I was also happy I wrote them. My people were going through a lot then. You read the front page of a newspaper and you struggle to find even one happy news. It was that bad. So, I told myself I was documenting all that; that is exactly where the word ‘encyclopedia’ came from; and dolour simply tried to capture the themes of the poems.

**ZK:** The chapbook opens with an epigraph from Mahmoud Darwish, and at one point quotes Rumi. How has their work, and that of other poets, informed *Encyclopedia of Dolour*?

**AMA:** Darwish is a Palestinian poet. I am sure you understand why I keep him close; our themes are related. But that epigraph? I was talking

to my mentor, Nasiba Babale. I told her I wanted an epigraph for my chapbook—she has read and given insight on every single poem in that chapbook—and within a split second, she coughed out that epigraph and I was like: how perfect. Rumi is regarded as the greatest mystical poet of Islam—even though that could be argued. But there is a high place for faith in my poems. Therefore, I read his work a lot—it’s mostly about relatability.

These are poets whose work I was constantly reading when writing the poems: Mahmoud Darwish, Nizar Qabbani, Rumi, T.S Eliot, Anne Sexton; Umar Abubakar Sidi, Ismail Bala, Abu Bakr Sadiq, Samuel A. Adeyemi, and Warsan Shire. So, yes, their poems informed the chapbook a lot. How? Mostly through inspiration. I find it easier to write poetry when I read poetry.

Abdujalal Musa Aliyu’s  
*Encyclopedia of Dolour* will be available  
on our website and Amazon.com  
soon! Watch our social media  
channels for the launch.



ENCYCLOPEDIA OF  
**DOLOUR**

Abdujalal Musa Aliyu



## An Entirely Different Girl

How can you explain joy? The way it leaps without reason into the heart, bypassing the stricken mind. How it lies in the hand as your fingers curl around the new doll your mother had just sewn. The face pulled taut as bed sheets. The features painted bold and true: the apple cheeks and brown eyes, and the prairie-fire color of Indian Paintbrush blooming the lips—the expression caught between innocence and knowing. Not like the stiff, sad corncob dolls made by the other mothers in 1880, here on the pancake-flat Plains.

An aunt from “Back East” sent Matilda’s mother material to make their own clothes and craft the dolls. Back East, where her mother was born and grew up, the Plains that here surrounded their sod dwelling for miles and days and years were called fields, cut through with blue streams. Her mother drew Matilda pictures of Massachusetts: across the fields, in the distance, mountains. She drew a circle at the bottom of one and said that’s where Matilda’s father grew up, in a mill town where waterfalls—waterfalls!—powered the saws. In front of the mountains, she drew trees, and wrote their names: *oak, maple, birch, chestnut*. On the Plains, there were few trees. Her mother drew leaves of the different trees, and Matilda imagined their texture between her fingers, felt their slight scratch across her cheeks.

Today, Matilda stood in the vast space of the prairie and wished her face was unroughened, her lips as bright as the new doll’s. Twelve years old and still she hugged it to her chest. She and her mother had wheeled a cart not far from their home to where buffalo ran, so her mother could collect their dung, the large chips used to fuel their cook stove. On the cart, the chips were piled higher than Matilda’s head, the

stack tilting dangerously. Her mother stood so close she could tip the stack over, and for a moment Matilda feared she would. She moved away from the cart, but her mother’s attention was not on her daughter; rather, it seemed to Matilda, it was on some faraway place—Massachusetts? A sharp gust swung her mother’s dark dress about her like a vulture’s wing. Buffalo chips fell from the cart.

Startled, her mother gestured toward her. “Go on, girl, pick them up.”

Matilda would not move, clutched the doll closer. Her mother’s lips pressed together. The wind blew into the pitch of a whine, the same pitch as the words that came from Matilda: “Won’t. You ain’t gonna make me,” causing her mother to leap and slap Matilda, sending the doll to the ground. Matilda refused to follow, though the blow sent her reeling, as much from force as surprise.

Her mother began to cry and reached for Matilda, but her daughter turned from her touch, strengthened by the sting of the wind against her reddened cheek. Legs now sturdy on the earth, she was proud she could stand up to her mother, to this place. Her mother sighed, and began picking up the chips, an apology of sorts, and despite herself, Matilda relented. Together they gathered them all and piled them into the cart, then began the slow roll home, wheels squeaking. The doll was left face down on the ground, shamed; Matilda, now, unable to want anything crafted by her mother. Her own slap in her mother’s face.

Her mother always talked about going back to Boston, where she’d been raised and where her parents and sisters still lived. She told Matilda about buildings made of brick and stone, and the grand park in the middle of the city designed by Olmstead (which Matilda misheard as homestead): the Emerald Necklace—emerald, a color Matilda saw in spring when the prairie shades of dust and mud and buffalo pelt gave way to waves of green dotted with wildflowers and avaricious bees.

Sometimes her mother cried when she talked. Matilda grieved her mother’s loss of home, could feel its emptiness in her own belly, particularly on nights when she’d not had enough to eat, and believed in this magical place, Back East, but couldn’t imagine it. She could feel only

her own landscape—the way it lies flat inside you, unfurls and stretches all through you. And how the wind sings and snaps, and the wild, wide way it makes you feel, bringing all variety of noise—crickets, buffalo, raptors, thunder—with nothing to stop it. Wind that blew her father away months ago. “I’ll be back,” he said. He was often gone, buffalo hunting, scouting land, but he always came home. This time he’d been gone the longest, and her mother had a different story: “He won’t.”

On some cold nights, with the buffalo chips burning low, Matilda knew her mother headed for the barn to lie down in the hay with the cow, and once she’d seen her weep into the side of old Bessie, arm reaching up her massive back as if to hug.

That night, when they’d returned from the prairie, the buffalo chips burned a golden glow in the cookstove, made good warmth throughout the sod house. They sat together, her mother sewing a shirt for Matilda in the fire’s light, one eye on her stitching, the other on her daughter. Matilda wriggled her fingers, their idleness a luxury, another apology from her mother for the slap: there were honey frames that needed scraping, beans to sort, dishes to scrub, a floor to sweep. Still, her empty hands grieved the abandoned doll.

“You know,” her mother started, “if I’d stayed in Boston, you would be an entirely different girl.” She settled her stitching on her lap, leaned slightly forward. “What’s the good of having a daughter if she’s different than you? We don’t even speak the same language.” The words were said softly, so didn’t wound as much. There was an opening in the softness. Matilda took it.

“Give me again the story of you and Papa.” She felt power in the words, knowing they would cause her mother sorrow or happiness. Her mother sighed and put fingers to her lips as if to deny Matilda her power. “You know it.”

“Tell me,” she said, and wondered, who would that girl be? What kind of daughter? What words would she speak so her mother would understand? The ones Matilda kept bundled tight inside? Her mother had described her own girlhood and Matilda imagined this daughter her mother wanted as one who wouldn’t need dolls because she had human friends. She’d talk of boys and twirl her fingers in golden curls that

bounced on her shoulders. Her shoes would be black patent leather (she didn’t know what that was, but her mother spoke of it), the straps tight around her ankles, and in her imaginings, this makes her toes throb. The white socks fill her with anxiety that they’ll get dirty. But there’s no dirt in Boston, no shades of dust or mud or buffalo chips anywhere. The sidewalks—sidewalks!—are hard and clean, surrounded by plush grass. Across this field a blue stream wanders through the green. In the distance, behind the tallest buildings: mountains. The girls carry books, sit on the grass and read to each other. Soon, blown in from the Prairie, a jealous wind slams shut the covers, rakes the words right out of their mouths, hurls them into the clouds, and carries Matilda back, filling her with the feral joy of returning to her own place, her mother in the middle of the telling:

“...came back to Massachusetts to see his brother, who was dying. Took him many weeks to travel home. And the night after his brother expired, he came to a dance at Thoreau House on my campus, to run from his sorrows. He had a wild streak. Wanderlust. Not one to follow in the path of his father or brother, that one. Not a mill man. A wild seed carried out here to the middle of nowhere. And maybe, too, he came Back East to find a wife among us elite and carry one of us back with him to this hell.”

Elite. Hell. Even in the slow glow of the fire, Matilda saw her mother’s bitterness. She knew the rest of the story. How he’d carried her away from her family, from all she’d known. Carried her here on horseback (Matilda didn’t believe this, could not believe her mother would survive such a dirty, dangerous journey, much less agree to it. Still, she gloried in its unlikeliness). But as her mother talked, her father formed in her mind, stepping into the small space between mother and daughter, softening each for the other, growing so tall he had to bend to keep his head from butting the sod ceiling.

The magical string of words stopped. No matter. They did their trick. Her father returned in her mind, hat pulled low, smiling, lips forming words roughened by wind, breaking sentences into small bites of sound, rock scraping rock: “Hey Chicken. Me. You. Let’s prowl.” And they did. Her father let her run wild, told her she was special, and promised next time he’d take her roaming with him. One day maybe they’d ride off and not come back. He’d always kept his promises, but

this time Matilda began to see him as one of those imaginary trees her mother had drawn and labeled—*oak, maple, birch, chestnut*—bending and tipling in the wind. Eventually blowing away.

“I thought there’d be schools.” Her mother laughed. “Not to mention libraries. Bless my sisters for sending some books on. Miracle some of them arrived.” She stabbed the needle into the fabric and pricked her finger, but didn’t say a word. A dark spot appeared on the pale fabric. “I’ve got to get out of here.”

Matilda yawned. She’d heard this too many times. “Go on then.” She wandered over to her pallet in the corner, the straw bedding drawn tight with a linen sheet covered with a quilt and other dolls her mother had made. Matilda saw again the doll left behind and thought her mother might visit the barn later.

When Matilda half woke in the middle of the night, the cookstove fire had burned to embers, throwing gauzy shadows throughout the room. Cold, she pulled the quilt tighter, thought the murmurs were dreams bleeding into her drowse. From her corner she looked toward the stove and saw two silhouettes, recognized the higher-pitched murmur as her mother’s. When Matilda was younger, some nights she dreamt of a silhouette man who came from the chimney and sat at the end of her pallet and spoke like this, kindly, and now the murmurs from those at the cookstove ran pretty—pebbles tumbling over each other. She closed her eyes, expecting to return to whatever dream she’d been having, when the lower murmur turned into words: “Heard he’s with her now. That whore. Next town over. You best find out.”

She closed her eyes and thought of the horehounds her father used to bring her, licorice softened with molasses and salt, and when she opened her eyes again, sun was trying to stream through the beeswaxed paper in the two small windows cut into the sod walls. She lay quiet for a few minutes. Something was missing. Stillness occupied the room and Matilda realized she was alone. Had her mother gone to the barn and was yet there, the cow rolling over and pinning her? She got out of bed and threw a coat over her shoulders, crammed her feet into her boots and was on her way to the door when she saw the paper on the table, recognized her mother’s fluid, curlicued script in light blue ink. To spite

her mother, Matilda had refused to write in cursive, her printed letters and words bunched up and slanted. But sometimes, when her mother was milking, Matilda would sneak her pen and imitate her writing, then bury the pages behind the barn—pages covered with words written as beautifully as her mother’s: *Papa, bees, wander, wind*.

She picked up the note: *Your father has returned. I’ve gone to bring him home. Mind the cow and chickens. And dig some potatoes. I should be back in a day. Be a good girl. Mother*

Was she dreaming still? She blinked, and then wild joy, running her outside into blinding light. Papa! It was later than she’d thought, the sun high above. Dust, flies, bees filled the air. Leaning against the house, six honey frames and a bucket of berries their kind neighbor from miles over must’ve delivered early this morning. Had he taken her mother to fetch her father? Why hadn’t Papa come on his own?

She went inside, dark now after the bright sun, and sat on her bed, hugging the dolls. Soon her father would be here. Wouldn’t he? She lay down and thought she might cry. Then she became angry and got out of bed again, slamming the door.

The chickens were walking in circles, clucking and frantically pecking the ground. She heard the low moan of the cow and quickly entered the barn, cool and dank. She grabbed the milking stool and pail. The cow paid her no mind. Placing both hands on its flank, she lowered her forehead to meet the flesh. For a moment she was inside her mother, became those stormy emotions—loneliness and anger, bitterness and pride. What if her father didn’t come? Her mother? What if they abandoned her the way she’d abandoned the doll yesterday? Women here lived alone, deserted, their small ramshackle homes dotting the prairie. Husbands gone off and lost, children died or moved east or further west. She ran her fingers over the cow’s ribs and another feeling trickled through: Sun and dirt and wind. The endless flat vista made her sturdy and independent. She didn’t need father or mother.

Still, as soon as she milked and threw feed to the chickens, she would go back and find the doll.

She walked in smaller and smaller circles so as not to miss an inch of land. But she knew as soon as she got close to where she and her

mother had been yesterday that the doll was gone. There was nothing blocking her sight. Yet she circled and circled, looking behind each scant tuft of brown grass and through the scrub brush. An animal must have made off with it. Why had she left it to this fate? To punish her mother? What good was that now.

Thunder sounded. She looked into sun-drenched sky, turned and saw a man on horseback veiled in dust. She feared it was an Indian strayed from the reservation miles off. But nearing, the man yelled her name. For a moment she was fused to this place, unbending, but something began to shift and break up inside her as hooves beat the ground, the vibration challenging her stubbornness. The man galloped closer and, emerging from the dust, became her father. Reaching her, he slowed but did not stop, swooping down to lift and place her onto the saddle in front of him.

“Bigger now, ain’t you? How’s that? I been gone only a week or so.”

She closed her eyes, leaned into his familiar smell: sweat and dirt, horse and wild strawberries. “Naw, some months, I believe,” and leaned harder into him. “Where’s Mam?”

He squeezed her shoulder. “I’m taking you back to her. ‘Member Sussy? Sussy Greene?”

She tilted her head to look in his face. “She lose her husband and son in that storm last winter?”

“Yep.” He nested his chin in her shoulder, breathed goosebumps into her neck. “Your mother’s there. We got some talking to do.”

She wanted to ask what about, but was silenced by his tone: *ominous*, a word he might use. Sometimes his vocabulary gave him away, words from long ago, escaping the prison of his lips: *reverence*, *absurd*, *disconsolate*, *omnipotence*. His origins, her mother would say. He had a college degree he never spoke of, which was unheard of for a mill worker. But then, her mother said, his family owned the mill. When a word like this slipped through, Matilda tried to sound it out then spell it in her mother’s fancy script; these words, too, buried in her plot along with her own and her prairie finds: an eagle’s talon; mouse skeleton; bison tooth; sometimes, a shiny mica schist; and rarely, a remnant from settlers passing through—a snapped barrette, broken shoe buckle, a ravaged bow.

“Missed you, girl,” he said, his words a gravelly cloak of warmth. He hugged her tight, and they rode on in silence, questions, apprehension, curiosity threading through her.

Miles of riding, and in the sky, the sun shifted from noon to two. Soon, through the emptiness, an apparition: a boulder in the distance. “Epic,” her father said. “Doesn’t it seem so to you? She’s been living here by herself all these many months. Courting sorrow.”

Who was he talking about. Her mother? This Sussy woman? Or another left alone? So many of them out here, brought to their fate by men. But she, Matilda, was born of this place. She would never leave, would she? The unmooring she sometimes felt was only through the emotions of her mother.

Closer, the boulder turned into a dwelling similar to their own, except for a little rambling fence, the wood petrified as stone. A woman, not her mother, emerged from the house. Her bonnet starched around her face, her lips red as if stained with berries, a big grin stretching the red into her cheeks. Was this what a whore looked like?

“You found her,” Sussy said. “C’mon, c’mon,” she urged as they dismounted. “Been waiting for you.” She ushered them towards the door.

Inside, cool and dim after the bright sun. At first Matilda didn’t see her mother sitting in a corner, her grey dress camouflage. “Come here, Matilda,” she said, the pale flair of her hand cutting through the dark.

Matilda felt caught between her father and Sussy, the woman’s energy snappy, claiming. Already her arm was across Matilda’s shoulder, and it felt excitable, electric as if the two of them might suddenly spring handstands.

“She’s more a Tilly, like me, name shortened. I was a Susanna, but out here...” Sussy’s words trailed off. “Tilly suits her better, don’t you think?” She looked at Matilda’s father.

“Sussy’s made a cake,” he said.

Was this the woman’s birthday? Sussy removed her bonnet and tangled black curls bounced around her face, her shoulders. She had not stopped smiling, and with her hair all about her, she looked like a child; like, Matilda thought, me. She’d never seen a grown woman let her hair go like that. Even at her age, Matilda tied hers back. But then

that was what her mother demanded. On the prairie alone, or with her father, she'd pull out the ribbons and pins.

In the corner, her mother darkened the joyful light Sussy was trying to create. A quick frown crossed Sussy's face. But she cut the cake, then swiped across the surface, loading her finger with icing, and offered it to Matilda. Her father nudged her. The finger seemed wrong, dirty almost, but when was the last time she'd had cake? And the frosting looked luscious. She could smell the sugar. And Papa had given permission. She took a tentative lick, stepped back.

"Don't be shy." Sussy touched her finger to Matilda's lips and she licked it clean, joy and guilt brindling her spine. Sussy scooped up more icing and offered her finger to Matilda's father. He took it in his mouth, holding it there, closing his eyes.

Matilda's mother sprang from the corner. "That is disgusting, abhorrent behavior in front of the child." In the light, now, the planes of her face looked sharp and brittle, the skin beneath her eyes puckered, and Matilda wondered if her mother had left with the man who came in the middle of the night and hadn't gotten any sleep. Or were her eyes puffed because she'd been crying?

"No," her father said. "Nothing to hide from the girl. This love's simple. But you wouldn't know about that." He dropped Sussy's hand and turned to Matilda's mother.

"Liar," her mother said. "Everything you are is made up. When were you ever around long enough for any love to be shown?"

"I could've been near you forever and you'd never let me unbutton even one of them that's tight around your neck."

"You're talking like a fool. But her," she nodded towards Sussy, "you don't even have to do the unbuttoning. She's already opened for you."

"And that's the glory."

Her mother's voice came out ragged, then pleading, "This is where you've gone all those times you left us? To her? You came for me. Claimed me and brought me here." Her hand curled around his wrist. He unwrapped her fingers, let her arm fall.

"And now I'm letting you go. The money's already paid for the stagecoach to take you back. Will's coming for you this afternoon." He

turned to his daughter. "And you, Tilly, you got to make a choice."

"Don't you dare." Her mother raised her hand as if to strike him. Sussy yanked Matilda towards the door.

Outside the sun shone on Sussy's hair, black like oil, like the liquid gold her father had described to her. He rode off once to find it, digging deep in the ground, but came home empty-handed. Had that trip been a lie, and he'd come here? Through the windows, the sound of shouting.

"Let them be and work their things out. Let's go." She took Matilda to the barn and saddled up two horses. Before they mounted, she undid the pins and combs in Matilda's hair, her fingers running through it like trickling water. "Let's have fun. It's been a time since I've had some. But your papa's made me better. Healed me."

Matilda pictured Sussy's husband and son, lost in that storm last winter. And then her father, trudging through snow, showing up at her door.

Sussy cropped Matilda's horse and the beast sprang into gallop. Wind rushed Matilda's face, rushed through her hair, raking away confusion and fear, and joy leapt unbidden into her heart, bypassing the scene inside her stricken mind: mother and father shouting, her father driving her mother off, or her mother driving him. Joy leapt into her hands, holding the reins so tight she felt the wild energy of the animal through them. She squeezed her heels into the horse's ribs, hoping to overtake Sussy, then hoping just to catch up. Sussy's black hair trailing behind like Rapunzel's from the story her mother used to read her. If only she could grab it and ride into a new world.

Sussy slowed and stopped by an outcrop of squat scrub bush. Matilda, finally caught up, dismounted. Sussy had already pulled out a pipe and was puffing when Matilda sat beside her, red-faced and sweating.

"Jeb," Sussy said. "He was about your age. A dear boy. Good. I also wanted a girl." She tucked a lock behind Matilda's ear, her fingers leaving a pleasant sensation. "But that wasn't to be. 'Til now."

Was Jeb's hair long and did his mother tuck it behind his ears? The skin Sussy's nails had touched began to prickle. Matilda scratched and her hair swung free.

“Want a puff?” She held the pipe to Matilda’s lips. “I started when I was your age.”

Matilda tried to inhale, but the acrid smoke stung and would not go down her throat. She coughed it out.

Sussy laughed. “That’s how it is at first. But you get used to it. Then it brings calm. “Specially when the sun’s going down and you’re sitting on the porch. That time a day.”

The two of them, side by side, an orange and red sky, the darkening light keeping them from seeing miles and miles into their future. *Tilly*, she sounded the name in her mind, *Tilly*.

“Hold this,” Sussy gave her the pipe. “I gotta shit.”

The pipe was still smoking, the bowl warm in Matilda’s hand, as Sussy ran some yards from the shrubs, hiked up her skirt and squatted. Even in the hot day, the glaring sun, the small pile steamed.

*Well, what are you supposed to do*, Matilda thought, trying to tamp down her surprise and distaste at a grown woman doing that in broad daylight, there’s no rock, no tree to hide behind, and at least Sussy hadn’t done it behind the shrubs Matilda was sitting in front of. Still, she was afraid her expression might betray her, until the unthinkable image of her mother squatting before her flashed through her mind and almost made her laugh. Her mother would rather hold it until her eyes popped than do it in front of her daughter.

Finished, Sussy returned to Matilda. “Don’t mind me,” she said and took the pipe, dumped the contents on the ground and covered the hot tobacco with dirt. She lifted Matilda by her armpits.

“All right. Try’n catch me.” She bolted, laughing over her shoulder.

Matilda was faster and caught her, tackling her to the ground. They tussled and Sussy began to tickle her until Matilda’s laughter rang so loud through the prairie, she was sure it would reach her mother. She imagined her father smiling when he heard it, saw her mother’s frown.

They rode back, abreast. Matilda’s horse slowing, plodding as they approached the house, as if sensing Matilda’s dread.

Her mother was on the porch, waiting. As they drew near, she sprang towards them, the hand that had been raised against her husband earlier, now aimed at her daughter. She grabbed Matilda’s arm and pulled her off the horse.

“Where were you? Your hair all undone like that.” She shook her daughter until Matilda’s neck ached. “Are you trying to look like her?” She was about to smack her daughter when her husband appeared and pulled her hand away.

Matilda stumbled, almost falling, her eyes stinging with angry tears.

“You’re going home to Boston with me,” her mother said. “Someone’s coming to take us to the stagecoach.”

“You don’t have to,” her father said.

“You’ve no right to her. She’s coming with me, to my family, where she belongs.” She addressed her daughter: “To a proper home and school. You’re going to become a lady.”

“She’s mine, too,” her father said. “And old enough to choose.”

Her mother hustled her onto the porch. “Listen to me,” her voice was low, almost a hiss. She bent and gripped Matilda’s shoulders, her face so close Matilda felt her breath on her cheeks. “You cannot stay here with them,” her mother said. “They are ruined people and they will ruin you. Trust me. We’ll be happy in Boston.”

She looked into her mother’s eyes, welling with tears. Grey eyes. Had she never noticed the color before? Matilda couldn’t remember ever being this close to her. Her mother’s fingers dug into her shoulders as if impaling her with knowledge. “He left you all those times to go to her.” That whore, Matilda thought. “If he loved you, he’d never have left. I never left you. You’re my daughter, Matilda. I’m the one who raised you. I know you and know what’s best.”

Matilda closed her eyes against her mother, and pictured again those tidy girls of her imaginings, and tried to see becoming one of them, speaking freely all those fancy words she wrote down, instead of burying them. Speaking them out loud in sentences. She tried to imagine a new mother and daughter with no grudge between them. But the shoes, those patent leather shoes with the straps so tight, as tight as her mother’s hands on her, constricting, and the clean, neat spaces Back East, made smaller and smaller by trees and mountains and buildings. Trust you? she thought. You raised me, but he loves me. She might never see him again. And here he was, now, boots striking hard across the wooden porch as he came to claim her. Her mother stood, her arm around Matilda’s shoulders.

“Enough,” he said. “She belongs here, with me. With us,” he nodded towards Sussy. “She’d die in that place. Same as me before I came out here. Not gonna happen to her.”

Her mother’s arm tightened, but Matilda wriggled free. She moved to her father’s side, trying to calm herself, twisting her confusion, her anger, and widening sense of loss into power, into words that would come out kindly, as if she were looking out for her mother’s best interests.

“Go on,” Matilda said. “Now you won’t have to go to the barn every night and cry on that cow.”

Her mother’s face froze, her eyes wide. “What are you talking about?”

“Tilly?” Her father raised his eyebrows.

She turned to him, to Sussy, as if her mother were no longer there, as if she’d already gone. “Every night you been away, I see her go into the barn to be with that old cow. Every night. She doesn’t just hug and cry on her. I seen her kissing that smelly, old dirty thing, kissing it on the mouth like she was married to it or something.”

After her mother left, Sussy pulled her into the barn, awkwardly patting her back, trying to comfort her. She sat Matilda on a milking stool and told her to wait. Through the open barn door, Matilda saw her father saddle up, getting ready to ride to their neighbor’s for a sack of oats. “When’re you coming back,” she’d asked. He hadn’t answered.

“I made some things for you, Tilly, don’t move.” Sussy clapped her hands and hurried through a thin carpet of hay strewn across the floor. She lifted a box from a corner. “Guess what’s in here.” Her voice, shy, lifted with excitement. Matilda said nothing as Sussy placed the box on her lap.

“I know they’re not much, I’m just learning, but your papa told me how much you loved them. I know they can be good company sometimes.”

Matilda took out one of the corncob dolls. Matted hair of brown-ing cornsilk, the same color and texture as the hair that snaked down Matilda’s back. The doll’s arms: sticks that struck straight from the body. Matilda felt the tension in her own shoulders, along her arms.

The crude red mouth dripped lies into the neck, and the eyes of the doll, bulged and knowing as Matilda’s, were heavy and misshapen.

She returned the doll to the box. “These are for children.”

She saw the doll lost to the prairie, its subtlety and beauty, and sounded the word *sophistication*. She would never not see it. Was that love? Standing, she turned away from Sussy, not wanting to see the hurt on her face, then glad she caused it.

Outside, she stared into the flat emptiness of her surroundings where everything was visible, exposed, except for what lay hidden inside a person. The emptiness now stifling. What words might her mother write in her fancy script and then bury—*loneliness, home, truth, betrayal*—

EMILY RANKIN

## Galaxy

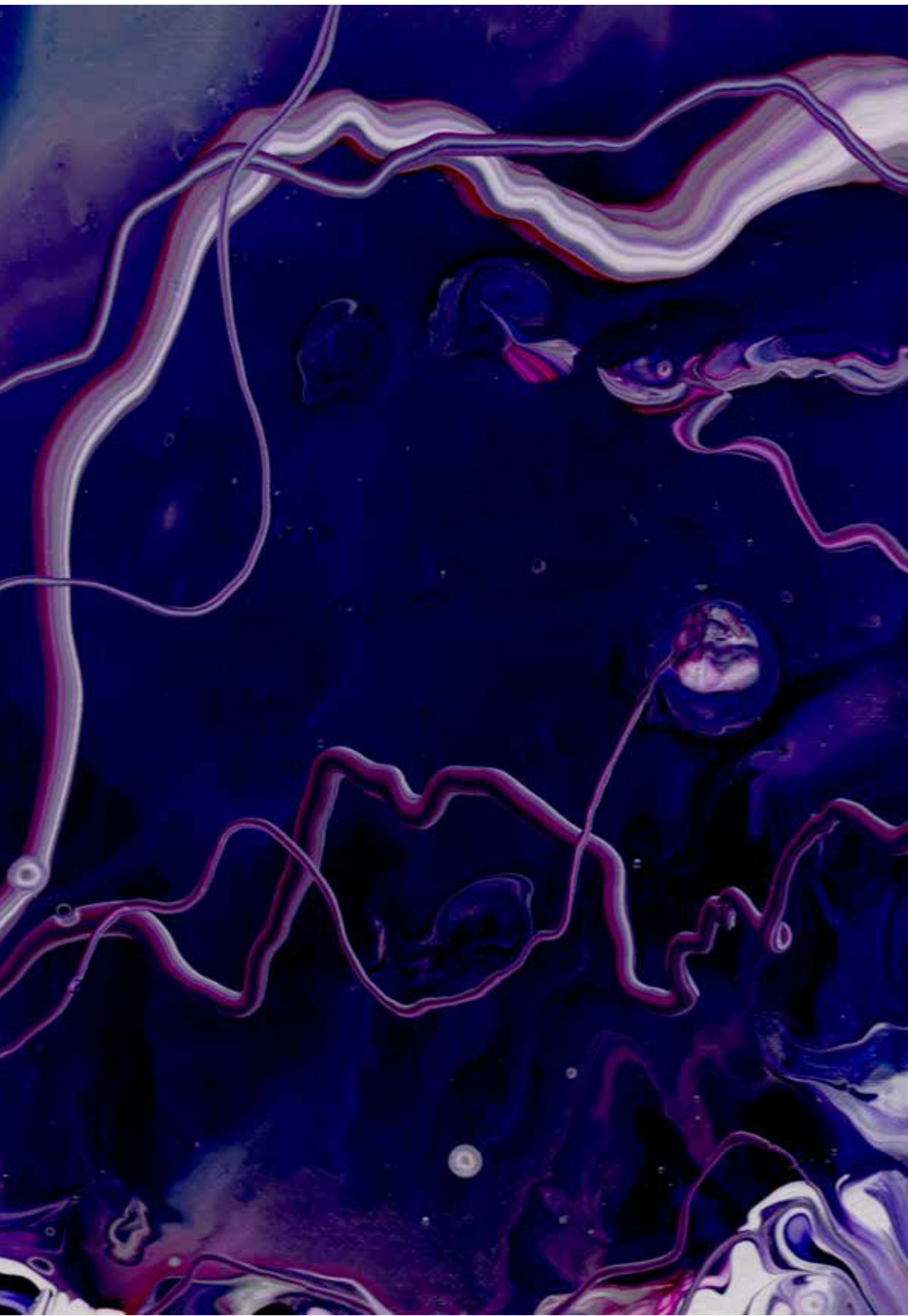
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Fluid acrylic on canvas

11x14 inches

2022

This piece makes up part of an ongoing series, Fluid, which seeks to capture the ways in which a fluid moment in time might be fixed in the mind. Fluid art is a representation of liminal space, an echo of the moment before the paint dried. I’m interested in the way the momentary motion of liquid paint can be captured and pinned to canvas.



MARYHILDA OBASIOTA IBE

## Object Permanence

During the harmattan, a film of white covers the Cordyline. The Ixora and Red Acalypha are quiet and satisfied like mothers on the front porch. The albino neighbor sings an Igbo carol in the yard, laying clothes on the heaps of granite stones bordered by bricks the color of red earth. His voice firm as scripture. It was as though there was a playground in his throat, children the height of little trees clapping loudly in ululation of a looming absence. It is evening in his voice and the playground is littered with torn slippers the color of yellow bush and climbing ivy. In his song, there was the year of hymns and in the hymns, there was the year of recollection and in recollection there was memory, the body's echo. In his song, decades sat like worshippers in the pew of an old church. Outside, the wind crackled like scars. In his song, there was a skyline of children with laughter loud as dream chasing pigeons and failing to catch them, which really is the game—the sublimity of looking at the world in failure. The birds perch on the children and like wheat in a field they run into one another giggling like rain. This is the closest I have been to understanding Kafka's philosopher who ran into the playground seeking to seize the top of a child just to capture the ephemeral. Except when I run into the playground, the children are already gone. The silence, small as a punctuated sentence. The sky, a femur of blank page. The world silent as waving. I have seen years carried abroad like coins in the teeth of butterflies and the language I have is not the one I crave. I have watched my childhood awake like dawn and christened it joy because it did not stay long enough. I only wield semantics large enough to entomb what I want alive. I, who have lost in transmutation the potency of my name. I, nameless protagonist of a threnody.



I who Language fails  
Language  
empties  
Language demands  
of a body I  
cannot give.

In the beginning was Language.

In the beginning, Language.

In Language, a beginning.

In the beginning, Language was a half-opened eye exiled to the lonely center of life.

## TALES FROM THE QUEUE

### Our reader describes what it was like to find Maryhilda Obasiota Ibe's "Object Permanence"

I am in the woods, and although they—the woods—are emptied for the winter cold, the taller trees' tangle—and the air there—holds its sounds, and what it's given it holds, it sustains, and "Object Permanence" knocks, knocks against what I throw it at, and it roots about where it lands. But it cannot throw itself. We know this about language, however reticent or moved we are by it. Hymns, the pre-imbued chants, sustain memory, held as if outside of us for us; what I want alive is occasioned by it, and in being read to the tangle, alive not to untangle it, but to caparison there, a thrown but unthrowing livery, as chaff in the wind. Childhood is a chant, or its nine letters are. The conjured spirit visits; that which can urticate can salve. This close, the volta—unbound by choice—wings past lines of sight, becomes an apeiron. Syllables promulgate. Things decohere. Language is not a thing. Anything less would be to miss the forest for its wood.

—*S. G. Mallett*

## Our reader describes what it was like to find Jona Whipple’s “Why Are You Still Here”

When I read the first line of this story, it got me on board immediately. One sentence, I was catapulted into the middle of a strange situation, and I felt compelled to continue reading just to find out why. The setup is clever, but not gimmicky, because it is justified—as the story progresses, we learn that the father character has dementia, and the mother and the daughter are caregivers. These topics are often difficult to write about because of the intimacy and the emotional weight, but this story achieves a great balance between being honest and showing restraint. As I finished reading, I felt a complicated sadness, which to me is always a sign of good writing. I’m glad that this piece gets to be shared with more people, and I hope you enjoy it as much as I did.

—Xueyi Zhou

## Why Are You Still Here

On the day my father promised me to the neighbor, my mother cried. It was all the sound of ritual, something no longer worth looking up from my breakfast plate for. My father banged through the side door, his unsteady metal sword clattering against the frame. He landed his proclamation, then demanded some ale. He glanced around, eyes glassy and unfocused, settling on the syrup bottle. The sword fell to the kitchen floor as he took the bottle in his hands, turning its curves over between his palms. My father: guzzling maple syrup from a glass bottle in the shape of a woman. My mother: elbows on the table, the curtain of a stained cotton napkin spread across her face, shoulders contracting with sobs.

“What it is,” she told Mrs. Tobin later that morning, “is that he wants to see her get married before he—before he *goes*.” She wrung the napkin in her hands, dabbed at her eyes, yellowed orbs, red-threaded. “Before he *really* goes,” she whispered low, leaning into Mrs. Tobin for conspiratorial effect. Mrs. Tobin leaned back, protecting her airspace. “It’s a very sweet thing if you think about it,” my mother continued, smiling cautiously as she became ever more certain that Mrs. Tobin was a wall to be removed one brick at a time. “It means he’s still in there somewhere.”

My mother sighed, glancing toward the kitchen window to draw Mrs. Tobin’s eyes and thoughts to my father, who stood at the sink staring over the blank expanse of the backyard, digging his fingers into his beard and thinking of nothing. Mrs. Tobin’s polite smile blinked on and off like a broken neon sign, she rubbed her elbows under her crossed arms and said she’d discuss it with Mr. Tobin, who had been

hiding in the garage pretending to sort bolts into tiny jars ever since earlier that morning when my father chased him out of his patio chair with shouted promises of a hefty dowry and healthy sons. My mother nodded and did that thing with her brows where she tilted them up until the lines in her forehead formed a perfect peak, a cathedral roof.

“What do you think of all this?” Mrs. Tobin asked, looking me up and down, the first time she’d ever said anything to me that wasn’t shouted across the lawn. I looked up to meet her gaze, and her eyes weaseled tight and small, as if she was trying to sort out some kind of pattern printed on my skin, decide if I was bruised fruit, just as crazy as my parents. “I think,” I said, aware of my mother’s hands, how they held the fabric of the wadded napkin so tight they looked like they might bleed, “I think it’s fine, it’s whatever.” I was not yet used to the way adults had begun looking me in the eye and asking me what I thought about things, expecting me to answer. It was like I had been standing in the shadow of an eclipse for fifteen years, and then the Earth moved and they could see me in a place where there had been nothing before.

I scratched at the skin behind my ear. I felt my mother relax. But Mrs. Tobin’s tiny eyes had found me, and they would not let me go.

My father’s dementia began like a secret, a bloom of black mold behind the walls. The first few times he’d lost control of his bike on his way to and from the university where he worked, he reasoned it to be due to the dizziness he suffered when he took his heart medication too late in the day, or without enough food, or any number of other things he said could affect a body “after a half century of living.”

“Drink plenty of water,” he said, winking at me from under a gauze pad he held against his head to stanch the bleeding, “and don’t do drugs, at least not the ones I did.” That particular day, he’d slid sideways and crashed into the curb, grating his bald head against the pavement. Later, he complained of numbness that came and went. One night, he asked me to chop the zucchini for him because, he said, “My hands are tired.” His hands were tired more often after that, then his feet, his legs—and then the university began to send spies to sit in the bushes outside our house, attach trackers to our car, tape codes to the

bottom of his deodorant stick. At night, my parents met in the downstairs family room to talk low and serious, unaware of my presence on the top stair. “I’m here,” my father said, punctuated by a soft tapping, which I imagined to be him placing the palms of his hands on the tops of his thighs, “I’m here, but I just can’t...” From my hiding place, I could feel my mother leaning in to prompt him forward as his pause inflated the space between them, but nothing called him back from these moments when he disappeared into himself.

“Can’t *what?*” my mother prompted, reaching with her voice into the clouded smoke surrounding my father’s brain.

It had always been unlike my father to stop speaking when he held an audience, and then, he walked into rooms as if searching for something, said random half-sentences, or delivered isolated clippings of poetry. “The golden is before us, and we—and *we*,” he once shouted in the produce aisle at the grocery store, so loud I saw the limes tremble. We abandoned the cart, and the three of us drove home in silence without the tomatoes and cereal.

*Family time* was a holy land my mother vowed to reclaim, even across the unpredictable landscape of my father’s health and my persistent disinterest in being around either of them. She carried the cross of the notion through gritted teeth. Dinner with my parents became mandatory, and I was expected to be at home in the hours before and after, doing what my mother called *visiting*: sitting in the living room watching the fall darkness press down on us until someone got up to turn on a light. Hospital visits became more frequent, and then they too became family time, and my mother scheduled all of my father’s appointments at times when I could be expected to join them.

My father on those days was morose and petulant in the backseat, angry because my mother didn’t trust him to drive, or because he thought he was seven years old and she wouldn’t let him have a Donald Duck Pez, or because fuck you lady, he was Steve fucking McQueen and knew how to fucking drive goddammit. She wouldn’t let me drive either, no matter how many times I reminded her of my permit slip. “You can practice next year,” she said, teeth pressed together, hissing words out of the corner of her lips and checking the rearview as if

my father could have possibly been present enough to clock her tone. “We’re focusing on family time.” I slouched and sneered, I picked at the edges of my ragged cuticles and flung pieces of skin onto the floor of the car out of spite because she’d been sitting in the fire lane behind the B building, laying on the horn until she saw me come out of the double doors, where I’d been trapped behind an avalanche of other bodies, all of them slowing down to get a look at the crazy-faced woman peering up from behind her screeching wiper blades.

My mother and I waited in empty gray rooms with uncomfortable chairs. I picked through *AARP* magazines for articles about diabetes medications and lists of Shirley MacLaine’s favorite restaurants that had not yet been torn out. Walls of windows looked out onto construction sites, buildings going up all around the hospital, and I huddled into my coat under blasting air conditioning and sketched geometry triangles. The metal chutes of bright hallways were lined with impersonal, synthetic closets. The waiting rooms always had televisions, and my mother and I pretended to watch football games and house-flipping shows, handing those crumpled magazines back and forth, until she reminded me to do my homework.

With my notebook balanced on the edge of a chair that felt like it had been carved from marble, I wrote an English paper on the theme of empathy in *Jane Eyre*. *If Jane Eyre had any more empathy*, I wrote, *she would have been living in the attic and shitting in a bucket. If she had been any more empathetic, they would have been looking for a place in the manor to put their new doormat*. In a room at the end of the hall, a doctor injected dyes into my father’s head and spoke to him through a microphone. After the test, we watched as the doctor moved a mouse back and forth across the back of a small notepad. Clouds of color in turmoil moved over the outlined surface of my father’s brain, ebbing in lasso strands, and then the bad part: At the end, a wall of gray, a wash of nothing.

We nodded along with the doctor as he dragged the color back and forth, into and out of possibility. We nodded along with that doctor just as we had with all the others, their exhausted monologues walking us through the terrifying and endless process of crossing off the less serious diagnoses. We nodded along, smiling, with the specialist who suggested that we go along with my father’s confusions, engage him

with his stories, meet him where he was living. “Stay in the moment,” the specialist said, touching his fingertips together, “and, in a word, *play*.”

We smiled, we nodded, we agreed that this was the best course of action, my mother and I, and we went to the kiosk at the mall where you could buy replicas of battle weapons, all painted metal with plastic edges and jewel inlays set with blobs of hot glue. That was when we were still in the stage of observing terminal illness where you believe that if you’re agreeable enough, if you just go quietly, if you move just the right way, it won’t be able to see you, it will pass you by in the dark and leave you whole.

My essay won me an elegant, impressive F, and regular meetings with the school guidance counselor. I’d been assured by Mandy Jeselnik that she had turned in her *Jane Eyre* paper the year before and it was just the intro paragraph over and over, copied and pasted until it looked like a full eight-page paper, and had gotten an A. “She’s not actually *reading* them,” she’d said of Mrs. Phelps, blowing smoke out from between the gap in her teeth as we sat one cheek each on the toilet tank, feet up on the seat, in the fifth-floor bathroom.

“Anyway, if she calls you out on it, just pull the dad card. You don’t really get to use that for that long,” she warned as she ashed between our sneakers into the bowl.

The most the guidance counselor could do was scratch illegible words into a yellow legal pad in his windowless office by the cafeteria, then send me back to class. His expertise was in sudden death: Cars full of teenagers speeding into trees, school shootings, someone jumping off the roof of the L building and landing in the parking lot. No one had jumped off the roof of the L building since 1996 because they started locking the stairwell door, so he was woefully out of practice in the business of sudden loss. He’d perhaps never been in the practice of handling the kind of protracted, dissolutive exit my father had not planned.

My father managed to keep having good days until the eighth week of the fall semester. Once or twice each week, as he was able, he would sit in a chair before his class and deliver his own lectures. Sometimes,

he could only manage to show up and observe his replacement, an adjunct named Jerry Yarbrough. Jerry, according to my father, stumbled through the maze of slides my father had prepared, pausing before clicking the button to check his notes on comically large note cards before each advance, as if a surprise awaited him. On the days when my father could only observe, when stuttering prevented his speech or auditory shadows confused him until he was convinced every student was talking at once, he let Jerry do the talking. In the evenings, he referred snidely to Jerry as “One-Ball Jerry,” an uncharacteristically cruel nickname derived from Jerry’s survival of testicular cancer. “The man’s got no soul for it,” my father said. “You watch. They’ll tenure One-Ball and then they’ll be calling me to come down there and fix it.”

On what turned out to be my father’s last day at work, I came home after school to find my mother at war with the bottoms of the kitchen cabinets. “Your father needed to come home a little early today,” she said, glancing over her shoulder before letting me through the locked screen door to the kitchen. “He’s asleep now, so be quiet, please?” The cabinet doors gaped open all around us, their contents arranged on every stable surface and filling the sink. She shook her head, lifted a rag to her face to give it a light sniff. “Do you smell that?” she said, sniffing around herself, under her arms, sticking her head into the cabinet. “What *is* that?” she said. She grabbed the lemon cleaner and huffed at its lid. “Probably shouldn’t be using this anyway,” she said, holding out the bottle as if to read the list of its contents, “they say it causes all kinds of crazy things in dogs.”

I learned the full story about what happened on my father’s last day at work from Ryan Gibbs, who was in my father’s history seminar on that last afternoon. “Watch the door,” Ryan said, ducking down behind the dumpsters to pick up small piles of the flattened cardboard boxes he was supposed to be throwing away. I kept my eyes on the bright yellow line of light coming from around the back door of the Best Buy stockroom where he’d jammed half a concrete block to keep it open. I avoided eye contact as much as possible as he talked, embarrassed by the puckered spots around the neck of his Best Buy polo. There were wrinkled dimples around the necklines of all of his shirts where he obsessively dug in his fingers and wiped at the corners of his mouth,

so they were sometimes wet with spit or dirty with whatever grime was on his face. It wasn’t the spit or the dirt that bothered me. I didn’t like thinking about the way his fingers moved without his awareness, couldn’t stand the thought of physical compulsions, like when someone pretended to be listening to you, but their eyes relaxed and focused on something like they were looking through you. I didn’t like thinking about the ways that we could disappear, but still be there.

Class that day had started normally, according to Ryan. My father had been standing, moving back and forth in front of his whiteboards, engaging with students throughout the first thirty minutes of his Iron Age lecture, like his old self, except for a limp. At some point in the lecture, he’d gone quiet, stepped back and stared at the script he’d written across the whiteboards. Without a sound, he’d wandered out into the hallway. Students glanced at each other, nervous laughter rippled through the room. Just as Jerry began to get up from his seat to go and find my father, he re-entered, but without his pants and underwear. He walked in sock-footed, dangling beneath the wrinkled ends of his shirttail.

“My little eggs!” he exclaimed, raising his arms before the packed auditorium, exposing himself even more. “My little eggs, all of you! By God, I’ll sit on you one by one until you hatch!”

Someone made for the door and then they all scattered, leaves in the wind, leaving my father sitting on the floor in front of his whiteboards. I asked if anyone stayed with my father. Ryan assured me that a small crowd waited in the hall, forming a semicircle around the pile of my father’s clothes, waiting for Jerry to return with someone who knew what to do. Ryan booked it down a stairwell and escaped to his car, “called it a day,” a fact he was too stupid or immature to regret sharing with me. “Heavy shit, huh?” he said, wiping his mouth, but he said it in a way that could have been in reference to everything from my disappearing father to the pile of flattened refrigerator boxes. He didn’t wait for a response, didn’t see my shrug as he looked away to check the door.

I walked home in the pink twilight, under a swirl of birds changing patterns over me, turning and dipping along the sound waves of some distant church bells calling out the hour. The watermelon gummy

rings Ryan had given me, stored in the pocket of his cargo pants, were a mildewy green, and I let them go loose and slimy in my cheek, then set my jaw and clamped it hard on my tongue until they turned softly bitter and tangy like cut grass. I thought of my father's legs, how when you saw them in the summer they seemed carved for a man of a different size, a man more delicate, paler in color. The smoothness of his calves had inspired his tormentors in school to call him *bird legs*; my mother sometimes did this too, and pinched at his thighs. He slapped her hands away, screeching like a barn owl. The light of the kitchen in those scenes seemed bright and effusive at the time, but leaked its brilliance somehow in my memory because from then on, I would think of my father's legs as they had been on that last day, exposed under the bronze lights to the unforgiving eyes of his students.

When I came in the side door, my mother tossed a handful of cutlery into the sink with a crash. She glared at me on her way back to the table for the plates, stopping to lean into the mud room and remind me that dinner time was family time. "And why is your mouth all green?" she said, squeezing my cheeks in her hand to stare at my tongue.

"My little egg," I said to her, stroking her face. "By God."

On the day of the wedding, my mother cried. She folded up the sleeves of her wedding dress so I could use my hands, held the fabric together at my elbows and shoulders with metal binder clips. I tripped over the mildewed skirt when I walked, crushing the plasticized fabric under my feet and popping the clips in the back. She found a belt in her closet and used it to hoist up the excess around my waist, a backwards hem job. She stepped back to look at me and then it came, the tears, her eyes two swollen slits, the crying some kind of permanent condition. I looked like the top of a rotten mushroom. She said "I'm so glad your father can see this day. I just wish you had washed your hair."

Outside, the News 7 van parked on the corner. All down the winding driveway to the street, neighbors stood in their sweatpants and bathrobes, my mother's invited guests. Mr. Bankhead held a cup of coffee. Even though Mrs. Stafford didn't live nearby anymore, she had shuttled both twins over in their matching white Sunday dresses.

The little girls held plastic sandwich bags filled with bruised handfuls of petals from Mrs. Tobin's azaleas and stood still and wide-eyed on the side of the driveway, their mother's hands flat on their sternums, drawing them into her hips, eyeing the sword on my father's belt. The scratched tip of the sheath scraped the ground as he limped past, calling "Good morrow" and gathering handshakes from the men in the crowd.

Crisp, rotten rings of tulle petticoat scratched at my knees as I dragged the weight of the dress down the cracked pavement. My mother played the wedding march on a paint-splattered boombox, the sound smearing around us as the tape squeaked along at the wrong pitch and speed. "O joyous day," shouted my father, unsheathing his sword and lifting it to the gray sky, wobbling on his right side, his foot turning in. The gauntlet of people beamed, tucking their newspapers under their arms to clap their hands.

Mr. Tobin waited at the bottom of the driveway, his cheeks red and puffed, disguising that same look of pity I saw in all the watching eyes behind me. He offered me his fist instead of his hand, placed it in front of me like a fence post, and I was grateful for it, the way he recognized the intimacy of putting your hand inside someone else's. It could have been that he was just aware of his wife's gaze from where she stood near the street, guarding her azaleas from further molestation, hands on her hips in her grass-stained sweatpants, ready for this silliness to end so she could get back to the yard work. The back of Mr. Tobin's hand was red and scaly, as dry as raw wood and uncomfortable to touch when I remembered that it was supposed to be flesh. I put my hand on top of his, as gently as landing on a branch, and we proceeded.

We presented ourselves to Mr. Landry, who lived on the other side of the cul-de-sac and held a regular D&D game in his garage. He wore a faux leather vest from a pirate costume held closed over his gut with a safety pin. The curve of an ornate costume cutlass hung from his belt. The News 7 cameraman changed positions behind Mr. Landry, this side and then the other, gathering all the best angles of the manufactured occasion.

Mr. Landry had only read the first few words from his wedding

service pamphlet when we heard the sword scratch across concrete and saw the News 7 cameraman pop his head up from behind his eyepiece. At the top of the driveway, my father lay in a heap, sword and sheath scattered beside him, a dark stain growing on the front of his khakis. A few neighbors gathered to help, leaned in and offered advice for seizures, sprained ankles, for things that can be cured, but my mother assured everyone that this was normal, even as she removed her flannel shirt and threw it over my father's pants to protect what was left of his dignity. She lifted his head onto her knees and nodded polite thanks to all of our neighbors as they drifted away across the lawn in one wave like a flock of birds. The news van rumbled back down the street, and Mr. Tobin's giant hand patted at the crushed lace where my shoulder might have been.

I slept under my bed that night, slid off the side and rolled under, pulling down the blankets on all sides until I found the absolute dark. There, I pressed into the floor, where I dreamed I could untie all the knots of myself, gently teasing apart the ends of twisted strings as the sky tilted sideways overhead. The silver edges of the dream rattled, first a threat, then an intrusion. I woke, hitting my head against the bottom of the bed, my cheek numb and cold from the carpet. The rattling sound persisted, and I followed it out the door and down the hall.

In the kitchen, my father sat on the floor in the dark, leaned up against the cabinets. Holding the side of an open drawer, he tried to hoist himself into the wheelchair that had been sitting folded behind the couch for weeks, and now stood by him empty, waiting.

"I used to have a rope here for this," he said, noticing the shape of me in the dark, a slice of my face in the streetlight coming in the window. He winced as he lowered himself back to the floor. "Do you know what they did with it?"

"I don't know," I said, "I'm sorry. What do I do?"

"You can find my rope, Private! I need it," he barked, leaning back against the cabinets, breathing hard. Beads of sweat rolled down his forehead.

"Dad," I said. My voice cracked, too high, too blank. "Dad, there was never a rope there. There was no rope, Dad."

We stayed there in the dark, waiting, both of us moved by the air in

the room and the pulse of our blood. I felt him crying before I heard it, and the hairs stood up on my legs at the sound, something I'd never heard, a lost and empty peal of what was left of my father ringing out into the night. I came to my knees on the tile, covered my face in the dark. He reached out until he could almost touch my hair, fingers grazing my face, both hands outstretched to pull me into him.

"What is happening?" my mother said, alarmed but half asleep, a tornado siren in a distant county. She flipped the switch on the wall and we all shriveled away from one another under the harsh light until she turned it back off. "What's happened? I'm here!" she said, sliding to her knees beside him. She cradled his face, wiped at his tears with her shirt. He held her forearm and muttered explanations and apologies about the wheelchair, but she shushed him. She began to rock him, moved him side to side until his body calmed, his breathing slowing. I had seen her leaning over him in this way that morning on the driveway, and a week ago when he had fallen in the breezeway, all the times he had come home bleeding and confused. She had assumed this posture over time—softly, afraid—learned to curve over him in this way, an impermanent shelter for what was to come.

When I moved, it was to wipe my face on the back of my arm. My father, near sleep, glanced across my mother's shoulder to see me again, sitting in the beam of white light from the motion sensor on the Tobin's garage. "Why do I still see this one darkening my halls?" he asked her, lifting his head. "Did I not see her married this day?"

"Oh yes, my Lord," my mother said, peeking back at me where I sat hunched on the floor, a breath away from them. "She will join her husband when she is of age." He spluttered, a cruel laugh.

"And you be mine, I'll give you to my friend," he said, raising a finger toward my face. "And you be not, hang."

My mother unlaced her arm from around his back, used it to make a shooing motion in my direction, waving me backwards in the dark, away to my room down the hall.

On the floor, my back to my bedroom door, I listened to them talking, hushed, then the sounds as they traveled back to their bedroom, and finally the silence of the house rang in my ears. My window stood open, the cold breeze spinning circles across the floor, winding around

my toes, and if I shut my eyes it felt like I was moving on the air. I could build hidden rooms, I thought, and I began to plan them, to cover the walls with scenes of hurt. But the hours turned, and I opened my eyes to the morning pouring over the hills at the end of the street, a wall of gray, then threads of gold, again, waves of color crashing back in, night birds disappearing into the trees. I could go where they go, silent in the air, a sharpness hidden in the vivid dark. If I wanted, I could live in endless night, moving in all the ways no one hears.

But I had no desire to live behind the walls of myself, bricking up the exits and turning in silent circles. I had no desire to float unseen. My throat was full, metallic, heavy with something like rage, with something like sadness, keys to the same door, the heavy handle of an escape hatch. Down the hall, I could hear my mother in the kitchen, the clicking of the coffeemaker, the shifting of dishes in the sink, the sounds of her beginning to build the day. I looked around me, feeling on the floor for something to knock down, something to shake, some insistent noise to make so that she would know I was still here.

WINSHEN LIU

## You know the kind of school

Assigned in November, we were to become pilgrims on the classroom ship, so my mother crafted dress and collar for me to emulate Honor and Prudence. For January's lesson, we drew "gentry" or "slave" from a hat and I wish I could say we threw Ticonderogas, jumped onto desks. But I knew too little then, only afraid of losing the few friends I had. March meant Ellis Island Day, when we needed to bring a dish from our heritage. Per my request, my parents braised eggs for hours. The spiced soy sauce quelled their fears I'd forget where I was from. Really from. But my classmates showed up with spaghetti and shortbread. Store-bought cake. It wasn't that the teacher opened the pan after dessert, or that my classmates uttered *ew* like a punchline. It wasn't my voyage home on the bus; it was the pan's weight in my mother's hands, with exactly the same contents as yesterday. Two dozen eggs—instead of zero—inside.



## Leslie Birch Was Not Real

Leslie Birch was not real. He stood on the corner of Western and Polk in Chicago, Illinois, in November. It was a real place and a real time. If Leslie had really thought about it, he might have wished or even hoped for the realness of this corner to rub off on him. Gum on the shoe. Stuck. Two minutes ago, he was buying a pack of beer when he looked outside the window of the corner shop and he thought it was snowing. He swore he saw snow falling, small, dry flakes, dust or dandruff. He left the beer on the counter and the woman standing at the cash register didn't call his name because she didn't know what to say. Leslie Birch stepped outside and it was not snowing. Just cold. The grey of the sky stayed up there out of reach.

Leslie left the beer and walked down the street. On a street this cold and this grey, there was only a smattering of life. Only a few people walking, stepping out of their own corner shops, looking up at their own grey skies. A trio of boys circled the block on bikes. Once, twice, three times. Leslie didn't mind leaving the beer on the counter. He didn't really want the beer. What he had wanted was to stand in front of a cashier and hand her some crumpled dollar bills and for her to take them from him.

It was Tuesday afternoon and Leslie had missed four shifts at the package facility. When he didn't show up for the first shift, one of the floor-leads or operations managers would have called him repeatedly. Leslie's phone died on Saturday. None of the calls went through. When he didn't show for the second shift, he would have been terminated automatically and his information would have been erased from the system. By the third shift, someone would have cleared out his locker,

only to find a pack of nicotine gum and a stick of deodorant. At the start of the fourth shift, it would be as if there was no Leslie Birch, here or anywhere else. Leslie Birch walked down Western Avenue and no one noticed.

Real or not, Leslie heard the bone break. He heard the snap of the bone first, and then silence. He turned and the street was empty, except for the three boys and their bikes. They were maybe nine years old. Maybe they were fourteen. Leslie had two sons who were adults now, but they had never been nine or fourteen, not in his memory. The boys in the street wore thin jackets and their cheeks and noses were red-stung by winter winds. Two were standing with their bikes still between their legs. The third boy was on the ground, his bike scattered in one direction, his body in another. Leslie saw the boy on the ground try to raise his left arm, and saw where the arm fell away from the shoulder, where it hung too low. Even through his jacket, Leslie could tell his arm was broken. The standing boys looked at Leslie and back at their friend and then to Leslie again. No one made a sound. Down the street, a dozen pigeons all took flight at the same time, as if they had planned it. One, two, three. Leslie, who was not real, who had been walking through the city for five days and sleeping during the mornings in parks and libraries, turned and walked away. Surely someone would come. Someone who could help. There was that lady at the corner store; the boys were still in the view of the window where Leslie had sworn he'd seen snow. Leslie Birch had nothing to offer.

Leslie made it only two blocks before he turned around. He picked up his left foot to take a step further way from the boys, to keep walking, and instead used it to turn his body around. Western Avenue was wide, and the buildings on either side were low. To the east, Leslie could see the downtown of Chicago blooming like a mushroom cloud in the distance, many miles away. These streets were empty and made of the same color as the sky. Grey above, grey below, sun-bleached like the posters that hung in the windows of corner shops that promoted old music festivals and strip clubs. When he turned around, the boys were still in the middle of the street. Everything was still frozen. Leslie walked to where the broken boy was laid out, and kneeled beside him.

You left, one of the standing boys said.

Leslie grabbed the broken boy's hand on the uninjured arm and squeezed. The boy squeezed back. His grip was weak and his face was drained of color.

What's your name? Leslie asked the broken boy. His voice was calmer than he had expected. It was the first time he had spoken to anyone in five days. His tone was smooth. His words didn't catch on anything in his throat.

You, you, you, the boy said. His voice was shaking and he spoke between short bursts of breath.

Where are your parents? Who's taking care of you?

You, you, you, the boy said again.

Leslie turned to the two boys still standing with their bikes. What's his name? Where are his parents? He spoke louder now, pinched the words between his teeth. The boys just looked at him. No one moved.

You left, they said.

Wind whipped down the street. Leslie tensed his shoulders as a chill passed through him. He caught a whiff of himself and suppressed a gag. He thought for a second that no one would ever again ask for his name. The thought was as quick and sharp as a needle in the eye. He leaned down to whisper in the broken boy's ear.

I'm not real. I can't help you. I don't know what to do with you.

You, you, you, the boy echoed.

Earlier today, when a cop had kicked his leg to wake him from sleeping against a tree in Humboldt Park, Leslie had decided to take what money he had on him and buy a bus ticket to Oklahoma. Leslie's father had died earlier that year and he had been a Choctaw Indian who grew up in Oklahoma and never talked about it. That made Leslie half an Indian and he had the blood certificate to prove it, but he didn't know anything more about being Choctaw than he knew about being Cherokee or Chickasaw, and when he was drunk, sometimes he mixed them up.

Leslie thought his whole life his father had been part of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, but it wasn't until he passed away that he learned his father was actually Mississippi Band. It wasn't until he passed away that Leslie knew those were two different things, that there was a difference between the people who stayed and the people

who didn't and that, somehow, his father had lived with both. No one from either tribe came to his funeral. Neither Leslie nor his older brothers knew who to call. His brothers had accepted their father's silence a long time ago and were now silent Indians themselves, standing like poplar trees at the edge of a field.

The funeral was just Leslie, his white mother, and his half-Indian brothers who also had white wives. There were their children, who knew even less. If he had still been married, Leslie's own white wife and his own quarter-blood sons would have been there as well. The only Indians Leslie knew were his brothers and his fathers and his sons. The only Indians Leslie knew were the ones who made him and the ones he made. None of them knew what any of it meant. All these words, delineations, blood quantum, lines drawn between one river or another. They didn't know the language, the stories, the families, the past.

Being half-Indian with no history was like being just half-white, the other half a mystery. Not real. They had none of it, none of the stuff of being Indian, and it was Leslie's father who had kept it from them. Leslie had asked, first in quiet, timid tones and then in hollers and screeches louder than winds. His father had never answered, and Leslie had never figured it out. What did a son know of his father's behavior, of his intentions, of his choices and consequences? Or of his own? Nothing, nothing.

Leslie had tried to go to Oklahoma before and never made it. Short spells of compulsion, time that Leslie couldn't answer for. He'd come to and find himself on a highway approaching St. Louis. He would always turn around, always a job to get back to, sons he couldn't leave behind then. Leslie thought, because he wasn't real anymore, that maybe this time he could make it. In the back of his mind, Leslie knew that there wasn't anything down there for him. There would be no family, no long-lost cousins, no one who would know his name or his father's. Leslie knew that if he wasn't real here that he wouldn't be real there, but it was the motion of the thing. Leslie could be not real, but he could be unreal with movement, with direction, with velocity. That trajectory kept him solid. He had been walking for the past five days. And now, he was kneeling in the middle of the street with a broken

boy and no one was moving.

I've called an ambulance! The lady from the corner store was standing on the sidewalk with a phone to her ear. A small crowd of onlookers had stopped on the sidewalk. Leslie looked up at them and saw what they must have seen. A broken boy lying there in the middle of the street. A not-real man kneeling at his side. The two boys with bikes stood above them like angels. It must have looked like a painting or an oil spill. Something like that.

After the ambulance came and took the boys away, the small crowd of passersby slipped back into side streets and the woman went back into her corner store. The boys left their bikes in the street, and Leslie dragged them out of the street and leaned them against a boarded-up storefront. When he turned around, the grey street was empty again. There was no sign that the boys had been there, or that Leslie had either. He walked to the middle of the street where the boy had fallen. Leslie felt something twist behind his sternum, then the sensation of a string being pulled taut from his anus to his throat. He leaned over and vomited onto the pavement. The partially digested food and stomach bile that had left Leslie's body was now as much his as the street was his, as the sky was his. In the cold November air, steam rose from the warm vomit and spilled out of Leslie's mouth and no one noticed.

## BRENNAN BURNSIDE

### Wake

The last time I saw him he was smiling,  
wandering around my uncle's property,  
watching my cousins talk as if they were  
a flock of birds changing direction. Dizzy  
with the broadening space around him. His wife  
only two years dead. Everything was unfolding.  
For the first time, he saw mountains outside and  
darkness within them. The strange patterns on the floor.  
The beds that remained unmade, as if in protest.  
Constellations of dust frozen in time perforate each room.  
All his clothes are coated in stardust.  
He was mostly cement by then, dried and driven  
into tree trunks. Century-old nails made in town  
by an extinct blacksmith. Walnut harvested from  
the mountain property, heartwood warm  
like maple syrup or blood. Like history kept in  
incubation. I can't tell how much dark fire used to be  
there. What kind of obscure misery compelled him  
to tell his children to lie about the other, then  
line them up in the kitchen and beat them until one  
confessed. History becomes a dream that sweats off  
like wax. The whole house still reeks of apple butter.  
The pantry is loaded with small jars canned decades  
ago with only the dry dark to sup on its fermentation.  
The sky was clear that day. My mother sat  
opposite my uncle and avoided his smile.  
With decades of words buried between them,  
only she knew where the gravestones were.

LENA ZYCINSKY

## Beautiful Fighters

(right)  
Mixed medium  
2022

I created "Beautiful Fighters" in response to the war in Ukraine. The artwork captures doves, which are symbols of peace, engaged in a fight. It is executed in mixed media, where I used a patchwork collage technic to manipulate pieces of magazines into a harmonious whole, which I then finished with acrylics. Despite the dark foresight, I hope the destruction of war will be over soon (not just in Ukraine, but in Israel-Gaza, too), that the peace will break in unexpectedly like rays of sunshine do through what looks like endlessly thick clouds: time to collect, rebuild and heal.



## Thunder Thighs

In the room's thick dark, he explores me.  
I say nothing.

His fingers trace my belly; below,  
his hand claims a cheek.

When he comments on my slender frame,  
it's implied that I should learn to stop growing—

*'cause right now you don't have thunder thighs  
like other women.*

By the time my mother comes home,  
I've been told to tuck myself in.

He believes there should be a line  
somewhere, so he draws it at treating me

like a kid.

## Bughouse

The ladybug comes first, red as a blister ruying the crown molding.  
My husband stretches a fingertip toward the ceiling and clicks it like an  
on-off button. The stink of its yellow blood is like something burnt.

“Are you leaving the windows open again?” he asks me. “I told you  
not to leave the windows open.”

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Ants march on us next, mapping highways and turnpikes across our  
laminated countertop. They are palm-heeling to a dark smudge, and my  
husband sprays aerosol pest-killer.

In the weeks that follow, I spot a spider ducking behind wainscoting  
seams.

A millipede squinches up our shower curtain and I shriek.

Vinegar flies dangle in the kitchen.

Boxelder graveyards crop up in windowsills.

“How are they all getting in?”

We scour the house late into the night. Every surface is scrubbed  
to shining until our elbows ache, but when we fall back victorious and  
kissing and undressing onto our mattress, the thump of a moth against  
a bulb at our bedside interrupts.

Back on our feet, my husband and I are snatching fistfuls of empty  
air until the thrash of wings is powder on the drywall.

The romance is spoiled, and I switch off the light and settle back  
exhausted.

“Love you,” my husband murmurs, and when I am nearly asleep he

shifts beside me. “You’re not going to say it back?”

“I love you,” I say.

“Why are you saying it weird?”

“What do you mean? That’s how my voice sounds right now. It’s been a long day.”

“Did I do something wrong?” he asks.

“No.”

“I feel like I’m always doing something wrong.”

My eyes are wide open now, bolted to the dark ceiling. “Me, too.”

My husband lets out a breath of frustration. “Why do you always do that? Make it about you when I’m upset.”

“I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I think you should apologize anyway.”

“For the way my voice sounds?”

Our back-and-forth takes us in a circle, and I finally concede.

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

“See? You’re saying it weird,” he says. “You never say it like you mean it.”

“I’m super tired. Can we talk about this in the morning?”

“You always want to talk later.”

“You’re always upset.”

My husband jerks up in bed. “Seriously?” He is talking through teeth now. “This didn’t have to be a big deal. If you just apologized like you actually meant it.”

I am quiet, wishing I could fold myself smaller, the same way a pill bug can coil into a ball, the way a grasshopper accordions its lace-wings tight against its flanks.

“You’re just going to go to sleep, then?”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper again.

“That’s the best you can do?”

We hear a clack of something dropping to the floor, and when I switch on the light a June bug is on its back on the hardwood, six legs flailing.

\*\*\*

Our furniture is dragged back from the baseboards so we can dust and vacuum every crevice. Cobwebs are broomed and carpet beetles are halved and crane flies are clapped in preparation for the party. Guests arrive, and despite our best efforts I still spot cutworms beating themselves against lights, a mantis perching on the sofa arm, a lightning bug winking overhead like foil confetti. Our friends are swatting at gnats while they dig in ice for beer cans, crack glowsticks, bounce ping-pong balls, bob near the Bluetooth speaker.

“Where’s the birthday boy? We have to do candles!” someone shouts as midnight nears.

I find my husband alone in our bedroom. He looks like he’s been crying.

“It took you a whole hour to realize I was gone,” he tells me.

“Why are you in here? Are you okay?”

“It’s my birthday. And you didn’t even notice I was missing. No one did.”

“Of course we did. Everyone’s asking about you. I think we should go—”

“You’re my wife. I thought you would have noticed, at least,” he says, breathing hard. “You know I hate my birthday. I’ve always hated my birthday. If you really knew me, you’d know I didn’t want a party.”

“I thought you said—”

“I make your life miserable. I know I do,” he panics. “Why are you even with me?”

I lock the bedroom door and hold his head in my lap while laughter and music seep in from outside. “Because before I met you, I didn’t think it was possible to love someone so much,” I tell him, my chest aching.

Some days being in love feels like being a longhorn ant, carrying something ten times my weight.

I am a dog tick, so swollen to bursting I can barely move, and love is something liquid red.

We sit together like this until our guests filter home, and I watch a widow gossamer her net between walls while I stroke the hair from my husband’s forehead, trace the lines of his beautiful face with my thumb.

\*\*\*

We fill the seams of our doors and windows, caulking gun in my husband's hands while I smooth the sticky seal with a putty knife behind him. When we don't see a single insect all day, we pop champagne to celebrate, laughing as we lever the cork, collapsing on the kitchen floor and sipping straight from the green gooseneck of the bottle.

"Do you remember the day we met?"

"The way we used to talk?"

"Until the sun was rising."

"At the top of that parking garage. Where you could see all the city lights."

"Remember our first kiss? We were so—"

"And that waterfall we went skinny dipping in?"

"Why do you always do that?" my husband mutters.

"What?"

"Interrupt me."

"Oh. I didn't realize."

"You do it all the time. You're not a very good listener."

"I didn't mean to. What were you going to say?"

"I'm not saying it now." He passes the bottle, and a pair of katydids start a chorus in a high cabinet.

\*\*\*

The bugs are pouring in ten times more than before, so many that high corners are velveteed black. The frosted bowls of the overhead lights fill with a trail-mix of exoskeletons. My husband and I keep our shoes on to stomp for roaches while we walk. We are shaking silverfish and moth larvae out of our clothes when we dress, washing palmettos down the shower drain before we step into the tub. Black flies float in our cereal milk and strawberry-root weevils wriggle in our rice. We are scratching mosquito bites until they bleed, tweezering hornet stingers from one another's knuckles. A fleecy egg sac bursts and spiderlings unspool from it by the thousands, so we are sucking them up in lines with the vacuum tube.

We spend a whole weekend hanging blackout curtains. We run our hands along every wall, every baseboard, every windowpane searching for cracks, spackling the smallest suggestion of one.

"It was your idea." I spit in frustration, fingernailing something bitter and winged from between my teeth. "To live in this house. To move out of the city."

"Oh, so this is all my fault?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Don't I always let you have your way? About every other thing? I'm always doing what you want." He is raising his voice. It climbs a rung with each word. "And you. Do you ever do a single thing for me? You treat me like a chore!"

"That's not true," I murmur.

"You don't get to decide how I feel."

I go silent enough for us to hear the tick of chitin against glass, the drone of house flies in the next room.

"You're always doing this. You say something you know will upset me, and then get all deer-in-headlights when it works. You're such a bitch sometimes."

I am still silent.

"Say something! Apologize! Anything!"

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"That's it?"

I am quiet.

"You're seriously bad at making me feel better!"

"I don't like when you yell at me."

"You think this is yelling? This is what yelling sounds like to you?" he is shouting now. "You've had it so easy, haven't you? You have no idea what yelling is!"

My voice shakes. "Maybe we should wait until you've calmed down to talk about this."

"I wouldn't get so upset if you knew how to apologize the right way. It's only you that gets me worked up like this. No one else ever does." He is roaring now. "Just you!"

I am shrinking back from him, even though I know he hates when I do.

“I’ve told you not to do that. You make me feel like a monster. You make me feel like the worst person on earth.”

I lock myself in the bathroom for hours, pressing darklings into porcelain one by one as they come up from the drain.

\*\*\*

My husband knows I don’t like flowers, and after work, when I’ve slashed my way through fresh spiderwebs to get to the kitchen, I find bunches of mint and rosemary and eucalyptus in a vase. Caterpillars are already eating holes through the leaves.

“I’m so sorry,” my husband says. “I don’t mean to get so angry. It’s how everyone treated me when I was young. I hate that I get like that. I’m an idiot. A horrible person. You’re so much better than I am.” He goes on and on, kissing my cheeks and my eyelids and my fingers between words.

Water is set to boil, but for every copper-winged Indianmeal my husband picks from the penne, the next duplicates tenfold. We order takeout instead, eating on the driveway under a salting of stars, laughing at the constellations we draw.

“See?” he says, bringing a blanket when I start to shiver. “This is how you apologize the right way.”

\*\*\*

Later that night, I slide a hand down my husband’s shorts while we watch television, but he shirks away.

“No. Not with all these bugs everywhere. We need to get them out first.”

\*\*\*

The next week my husband fogs the living room, and the floor is littered with legs and wings.

“I have to go,” I say when I am passed a broom and dustpan. “Meeting friends for lunch. Remember?”

“You’re just going to leave me? To clean this up on my own?”

“You should come with me. We could both use some time out of the house. We can do this together later.”

“I want to do it now.”

“I’m not canceling.”

He frowns. “I feel like you’re always trying to get away from me.”

“I want you to come along.”

“You don’t mean that. You act like you hate being around me when we’re with other people. And your friends are assholes to me.”

I sigh. “I’m late. I can’t deal with this right now.”

“Me? You can’t deal with me?” My husband is taken aback. “I do so much for you. Everything I do is for you. And you can’t do this for me?”

“I’ve had these plans for weeks.”

His eyes narrow. When he wheels back his open hand, it is to slap the wallpaper near my head. He shows me the smashed centipede on his palm after.

“Go. Have fun,” he says. “But if it was you asking me to stay, you know I would.”

\*\*\*

Cocoons drip from the underside of everything like woolly stalactites, half-marinated darts and loopers and carrot seeds and wood nymphs ornamenting all the rooms of the house. There is a wasp nest chandeliering our table. Dragonfly eggs kernel our sink basins. Each step my husband and I take makes a cuticle-molting crunch, and we keep our lips pressed in tight lines as we tiptoe through the house to keep from inhaling midges and fleas.

At night, clover-mites tickle footpaths over our skin and orb weavers feel their eight-legged way down the tunnels of our throats so we are rasping and choking awake.

“I can’t stand this anymore,” I admit. Even at work I feel sowbugs crawling under the fabric of my uniform.

My husband frowns. “You want to leave me.”

“No. I want to leave this house. Together.”



“I’m not leaving. I’m not moving. I’m not giving up on this. If you want to leave, you’ll have to go without me.”

I try to imagine leaving him, and I cry under a heavy quilt until I can’t breathe.

It would be like cleaving an earthworm down its center, and I’m sure he is the half with our shared heart.

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The house smells of cedar and sawdust and the rotting coriander of smashed stink bugs when I enter. My husband has a mouthful of penny nails, and he hammers cuts of plywood over our windows with an enormous mallet.

“Do you have to cover them all?” I ask when he starts in the bedroom. “How will the light get in?”

“We don’t have a choice,” my husband says. “This is going to help.”

We switch our bulbs to infrared, stick the walls with a checkerboard of baits, hang strips of flypaper like party crepe. Whole colonies gather to drink from the dish of poison we set out, their humming bodies squirming in unison like they are a single creature, a greasy, ash-colored companion come to stay with us, one we never invited inside.

“I don’t think this is working. Nothing is working.”

\*\*\*

I go running in a lightning storm.

I take a trip to the grocery store and don’t buy anything.

I pack a bag to stay overnight at a friend’s.

Anything to breathe air that isn’t bloated with insecticide, textured with drain flies.

“You don’t love me anymore,” my husband says while I empty my suitcase. “I don’t think you ever did.”

“I love you so much that sometimes I feel like you and I invented love,” I tell him.

“Then why do I feel this way?”

“What way?”

“Like I have to beg you for it. Like I have to pull your teeth out to get it from you.”

\*\*\*

My husband brings home steel plates to weld over the vents, insulation stripping to stuff under the doorframes, tubes of Gorilla glue to seal the entrances. “We can keep them out of the bedroom, at least,” he says, duct taping us in and plugging the keyhole with putty.

“Won’t we be trapped?” I ask while I help him paint weather-proofing pitch.

“Do you have any better ideas?”

I don’t have to answer.

“Of course you don’t. I’m the only one making an effort,” he says. “This has to work.”

There is nothing else left to try, and we drag furniture to barricade the door when the bumping and clicking and buzzing outside swells to a brontide. Termites take bites of the house to get to us, and we are coating our four walls in layer after layer of sealant to cork their shafts and tunnels, lathering it so thick we lose whole inches of the room.

When they finally make their entrance, it is teeth-first, pale bodies plunking one after another onto the floor like drips from a faucet.

After this, my husband and I have no choice but to work in rotating shifts, holding books and saucepans and soles of shoes and our gritty palms over fresh chinks while the Poly-fil and paste dry.

With a blood-colored bulb as our only sun and moon, I am not sure if days or weeks pass this way.

I start to ache like a clenched fist, a body-shaped bruise.

Sleep can only be caught in snatches.

My parents call.

Friends text.

Work emails.

“We’d love to hear from you.”

“Where have you been?”

“Can you please submit your sick day requests in the online portal?”

I don’t answer, melded to a single joint gone Sisyphus-stiff from

pressing, steeling, holding on.

\*\*\*

“I don’t think I can do this anymore,” I say, when I am sure my arms won’t stay above my head for another minute.

“Are you even trying?” my husband demands. “I’m never going to stop trying. If you want it to end, you’re the one who has to give up on this. You have to say the words.”

I don’t have any words at all left to say, so I drop to my knees to find the mallet in my husband’s toolchest. I am crying while I weigh it in my fist, while I rise to swing at the wall, while it erupts in paint chips and wood splinters and plaster dust.

My husband watches in silence.

When I have made a gape large enough to fit through, I look back at him one last time.

He nods once.

We both try to smile.

Then I am hoisting and scraping my body between studs and joists.

The walls in the rest of the house are sheets of writhing insects. Maggots squirm. Earwigs and cicadas clamber sticky from their molts. Ants have gathered to dine on the carcasses of yellowjackets. Cocoons have been peeled back like hangnails, and moths pound like a hundred hearts around me as I stumble for the front door.

Outside, a torrent of hot white sunlight scorches me.

When I lift my hand to shade my eyes, a newborn cecropia is opening and closing its silken wings in my palm.

HAZELLE RACHELLE

## Compulsory Heterosexuality

The bartender with black curls, the blonde stalking across the road in a houndstooth coat, ponytail girl with the white teeth, the waitress with milkmaid braids across her perfect bare shoulders, the dykes making out at the karaoke bar (both of them), the girl behind the counter with upside-down lips, thighs like columns under the lathe, a waist like a neck, a girl with a chest so pale it looked like a mess of wires for a clever spy to snip and untangle, preferably with teeth, face inches from the explosion, a girl with red sashiko across both knees, a girl with horsey teeth and a news reporter’s smile, the ceramics girl with ink smeared all over her arms (all fucking over), the library employee who smiled when I returned all my library books, the one who didn’t, the bosomy one with life dedicated to Christ, the flat-affect girl jittering in her daily puffer vest, whose mobility device whirred in late behind her every day, the girl who cried when she saw porn for the first time, the girl who would eat anything if she thought it would make me laugh, and the man in the end because I saw a bit of each in all of him.

## Adagio for Bisexual Erasure

Another September dusk and you think, for whatever reason, of him as he rarely was, composed and sober. Buttons freed, undershirt loose against the plumpest parts of him. In his left hand, a plum

bitten, waiting, a book spread, being read in the right. La nuit de l'homme spritzed across his neck, a silver chain hung there, where you were thinking of sinking the sharpest parts of you, as if to reach

a pulsating sadness in his jugular. So why were you, those years ago, so scared, when he took you down Vine, over the night's shadows and their silence, brought you closer, close enough

to see yourself atop his space dust irises? And you cowered. What is the word for when the blood grows ever slightly colder? When we lose some hidden part of ourselves?

## Cling

and so we made love or maybe just talked about it in the dimmed light of your bedroom. My kitchen. Your face flickering like a static of light from a dream of almosts. We were always up against it. The wifi. Your flight schedule. My mother. The guilt of not being enough. Time, a chip on our shoulder—the future hunching over itself like a man who outlived his spine. I don't like remembering most of it. The specifics wear me out and memory is a carve in the bone. Angles converging in the rib. Scratching and rehashing themselves like a novel going nowhere. But nowhere scares me so I try to name things to contain them. Map them out on the floor beneath my feet. Smash the slant of light clean on the concrete. My therapist says none of what I tell her warrants a prescription unless I am lying and I don't know how to translate the aftermath of want—which is still want—that a guy going nowhere wants it all, all at once. And I am supposed to write it down. Not the all, but the specifics. Clutch the velocity of thought. Seize the panic in a procedure of breath. Block the escape routes. Yield nothing to the slatted light dream in the back of my head. So the fore of my skull and the eyeballs burning. Skyline a gesture in the vague. In the cut of my heel the smashed glass glittering—gullet a clog of mucus and language. Language loyal to itself, slithering in the nerve, inching for some debris or dream to scatter its syntax on. So we did make love because I know we talked about it—your sun bleeding on the brackish water, my moon scattered on the reeds by my kitchen window. Across three time zones you said you're kissing my forehead and I said you're only doing it because you have to. And you said *bush and crawl outside the mind and its mirror and lick this breath of light with a naked nib, beyond word beyond thought*, a curve beyond intention, a sort of death and the time goes nil. My

finger unknitting the tangle of your hair. Our limbs tugged in each other like the comma of a lost language. I asked you how long will it be like this, this litany of words in the wake of flesh, this gouging of oblivion—this gesturing at the throat of want and never quite breaking it open. Whatever you said next dissolved in the static, then a curl of wind and your voice quivering *I am coming I am coming I am coming*

VINCENZO COHEN

## The Way to Hammamet

(right)  
Watercolor on canvas  
50x100 centimeters  
2000

The painting was created through the encounter of large color spots and represent scenes of life in North Africa by expressing love for exotic and distant places. The artwork focuses on the gradual disappearance of natural spaces and civilisation and testifies, like in a living crib, the tradition of the Berber Bedouins. Landscape shapes blend in the background through the encounter of colors. The chromatic background that comes from the combination of stains of watercolor recalls the weaving of oriental fabrics and the wear of time.



## The Genie & Me

I go to the garage sale because all the lamps moved out when my roommate did, and the apartment's never been darker. An old woman with a face like a used tissue sells me the oil lamp for thirty-five cents, and it comes with me to the Dunkin' Donuts on Seventh. I like Dunkin' because they write my name on the cup. Most of the time, they spell it wrong, giving me y's and e's I haven't earned, but sometimes they get it right, which is even worse.

I tell all this to the Genie, who takes occasional sips from the caramel Coolatta I bought him. He's wearing a gray plaid vest and matching fedora that makes him look like a DJ from a Disney Channel original movie. His lamp, from which he emerged spectacularly about twenty minutes ago, sits between us, forming an avant-garde centerpiece with my empty cold-brew cup. Today, the barista spelled my name Kattrina, with two t's instead of the correct one, so I don't have anything to worry about.

"I'm nervous," I say to the Genie. "I don't really do this."

I give the Genie a tour of my apartment and try to figure out if he seems impressed. When we get to my room, he scrunches up his nose. "It smells like latte in here," he says. I open my closet door and show him the stack of empty coffee cups, the ones with my name smelled right.

"I can't figure out what else to do with them," I confess.

I show him to Angela's old room and invite him to make himself comfortable, a suggestion he accepts with a mordant smile. He's a small man, five-four if you're being generous, with a pouf of hair nearly as big as the rest of his head that bobbles when he walks.

"You can stay here while I think of my wishes," I tell him. My eyes drift to the far wall, where a solitary Wicked poster still hangs. "It's empty right now."

I make chicken roulade for dinner, and the Genie tells me the rules.

"I don't kill anyone, firstly," he says, examining his plate. I've taken my mother's good china out of storage, and I'm not sure how effective the cursory rinse I gave each dish was. "Making people fall in love, no. Wishing for more wishes, God no, three is plenty." He purses his lips. "Can't change the past, either. And no world peace."

I think for a long time, then wish to be three inches taller.

The Genie snaps his fingers and I feel three extra inches of leg sprout from beneath my knees. The Genie stands, sending his chair backward with a noise like a throat clearing. "This chicken," he says with a flourish, "is dusty."

I go to work for another week before I remember I have a Genie and wish to be a billionaire. Two minutes later, I get a fraud alert from Wells Fargo.

"I found a Genie," I explain to the customer service representative over the phone. "So I wished for a billion dollars."

"Ah, okay!" says the woman. "So I'll just check off Genie, then." She congratulates me on my good luck and asks if I want to upgrade to a platinum checking account.

Try as I might, I can't come up with my third wish. I make lists of possibilities and cross them all out. I have no need for a beautiful singing voice; no interest in being smarter; no real desire to travel the world or the galaxy. I'm nearly set on the ability to fly until Google tells me how many people get sucked into jet engines every year.

"That's exaggerated," the Genie tells me with an eye roll when I read him the statistic, but I decide to play it safe.

With the promise of free coffee, the Genie begins to accompany me to the Dunkin' on Seventh every morning, where I order a caramel Coolatta for him and a cold brew with sweet foam for me. The baristas must be learning my name, which is bad news; I add five cups to my collection in as many days.

"Things with your name on them are sacred," I explain to the Genie on the walk home, empty Dunkin' cup still clutched in my hand.

“Great to have, but awful, awful luck to get rid of. I might as well walk home in the street with my eyes closed as throw out this cup.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” says the Genie.

The Genie shorts the power by running his hair dryer and space heater at the same time. The Genie eats an 80-gram edible and orders two hundred dollars of Wendy’s. The Genie drops hints.

“Most people,” the Genie says pointedly one sunny Saturday afternoon, “don’t take longer than a week to make all their wishes. Some people are done in an hour.” I tell him I want to be sure, then ask if he wants to come with me to the farmer’s market; the Genie thinks for a minute, sighs, then puts on his shoes. “We’re out of bok choy,” he tells me.

One night, the Genie comes home drunk and climbs into my bed.

“Ka-tri-na,” he purrs, chopping up my name like sashimi. “Katrina, girl. Girl, you are so fucking weird.” He falls asleep with his head on my shoulder and we don’t talk about it in the morning.

The Genie borrows my lipstick for a date. He puts it on; takes it off; puts it on; takes it off; puts it on again.

“Some guys get scared if you’re too femme,” he tells me.

“Fuck them, then,” I respond.

“Mm,” says the Genie. He takes the lipstick off and doesn’t get back from his date for a day and a half.

My birthday rolls around and the Genie buys me a monogrammed necklace.

“Oh wow,” I say, holding it to my chest and tucking in my chin so I can see how it lays on my collarbone, “Oh wow, this is great, seriously.” The Genie smiles.

The Genie asks for his eggs without the yolk. The Genie asks if I can buy vegan egg substitute instead. The Genie invites me to go clubbing. I hem and haw for a day before saying yes. Friday night comes and I put on my sluttiest dress and a pair of shiny red shoes.

I like the club. I like being part of the pulsing fog of movement that isn’t quite any of the people who make it up. We are music and sound and movement in a moment that lasts forever. We are every thump of the bass in “Turn Down For What” by Lil Jon and DJ Snake. We are love, asking for ourselves in return. We are a seventeen-dollar Aperol spritz.

I jump up and down with the Genie for a while, and then he’s gone, and I jump up and down alone for a while, and then there’s a girl in front of me wearing a shiny leather dress, and she yells something at me that might be “you’re so pretty,” and I yell something back that might be “thank you,” and then we jump up and down together for a while until she leaves, too. Everyone leaves, I think to myself as I jump, and I am impressed by my own profundity. The Genie finds me again, and we do tequila shots, which sit nicely with the half-dozen tequila shots I’ve already done, and then we jump some more.

There are only a few seconds between the realization that I’m nauseous and the realization that I’m about to vomit; I barely make it outside to throw up in the street. A passing Audi honks at me and I give it the finger. It must have rained while we were inside because the whole world has turned slick and shiny like vinyl. I drop into a crouch and rest my head on my knees, praying for the spinning in my head to stop, for me to be somewhere else, to be someone else. Right after Angela left, I’d catch myself staring at the peak of Mt. Rainier and wanting to be there because somehow I felt that would make everything better. It took me a long time to realize that what I actually wanted was to be away from myself, from my brain, just quiet consciousness completely separate from my existence. It took me even longer to realize that, unfortunately, I am wherever I go.

“Hey girl,” I hear the Genie say, and realize he’s followed me outside. “Are you good?”

“So good.” I move to stand, but that makes something in my stomach plunge like it’s fallen down a mineshaft, so I stay down. “Ough.”

Tonight, the Genie is wearing a silver scarf and patent leather pumps I think might be mine. His hair is gelled into an inverse tsunami. “How much did you drink?” he asks me.

I shrug. “Enough,” I say thickly.

“Do you want to go back in?” he asks. I shake my head and rest it on my knees again, which helps for a second but then makes things much worse.

“I miss Angela,” I say.

“Oh, no, Kat. Come on, no you don’t.”

“I keep thinking she’s going to come back,” I tell him. “Every time

I get a text I think it's going to be her wanting to talk." Angela hated clubs, but I made her come out with me once; I remember how she spent the whole night hovering by the bar and then apologized to me when we got home, and suddenly I hate myself so bad I can't breathe.

The Genie shakes his head. "Don't shit where you eat," he says. "I always say that."

I shake my head. "I wish I hadn't," I say. My fingertips have gone numb and I feel like I'm going to throw up again. "I'm so fucking dumb."

I feel a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sorry, girl," says the Genie. I look up at him. The pumps combined with my low vantage point make him look unusually tall and sharp-jawed, and for a second I'm almost strangled by the urge to kiss him. I settle for vomiting again, this time all over my shiny red shoes. I close my eyes.

"Jesus Christ, girl," I hear the Genie say from what sounds very far away.

I wake up naked in my bed the next morning with little idea of how I've gotten there. There's a vague memory of a taxi, or maybe that's a microwave, and my mouth tastes like a rotten lemon. I discover that I've tried to message Angela, three texts consisting of eleven words and a blurry picture: I hate this place without you, then I have a genie now, then a flash of beige and black that might be me and might be the sidewalk. The texts haven't gone through; I guess I forgot I'm blocked. I go back to sleep, and then I wake, and then I go back to sleep again, and when I can't sleep anymore, I lie in bed feeling cold even though I'm under too many blankets.

Dusk has settled over the room like snow by the time the knock comes. I've called "come in" before I can even think to consider feigning sleep. The Genie opens the door carefully, like it might be rigged, and I push myself up onto my elbows.

"Hi," I say.

The Genie steps into the room and quickly shuts the door behind him as if he thinks someone might be listening in. It's the first time I've ever seen him nervous.

"Kat," the Genie says. "You need to make your third wish."

I settle back down. "I'm still thinking," I say.

"You've been thinking for a month and a half."

I shrug. My eyes are fixed on the ceiling. "It's a big deal. We both know I'm not going to get this chance again." I wait for the sound of the door, but it doesn't come.

"Katrina," says the Genie.

"Why?" I ask him. The ceiling is a slightly different shade of white than the walls, I realize. "Don't you like it here?"

"That's not what this is about," he says.

I lay my forearm over my eyes like a blindfold. "Maybe that's my wish," I say to him. "Maybe my wish is for you to stay."

The Genie is silent for a moment before he answers. "You aren't a bad person, Katrina," he says, and then the door opens and closes and I am alone again.

I find the Genie sitting at the kitchen table, thumbing through a months-old Lululemon catalog I can't throw out.

"Hey," I say.

He looks up from a spread of leggings. "Hey," he says. I take the seat next to him. For some reason it's hard to look him in the eye.

"I get too close," I tell my fingernails. "I get too close too fast. I tangle myself up in other people and when they go, they take parts of me with them."

"Mm," says the Genie.

"I've been thinking about my wish," I tell him. "I feel like I have to make it count."

"I could make you forget about her," says the Genie, and I can't find the words to tell him why that would be the worst thing, so I just say maybe.

Three days later, I put the lamp up in the free section of Craigslist. A man named Bareth answers the ad. "I've always wanted a Genie," he tells me excitedly over the phone. I give him my address and tell him to come at half past two. Bareth arrives in an old Grand Marquis that's the exact same shade of beige he is.

"This is a nice place you've got," he says, looking around my apartment. "Smells like latte."

"I think I'm going to be moving out soon," I tell him. When I give him the lamp I don't feel anything at all.



I do not watch the Genie go. I wait until I can't hear Bareth's car anymore and then I wait some more. I walk down to Dunkin' Donuts on Seventh and order a caramel Coolatta. The barista spells my name right, but it doesn't matter anymore; my last wish took care of that. I threw out all the cups in my closet. I won't have to worry about any kind of luck ever again.

I use my straw like a spoon and dab whipped cream on my tongue, and I think of Angela. I told her I loved her so I could hear her say it back and one day I will die so they carve my name on the tombstone. I tilt my cup to admire the strokes of the Sharpie and I smile, very small. I love having my name on things.

KEELY HOUK

## Quiet Spring

(right)

Acrylic on acid-free canvas paper, using golden heavy  
body & fluid acrylics  
8x10 inches  
June 29, 2023

I enjoy painting scenes from Nature in semi-abstract ways. Because my medium, acrylic, dries quickly, I create a lot of texture in my pieces. It helps the painting stand out from the page as if it is living art, like the environment that inspired this painting.





## The Recipe—Joy As An Ingredient For Cooking Grief

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- I. measure the grains of joy with a tin of milk.
- II. pour water into it & let the dirty particles come afloat.
- III. sieve them out.
- IV. add salt & turn on the heat.
- V. let it seethe & become tender.
- VI. stir.
- VII. add rosewater & tomatoes.
- VIII. add cubes of sugar & one spoonful of honey.
- IX. grind calcium out of wet skeletons.
- X. stir, again, until every grain is red.
- XI. joy is ready, serve your countrymen & observe how they feel.

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In the kitchen, I measured our joy with a fifty grams tin of milk. Not because the country is small. But, one spoonful of this joy equals the weight of a cadaver on the shoulder. A burden. Beneath the running tap, dirty particles emerged on the surface of the water, dancing to the ebb. My eyes, dancing, running—too. When I sieved them out, I found tiny rocks from tombstones, bullets of a trigger-happy cop, debris from the bombings in the North, a cupful of bloodstains & etcetera. Because I want you to eat & be healthy, I wash again & again until the grains were white as a snowdrop. Then, I added salt & turned

on the heat. Inside the pot, our joy seethed into something soft. Say, a baked *flower*. & when I stirred, the steams rose to my eyes & condensed into a clean spring. The grains now white & impure, I added rosewater & tomatoes, for colour. Hoping to add to my joy, a red affection. But, I remember that three layers of skin & a fibrous sheath is how narrowly into the body, an arrow must travel to taste blood. The body, not proof enough. Brother, because I want your last supper to be mouthwatering, I added thirty-six cubes of sugar, each for a state in the country. & two spoonfuls of honey, each for a river. In a grinder, I crushed calcium out of wet skeletons. Because, brother, all I want is for you to eat & be strong. Bone enough to feast on the memories that pulleys us into the sky, where we walk on water searching for our brothers. Hoping to find them more flesh than dust. More blood than vapour. I stirred again, until every grain of joy was red & sweet—like strawberry. And then it was ready. & I served the country & listened. Spoons clattering against plates. One man, knowing how hard it was to swallow the joy, chewed & chewed & broke the complex emotional bonds into simpler bearable ones. Another man kept chewing until the j-o-y became a love song in his larynx. Another, knowing how hard it was to sing the songs alone, lured his little son to lay on his broad chest. & as the boy listened to the song of his heart, he planted the joy between his milk teeth. & together, they sang the ode.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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**Gospel Chinedu** is a Nigerian poet from the Igbo descent. He currently is an undergraduate at the College Of Health Sciences, Okofia where he studies Anatomy. He is a 2021 Starlit Award Winner, 1st Runner Up for the Blurred Genre Contest (Invisible City Lit) and Pacific Spirit Poetry Prize 2023, Honorable Mention in the Stephen A. Dibiase Poetry Prize, 2023 and also a finalist in the Dan Veach prize for younger poets, 2023. His works of poetry have appeared or are forthcoming in *Worcester Review*, *Augur Magazine*, *Fantasy*, *Fiyah*, *The Deadlands*, *Channel*, *Apparition Lit*, *Mud Season Review*, *Trampset*, *The Drift*, *Consequence Forum*, *The Rialto*, *BathMagg* and other places. Gospel tweets @gonspetry

**Matthew Church** lives in the midwest with his wonderful family. He holds degrees in philosophy, Spanish, and English from Purdue University. Currently, you can find one of his poems in *New Ohio Review*, and when the work day is over, you can find him in his basement, cranking a tube amp past the edge of breakup, trying to discover the sonic limits of his pink Jazzmaster. On the best days, his son accompanies him on drums. This is his second publication.

**Vincenzo Cohen** is an Italian socially engaged multidisciplinary artist. He graduated in Painting from Fine Arts Academy in 2002 and held his first Solo Exhibition in 2005. In 2007, he earned a master's degree in Archaeological Sciences from "La Sapienza" University in Rome. Cohen's work encompasses figurative arts and writing, reflecting his life and travel experiences while exploring various social themes. His art stems from extensive historical/scientific research, focusing on cultural and naturalistic content. Over the years, he has embraced diverse experimental styles and media. His deep passion for nature, ingrained since childhood, motivates his involvement in environmental awareness projects.

**Coby-Dillon English** (they/them) is a writer from the Great Lakes. A member of the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, they currently are an MFA fiction candidate at the University of Virginia, where they teach writing and serve as the editor-in-chief for *Meridian*. They were a 2023 Tin House Scholar and a 2021 Periplus Collective Fellow. Their writing has received two Pushcart Prize nominations, a Best of the Net nomination, and PEN/Dau Prize nomination for best debut short story. Their work can be found or is forthcoming in *Cream City Review*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *Salt Hill Journal*, and others.

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**Keely Houk** is an Award-Winning Art Director, Artist, and Designer. She has received over thirty awards for her work in higher education, including multiple CASE Circle of Excellence awards. In addition to her design work, she is an illustrator, painter, and author with multiple pieces being featured in publications and international exhibitions.

**Winshen Liu** is from Illinois. After working in tech, education, and the service industry, she is currently pursuing an MFA at the University of Mississippi. Her poems have appeared in *Cincinnati Review*,

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**Rosalind Margulies** is a writer and recent college graduate currently hanging out in Oregon. She has work published or upcoming in *Epiphany, Hobart, StoryQuarterly*, and elsewhere. You can find her on Twitter @rothalind, or visit her website [rosalindmargulies.com](http://rosalindmargulies.com).

**Maryhilda Obasiota Ibe** is a Nigerian poet. She is the winner of the 2020 Bloomsday Poetry Prize and was longlisted for the 2022 Palette Poetry Emerging Poet Prize. Her works have appeared on *Brittle Paper, Blue Marble, Poetry Column* and elsewhere. She's currently an MFA candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

**Danielle O'Hanlon** is a self-taught visual artist specializing in 3D acrylic sculpting and mixed media paintings. Her work is abstract and dreamlike, with color-changing backgrounds and 3D elements. Danielle also works with oil, acrylic, and charcoal. Danielle's works are internationally award-winning, have been published in multiple magazines, and have been featured in galleries all over the US. Danielle currently lives and works in Georgetown, South Carolina. More of her work can be seen at [www.danielleohanlonart.com](http://www.danielleohanlonart.com).

**Hazelle Rachelle** (she/her) is a writer and emergency manager from Portland, OR. Her work can be found at *HORNS, HAD, Pile Press, ergot*, and other places, or you can get it straight from the horse's mouth at @hazellerachelle and [hazellelerum.com](http://hazellelerum.com).

**Emily Rankin** is an artist and actor currently based in New Mexico. She was born in Riverside, California and attended university in Texas, where she received a BFA in 2011. Her body of work deals with the tangles of emotion and understanding, and the intuitive messages of dreaming and subconscious exploration. Her work has appeared in various publications, including *Gasher, Raw Art Review*,

*Meat for Tea, Black Fox, and Rattle*. [www.eerankinart.com](http://www.eerankinart.com)

**Jona Whipple** is a writer, librarian, and archivist, in that order. She is currently pursuing her MFA in Fiction Writing at the University of Missouri-Saint Louis. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Hawaii Pacific Review, Heavy Feather, Catapult, Hypertext*, and *Blue-stem*, and are forthcoming in *CRAFT*. She lives in Missouri, dangerously close to where she was born. [jonawhipple.com](http://jonawhipple.com)

**Linda Woolford** lives and writes in Massachusetts. Her fiction is published in *Kenyon Review, Hobart, Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *Third Coast*, among others. She's the recipient of a Massachusetts Cultural Council fellowship, a winner of descendant's Frank O'Conner Award for Short Fiction, and a Katherine Anne Porter Fiction Prize Finalist. Her stories have been anthologized and nominated for Pushcarts.

**Lena Zycinsky** is a poet and artist whose work appeared in the *New York Times, Poetry Archive, Consequence Forum* among other places. Author of numerous books and shows abroad, she holds a BA in English and is currently a low-residency MFA student at NYU in Paris. Born in Belarus, Lena lived in the USA and Greece, and now resides in London. More info: [leanzycinsky.com](http://leanzycinsky.com)

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