



RIPRAP
LITERARY JOURNAL

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Did you know what you were doing,
that night in the dining room?

My sister gives you a grandson with a second
on the way, a daughter, a Lily. Every day is a fight
to keep the mother tongue in their mouths,
the rise and familiar fall of these four foreign tones—

四 / 死 / four and death

—these unlucky numbers. They stumble over my teeth
like toddlers spitting sand and I'm left with grain
in my gums, sticky rice, *guoba* at the bottom of the pot.

You have a daughter and two grandchildren, and me,
hiding away from home and shivering
in a congee of shame and fear. There's no father
here, not for your grandchildren, and it makes you
something I'm terrified of. Her name is [] now,
we keep telling you, she's her wife, she's their mom,

神经病啊, *what's wrong with you?*

I scream while you shatter your dinner bowl
against the hardwood floor and the dog skitters out
of range of your rage. In the moment I lose sight

of any future where I'm anything but
你的女儿, a daughter in pale performance,

never anything like your son. You will never have
a father of your grandchildren, not from me,
not from her. 爸, rounded syllable cut from jade I lost
in the tangle of gifted bracelets in my bedside drawer,

爸, I don't want to come home.
Not to you, not as me.

[BASIL WAYWARD] is an attempt at finding some kind of meaning in the front-facing eyes of a terribly unsuccessful predatory animal, currently taking on the shape of a third-year CSULB student.

WHO'S THAT YOU'RE LOOKING FOR?

Does her name begin with x?

I don't know if it'll rain.

The weatherman says 60% chance.

This is the last time we'll speak.

As lovers. We may remain friends.

What's your favorite continent?

Mine's North America. Stop shouting.

We're inches away. Inches. Away,

we fell like something other than sunset.

Unbeautiful. The next bus arrives at 11:15.

It's also the last bus. Hurry up. Wait.

Timing isn't everything. Power is everything.

Power and politics. Whatever.

Don't pretend to miss me,

all you really need is Netflix and
a couple scoops of pistachio ice cream.

JOSE HERNANDEZ-DIAZ is a 2017 NEA Poetry Fellow. He is the author of *The Fire Eater* (Texas Review Press, 2020) and *Bad Mexican, Bad American* (Acre Books, 2024). His work appears in *The American Poetry Review*, *Boulevard*, *Colorado Review*, *Crazyhorse*, *Georgia Review*, *Huizache*, *Iowa Review*, *The Journal*, *The Missouri Review*, *Poetry*, *Southern Indiana Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Witness Magazine*, *The Yale Review*, and in *The Best American Nonrequired Reading Anthology 2011*. He teaches creative writing online and edits for *Frontier Poetry*.

"David," Suzy called as she walked through the front door, "I seem to have had an accident."

David wasn't sure he heard her correctly. His wife had gone for her daily walk while he sat quietly in his easy chair, listening to the local news on the television. "What?"

His thumb found and pressed the volume button, silencing the news. Suzy stood just three yards away, but black blotches obliterated the center of his vision. All he could see were her jean-clothed legs and sneakers. David called these black blotches his "shadows." Years ago the beginnings of macular degeneration caused the center of his vision to be out of focus, progressing over time into dots of gray and partial blindness. Finally the blotches expanded, blackened, and consumed his functional sight. Memory replaced his limited, current vision of Suzy with her younger self. In the shadows he envisioned her as vibrant, young, engaging, always carrying something, going somewhere, smiling.

"What did you say?" he asked. "Come closer and tell me what happened."

Suzy always loved the outdoors: a hiker, a bird-watcher, someone who volunteered to clean the beaches of trash and debris. Throughout their marriage, each time she ventured out, Suzy returned, bringing the scent of green plants or the brine of the sea home with her. Today she smelled of leaves, so vividly he could almost hear them rustling in the breeze, reminding him of a more vital time and providing him an image of Suzy's younger face and luminous eyes.

Now he heard her pacing around the furniture. Suzy said, "I was going to walk, you know, along the park...park. Well, you know where I walk. That long, you know, path by the ocean. I love it there, David. It's so beautiful."

Steering her back on topic, he said, "You were going for your walk, and then what happened?"

She continued to wander around the room. "I was going for a walk like always. And I was driving there. I don't know who, but someone blocked the road. You know, White Sands. So, so, I went around another way."

At the fringe of his shadows, David saw Suzy pointing her index figure at the floor and twirling her finger in small circles.

Then she said, "I hit something."

"You hit something?" He wanted to have misunderstood. "Did you have an accident with the car?"

"Well, I don't think it was my fault. You see, someone blocked the road. I hit something. It's not too bad." He heard the lock click and hinges yawn as Suzy opened the front door. "You see, it's right here. It works without that thing. It fell off and he put it in the back seat."

"What? Who put something in the back seat?"

"A man. He was there too. I hit it; he was so helpful."

"Who was there?" Fear roiled his belly. "Do you know him?"

"I wasn't the only one lost. He was there too. They blocked the road. I couldn't take the usual way."

"Suzy, come over here, closer to me." David switched on the extra-bright LED desk lamp on the table beside his chair. God, he hated these shadows. He needed to see. The intense light augmented what remained of his peripheral vision.

He didn't hear her close the front door, but he did see her jeaned-covered legs walk back to stand in front of him.

"What did you hit?"

"I didn't mean it."

"What did you hit, honey? A tree? A rock?"

"I think...I think I made a turn, and it was on the side of the road. No, a curve. Curb? There. There. It's a curb. I hit the curb."

"You hit a curb?" What could have come off the car if she hit a curb? A hubcap?
"What came off the car?"

"It came off the front. But it's fine. I drove home."

"Who helped you?"

"A man."

"Did you know him?"

"I don't think so. He put it in the backseat." He heard anxiety rising in her voice.

"The bumper?"

"Yes." She pressed her palms together and then separated them until her hands disappeared as if she was trying to show him the size of the thing that fell off of the car.

"Come a little closer so I can see you," he said.

David positioned the lamp so it shone on his wife.

With some effort and back pain, David grabbed the arm of the chair to help push himself into a standing position. Then he grabbed his cane. He hated the curve of his spine, how it bent him forward and how the shadows kept him from seeing. He had become a blind and crippled old man. All this reminded him that he had not aged as well as his wife, who, only a year younger than he, could still walk five miles a day, but she spent those days confused.

His neck felt stiff but he tilted his head to the right, then turned slightly to adjust his position. Methodically he examined his wife in small fragments on the edges of his shadows: her swirling hand, blue sweater, her neck and chin, her nose and eyes, her white hair.

"Are you hurt, Suzy?"

"No. I don't think so. I was driving." She gestured with her hands again. He couldn't make sense of it. "I don't think it's too bad."

Intending to perform a more thorough examination, he said, "I'd like to touch your face." But when he reached for her, she stepped forward, hugged him, and kissed his cheek. Her touch was familiar and lovely, and stirred renewed longing in him for youth and health.

Then Suzy released him and walked away. "Did I forget to put these boxes away? I must have."

"Do you mean the boxes on the table? Leave them." Hearing sounds from the street and feeling the air coming in from the opened door, using his cane for support, David shuffled across the room, closed the door, and turned the deadbolt.

"Is it your birthday?" Suzy said. He heard her rummaging through the party favors.

"No. Barbara, Jamie's wife, brought them. Leave them. Suzy, come sit with me."

"What are these?"

He considered explaining that their daughter-in-law, Barbara, brought them for Suzy's eighty-fourth birthday party, planned for next weekend. But more details, such as re-explaining the party, would only remind her how little she remembered, make her more tense and forgetful, and exhaust him further.

David needed a break. He said, "Suzy, I need a glass of water."

"I'll get it." Suzy left for the kitchen.

With her departure, David exhaled. Sitting back down in his easy chair, David closed his eyes. This incident marked the end of her freedom and the moments of quiet he enjoyed when she took her walks daily. He couldn't be sure his wife was uninjured. The older he got, the more help he needed, and he hated being helpless. David found his phone, lifted the screen to scan his face, then said, "Call Jamie's cell."

The phone obeyed.

"Jamie, sorry to interrupt your Saturday. We need you," David said. "We are fine. No one's hurt. Mom had an accident with the car."

"Where are you?"

"Home." David reached for his hand-therapy ball.

"Where's Mom? Where was the accident?"

"Somewhere along White Sands. She's safe at home."

"Where's the car?"

"She drove home."

"Jesus. Dad, did she hit her head or anything?" He expected Jamie would add, 'I told you so.' Instead he said, "Never mind. I'll be over as soon as I can."

"David? David?" Suzy brought him a glass of orange juice and a napkin.

"Hang on; I'm talking to Jamie."

"Our son is named Jamie."

He stared at the shadow consuming his wife. "Sit down, Suzy."

David tilted his head to see the cushions on the couch and to find Suzy's knees bent in a sitting position. She said, "I had an accident."

David sighed.

Jamie said, "Dad? I can hear her. Get the car key from her."

"I will."

"Just get it, now, so I know you're both safe."

"I'll do it when I get off the phone."

"Why? Why would you wait?"

"Okay." He choked the squeeze ball in his fist. "Suzy, honey, please give me your car key."

"David, remember you can't drive."

"Honey, give me the keys, please." David unclenched the therapy ball and held out his hand.

"No, David. It's not safe. You'll get hurt, honey," Suzy said.

David spoke low and smooth and focused. "I just need to check on the car. Jamie and I need to check it out because of the accident. That's why I need your key." It was always easy to mislead his forgetful wife to get her to comply. The woman she used to be would have hated that he did that.

Still, even confused she debated him. "David, please. We talked about this. If you lose the keys, we can't find them. I need to drive."

"I won't lose them, Suzy. You know I always put them in my pocket. Just like you tell me to."

She placed a key in the palm of his hand, and David felt the plastic fob and the metal shaft but still brought his hand up to the peripheral vision to verify the key. He struggled to shift in his chair and shove the key into his pants pocket, but he managed it.

"You see," Suzy said, "I went a different way and someone blocked the road. I got turned around."

"Dad?" Jamie said.

"I know, honey," David said. "Jamie will take care of it."

"Dad, do you have the car key?" Jamie asked.

"Yes, yes, I have it."

"Good. Keep it this time."

"She's driven these streets for decades. All local, she never goes far. Someone blocked her route. That is not her fault."

"Okay, Dad. Don't jump down my throat. Be there in a few." Jamie hung up.

"David? I can't have all these boxes on the table." He heard her rummaging through the boxes.

"Honey, leave them. Jamie will take them away." The effort to hold back his anger and frustration constricted his throat.

A loud bang crackled through the air. "Oooooooooohhh!" Suzy shouted.

Grabbing the arms of his chair and leaning forward, David yelled, "What happened?"

"I pulled it apart."

A chemical smell wafted through the room. "Was that a party popper?" David asked.

Damn it! What was Barbara thinking, putting party poppers in the box? "Are you okay?"

"I don't know," Suzy said. "I have to run to the bathroom."

Hearing her leave the room, David leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes again. It was easier to rest with his eyes closed instead of looking at the contrast between the black blotches and the light. He remembered when his vision first went blurry, and the doctor explained macular degeneration. He felt confident he could beat it, but the shadows grew larger and blacker. Angry, David wanted to yell at Suzy but it wouldn't change anything. What ailed her was not a matter of attitude, and no one could teach her to be normal again. What good would shouting at her do? But holding his frustration back was exhausting.

He smiled at the irony. He read once that among elderly couples, caregivers died first. He and Suzy had always assumed she'd be taking care of him. He grinned. He made a shitty caregiver. He sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. This moment's peace gave him relief. Suzy was home, safe, and all of this would turn out fine.

David woke to a key turning in the front door lock. He rubbed his face. "In here."

Shutting the door, Jamie asked, "How you doing?"

"A little stressed, but good. How does the Camry look?"

"The passenger side is dented and scratched, and I don't know how but the front bumper came off, and it's in the back seat. How'd she'd manage that?"

David swallowed, knowing what would come. "A good Samaritan helped her."

"Did she know him?"

"It's fine. It's done."

"It's fine if some stranger shoved a bumper into Mom's car? Did you check her wallet?" The pitch of Jamie's voice increased.

"Jamie," Suzy said, walking into the room. "What a surprise!"

Around the border of his shadows, David saw movement between Jamie and Suzy that he interpreted as an embrace.

"How you feeling, Mom? Did you hit your head or anything?"

"Why would I hit my head?"

"Mom, you had an accident with the car."

"Oh. Yes. You see, someone blocked the road," Suzy lifted her hand and twirled her index finger, "and I had to go around."

"But are you hurt?"

"No."

"Let me take a look at you, Mom."

David shook his head. It irked him to admit that even though he had checked his wife for injuries, he might have missed something and needed Jamie to reexamine her.

Jamie said, "How fast were you going?"

"I never speed. Something blocked the road and I went around."

"I know, Mom. But you can't drive anymore. It's over."

David pushed himself forward in his chair. "That's for us to decide. Depriving her of her daily walk will increase her anxiety and confusion."

"She doesn't have to walk along the shore. She can walk in the neighborhood."

"She loves nature."

"There's nature here. Look, we don't know what she hit, a boulder, a tree. Then some stranger helped her."

"She hit a curb, that's all."

"Mom, please. Dad, don't make excuses. We've discussed this before. This isn't safe and you'll never end it. It's just the reality, Dad. Mom, you can't drive."

"It was a little accident," Suzy said. "You're too upset. Sit down and I'll get you some juice."

"Dad." Jamie lowered his voice and the effort sounded like a taunt. "You're blind, you literally cannot watch out for her. We've discussed this before. Mom has to be safe and so do you." Jamie inhaled slowly. David wondered if Jamie might finally cross the line and shout at him. "She needs to be in a place where she can be cared for: a dementia unit, assisted living, or you hire someone to live here. What about daycare?"

David scoffed. "She is not a toddler, Jamie."

Jamie sat down on the couch. "She can't drive anymore. Just please, give me the car key, and I'll drive it to the shop."

David reached into his pocket, pulled out the key, and tossed it toward the couch. "You know, you have no idea how hard it is to live a lifetime and then end up like this."

Jamie retrieved the key and stood. "Just... It's just I want you safe and you never listen." Something fell and objects scattered in the dining room. "Mom. Mom, stop going through those boxes, they're fine."

"They confuse her, sitting there on the table," David said. "Can you put the boxes in the garage?"

Jamie sighed. "Yeah. You know what I'm going to do, I'm going to take a drive to East Shore Auto and see if I can bring the car over today or tomorrow and leave it there for them to look at Monday. Sometimes their parking lot is full, so I'll check on it."

David nodded.

"I've got some errands to run. I'll come back in a couple of hours with Barbara, and we can buy some burgers. I'll take care of the boxes and whatever then. Dad, you have to face this. We were lucky this time. We have to make a plan going forward."

"Alright. Alright," David said, holding up his palm. "You have to stop it now."

After he heard Jamie drive off, David felt his body relax, but his mind worried about how their life together had changed and would keep changing until it was replaced by something neither of them wanted—parted by their infirmities. David grabbed his cane, pushed himself out of the chair, and stood.

It was July, a time of long summer days and plenty of sunlight still left to enjoy. And today Suzy would be present enough to enjoy this outing with him. All tomorrows, all future days were laced with uncertainty. On this day he couldn't allow anything, even blindness, to leave him helpless.

Grant us this time, he thought. Then, as he shuffled through their living room and down the hall toward their bedroom, he said out loud, "Grant us this time."

David opened his sock drawer, reaching in the back until he found his old wallet. Feeling his way around the leather, he opened up the cash slot, pulled out the second key to the Camry, and tucked it in his pocket.

He heard Suzy in the kitchen, clattering in the sink. "Leave that, Suzy. Let's go to the beach."

The clangs stopped. Suzy said, "The beach? I tried to go this morning."

"Yes, but this time we'll go a different way and I'm going with you."

"You're coming to the beach with me?" The old-woman rasp left her voice, and she sounded elated and young. "We're going to the beach! Come on, David."

David grinned because he knew she was smiling.

Suzy carried a blanket and the backpack filled with provisions down the front stairs of the house. David had packed bottled waters, two prepackaged lunches from Meals-On-Wheels, two pears, and four of the party poppers to open at the beach.

Following Suzy, David locked the front door, put his keys in his pocket, and approached the concrete stairs leading from their front door to the driveway. He judged his balance, adjusted for his strength, held on to the railing with his right hand, and using his cane for added support, stepped down with his left foot. He then lowered his right leg so that both his feet rested on the same step. He repeated this, slowly descending the steps.

"Oh, I forgot the car key," Suzy said.

"No, honey, don't worry, I have it." After he stood firmly on the driveway, David handed her the key.

Sitting beside Suzy in the passenger seat, David checked both seat belts were on and secure. He told Suzy to wait while he voice-activated his navigation app, inserted the earbuds' plug into his phone and then one earbud into his right ear. He remembered the alternative route to the beach, but blind as he was—daring as their journey would be—he needed some reference points to help Suzy find her way through the streets. Jamie underestimated his abilities. He stood in David's home and talked to him as if David were a recalcitrant child.

But he couldn't focus on his anger nor take it all out on Jamie. Right now his priority was to take care of himself and his wife. "Suzy, we need to take Crows Nest Avenue. The other road is closed."

"Crows Nest Avenue? We've been there before."

"Yes. White Sands is blocked off."

"I take White Sands every morning but someone blocked it off."

"Yes, that's why the best way is Crows Nest. I'm going to help you find the way. Turn when I tell you. Can you do that?"

"Yes, I can turn," she said.

David fought a wave of fatigue by harnessing his determination. "Okay, back out of the driveway."

The car moved backward, dipped as it crossed the street gutter, and lifted again as Suzy drove onto the road.

David said, "Okay, now we go straight to the first stop sign and turn left."

"I know that," Suzy said.

He grinned. Of course she knew. "Yes, but I'm just helping out."

David felt triumphant as they drove down the street. His shadows blacked out the sun, but his peripheral vision captured the blur of houses and trees, light and blue sky, and a partial view of Suzy sitting beside him.

At the stop sign Suzy tapped the brake, turned as directed, and then made the next turn onto Second Avenue, a large, four-lane thoroughfare. The navigation app confirmed their route: "Stay on Second Avenue for four-point-five miles." David grinned with satisfaction. Their next turn would be Crows Nest, a direct route to the beach.

Although he could never be sure of the quality of her driving, he smiled and said, "You're doing good, Suzy."

She reached over, grabbed his left hand, pulled it to her lips, and kissed it.

"Thank you," he said. "Hands on the wheel, honey."

"I am," she said, teasing him. He hadn't heard that quality in her voice for so long. It made him feel like a teenager again.

Then he heard the long waaaaaahhhhhh-waaaaaahhhhhh of a police car or ambulance approaching. The shrill wail came suddenly upon them.

"Oh, no!" Suzy shrieked. He saw the flutter of her hands release the steering wheel, clutching them at her chest. "It's behind us."

David grabbed for the steering wheel, missed; adrenaline surging, he reached again and seized it. "It's nothing. Just an ambulance."—He guessed.—"Grab the wheel. You can do it. Just pull over to let it pass. You know what to do."

The siren yelped.

Without fumbling or missing his intended target, David placed his hand on Suzy's shoulder. "Go ahead, just pull over."

"I can do it." And she did.

"He's leaving," Suzy said as David heard the heavy vehicle drive past their car.

"Just keep going," he said.

"To the beach."

When the navigator told him they had reached their destination, it took Suzy a few more minutes to stop the car and turn off the engine. David rolled down the window, heard the surf and smelled the sea.

Suzy said, "It's so beautiful here."

She got out of the car, went around to the passenger side, and offered him her hand to help him get out of the car.

"We're old now," she said, as if the implication had just come to her.

"Yup," he said, holding Suzy's hand with one hand and leaning on his cane with the

other.

They walked together on the blacktop of the parking lot and then down a concrete path, which lead to the shore. David knew that he could not shuffle through the sand alongside Suzy but had not yet formulated a solution. He didn't want to turn around and go back to the car.

As if reading his mind, Suzy said, "There's a bench here."

Grateful, David took a seat and Suzy sat beside him. He sighed with relief just as his phone sounded with the ringtone Jamie had assigned to himself. "Here, Dad, it's like an air raid siren. You'll always know it's me calling." David reached into his pocket and silenced his phone.

"David, it's beautiful here," Suzy repeated, her voice filled with pleasure.

Under his shadows, if he lifted his chin upward just slightly, David could see the waves roll in, sweep across the sand, pause as if breathing, and retreat back into the ocean.

He'd have to tell Jamie where they were soon, but not yet.

PATRICIA LJUTIC's work has appeared in *The Arlington Literary Journal*, *The Seattle Star*, *Bards and Sage Quarterly*, *upstreet Literary Magazine*, *Everyday Fiction*, and elsewhere. Her short story "Semicolon" was awarded Honorable Mention in the 91st Annual *Writer's Digest Genre Competition* for Genre Short Story, and "Always So Happy" was recognized with a 2018 Silver Pen Writers Write Well Award. Patricia lives with her husband, son and a Siberian Husky named Scarlett in the San Francisco Bay Area. Read more at www.patricialjutic.com.

DENISE DUHAMEL is a poet, professor, author of several poetry collections, and the recipient of Guggenheim and National Endowment for the Arts fellowships, to name a few outstanding achievements. We had the pleasure of speaking with her about her poetics, writing process, literary collaborations, and more.

Kiana Shaley Martin (co-EIC): Your poems do not exist in a vacuum. That is, though they may start with the speaker, they expand out to include the world the speaker exists in, making them a social act. I would love to hear your thoughts on the relationship between I and we/self and the world outside of the self.

Denise Duhamel: Yes! Thank you for noticing. I like to put my speaker in context. I know poets can be navel gazers, but I enjoy having the world in my poems. I don't want people 100 years from now to read me and think, *Didn't she know there was a war going on? Or How could she not have noticed the climate was in peril?* I guess it's crazy to think about 100 years from now or legacy... but even now I want readers to think—ok, she isn't one of those rarified poets who only write about pomegranates.

KSM: There's also an incredible vulnerability in your poems, but this vulnerability cuts deeper because you implicate yourself. You don't approach yourself as a third-party but rather acknowledge your participation in the grander scheme of

things—an implication I feel induces the reader to acknowledge their own. I'm thinking of "Amazon" in *Scald* or "Folkways" in *Second Story*. It can be difficult to call ourselves out and I would love to hear about the role this vulnerability, this implication plays in your poetics.

DD: Right. I wonder if this is an inherent female trait. Maybe not.... but I do feel guilty a good part of the time about not leaving the world a better place for the next generation. When I go down this path every pleasure is suspect. It's not a particularly helpful role for a political agitator or social disrupter though it makes for a more complex, nuanced poem. Or at least I hope so.

KSM: Some of my students feel like poetry is only ever melancholy and/or a bummer, but your work shows that, in addition to being an observation-cum-critique, poetry can be witty and, dare I say, capable of producing visceral laughter? What is the role of humor in your poetry? What is the role of humor in poetry in general?

DD: I love a poem that sneaks up on you and makes you laugh. Even that “funny strange” as opposed to “funny ha ha” reaction always delights me. Bill Knott was a mentor of mine at Emerson College and though he is a one-of-a-kind and almost impossible to imitate, his influence on me was huge. Here is a Bill Knott poem about Ezra Pound’s political failings, comparing him to Mussolini who supposedly “made the trains run on time...”:

well alright
I grant you
he was a fascist
ahem antisemitism the
war and wall
I’m not defending them
but at least
you’ve got to admit
at least he
made the quatrains run on time

This short poem talks about the trauma of history while using the wordplay of “trains” and “quatrains.” When I first started writing, I, like your students, thought poetry was a “bummer.” But Bill’s poems opened up a different kind of voice. A funny poem can be as profound as a tragic poem—two sides of the same coin, like those drama masks.

KSM: Your play with language is so fluid, so malleable. It’s a delight to read and feels like it’s mapping the mind’s

movements. What is your approach to language?

DD: I absolutely love wordplay. I had an aunt who was an amazing joke teller...and she made a deep impression on me. If you ever try to tell a joke, you realize how you have to set up everything perfectly, not give the ending away, and so on. I also was a fan of *I Love Lucy* (way before your day, I know). There was a famous bit about her doing a “Vitameatavegamin” commercial. Vitameatavegamin, the liquid supplement, contained alcohol so the more Lucy drinks the more she slurs her words and makes up new words. I see poetry in this bit!

KSM: It is always such a joy to start a poem and then recognize its form. In *Scald* (and throughout your body of work), you have several pantoums, sestinas, and villanelles. What is it about form and these forms that call to you?

DD: I resisted traditional form when I first started out, but through my collaborations with Maureen Seaton (who is a whiz at writing sonnets!) I learned to embrace form. What I love about form is that you are coerced/guided in a direction your mind might not normally go and the results can surprise you. I see form as a way to build a poem, block by block, as opposed to freewriting. When composing a poem that started in my freewriting, I have to carve out/highlight anything I want to save. Though form and free verse

come from slightly different impulses, I am enamored by both ways of writing.

KSM: The associations and leaps your mind makes are incredible and make me wonder about the relationship between control and intuition in your writing process. Where does one begin and the other end for you?

DD: Thank you! A long time ago I just learned to trust my leaps. Sometimes, in revision, I have to remove the more farflung associations, especially when I am freewriting in my journal. I am not a surrealist. But poetry, like comedy, is built on surprises and the opposite of what we would expect to come next. I think that's what makes us poets...or comedians...or comic poets.

KSM: You have done several collaborations with other writers. Can you talk about why and what the role of collaboration is in your poetry? What is that process like (for any writer who shudders at the thought of writing with other folks)?

DD: My first collaborator was Maureen Seaton. A long admirer of David Trinidad's work, I went to hear him read in 1990 or so. He read his own poems, then invited his friend David Flanagan onstage. The two started reading from their chapbook *Taste of Honey*. It was wild! I knew I wanted to try something like this, so I approached Maureen. As I said, she could write sonnets with such confidence that she wanted to try collaborative sonnets.

I encouraged her to write "chunks," little prose snippets we sent back and forth. And now I am the one who feels comfortable in form and many of Maureen's latest poems are prose poems. I have also written with other poets and, most recently, a book of nonfiction essays with Julie Marie Wade. If you shudder at the thought of writing with others, I assure you there is no reason to. It's fun for me, but it's essential that I pick the right collaborators. No bullies. Here is set of rules Maureen and I wrote:

THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF COLLABORATION

1. Thou shalt trust thy collaborator's art with thy whole heart.
2. Thou shalt trust thy collaborator's judgment with thy whole mind.
3. Thou shalt trust thy collaborator's integrity with thy whole spirit.
4. Honor thy own voice.
5. Honor thy collaborator's spouse.
6. Thou shalt not be an egotistical asshole.
7. Thou shalt not covet all the glory.
8. Thou shalt love the same foods as your collaborator.
9. Thou shalt eat and tire at the same time.
10. Above all, honor the muse.

KSM: I feel like one thing poets can forget is that their work and approach will change over the years.

How has yours changed? What/Which change surprised you? Conversely, what has remained your work's constant priority?

DD: Definitely. I think of James Wright who started off writing in traditional form while his later books were full of prose poems. Patricia Smith started out as a performance poet and now writes exquisite sonnets and terza rima for the page. It's wonderful to be open to change. I see many changes in my own work over the years. My first five books have no traditional form of any kind. And my first three books didn't contain that many funny poems. I think I evolved into different modes to keep myself engaged. I didn't want to be stuck or bore myself. Perhaps that is even where the collaborations came in. I was curious about the actual process of writing and when you collaborate you see that process up close. When I wrote a line so impossible (I thought) to finish, Maureen would think of something right away and vice versa. It was almost like we were giving each other prompts.

KSM: What's one thing you've learned in the first and last (most recent) five years of your career?

DD: In the first five years of my career I learned that I was ambitious! I was unstoppable in that I sent out work over and over regardless of the rejection—and, believe me, there was a lot. Other poets who were more talented than I just gave up. They lead happy, fulfilled lives and

left the business of poetry behind. These last five years I have learned almost the opposite. I am still ambitious, but I have learned that if I never published another poem again it would not stop me from writing them. I've learned poetry is essential to my wellbeing and understanding of the world.

KSM: And, of course, for all of the emerging and aspiring writers, what writing advice have you received that has been the most formative?

DD: I give the advice that Collete Inez gave me—pay yourself first. Make writing part of your day. Don't wait for inspiration. Write ten minutes even on your most busy, dreadful day. Even if a poem doesn't come (and often it won't) you are engaging in your craft and keeping your poetry muscles limber.

KSM: Lastly (and selfishly), I'd love to know what you're currently reading and/or your most recent favorite collection.

DD: Patricia Smith (who I mentioned earlier) has a new poetry book *Unshuttered*. Starting twenty years ago, Smith collected more than 200 photographs of African Americans, each image between 120 and 180 years old. She uses the photographs as points of departure, giving voice to a rich and painful American history that has so often been silenced. Smith has an exquisite ekphrasis imagination. I love this book!

I moved to Florida in 1999, moved into an apartment on the beach, confident Al Gore would be elected. I mean, who would vote for a dolt like George? Sure, Gore could have done more when he wobbled about protecting the Everglades, causing some to jump ship and throw in with Ralph Nadar. I know Ralph would have been a better president than either Al or George, but we all know what happens to third party candidates. In 2000 there was still a little time to turn this ship around, the ship the Nadar voters jumped from. On election night I went to dinner thinking Al had won, but by dessert the restaurant TV was saying George demanded a recount. Wall Street types—organized by Roger Stone—marched in Miami, and Florida became the butt of “hanging chad” jokes. The Supreme Court overruled the Florida Supreme Court to stop a recount of the votes in four Florida counties. *Howdy, George*. Now it's 2022 and the ocean inches closer while Joe Manchin looks the other way. Speaking of ships, Joe was on his yacht when constituents rowed towards him in protest, begging him to get on board with Biden's Build Back Better. Joe's betting his money on coal, hoping Elon Musk will take him on his spaceship to Mars. Today I am tired of fighting, tired of wringing my hands. I don't have to tell you what happened next--the World Trade Center, unjustified wars, the crash of 2008, more oil spills,

then Trump. Now there's inflation,
the overturning of Roe v. Wade, the insurrection
hearings. Everyone's seemed to have forgotten
about the environment, that it's 104 degrees
today in London with train tracks buckling,
cars overheating. Airstrips softened by extreme heat
have grounded the Royal Air Force. Wildfires
spread through the Mediterranean.
Portugal's temperature is 116. And here,
in Hawaii, 20-foot high waves
crashed onto the shore and over highways.
Colorado, Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas
all breaking records for high temperatures
under something called a heat dome. I'm thinking
of Mad Max's Thunderdome or the earth
as a dead pheasant under a silver cloche.
I'll probably rally tomorrow and be ready
to fight again, but for today my rant ends here.
You'll find me running into the sea,
me and my culpability, my negative capability.

POEM IN WHICH I AM A STAGEHAND

An astrologer tells me
that because I have three planets
in the twelfth house, I have
always been afraid to be the center
of attention. I will never
truly walk into the spotlight
of my life without a dry mouth
and my heart's blood gurgling
in my ears. I am happier painting
the sets—cardboard trees,
Styrofoam stars—and hemming
the dress of the lead. If necessary
I'll feed the lines to anyone
who's forgotten what to say next.

DENISE DUHAMEL's most recent books of poetry are *Second Story* (Pittsburgh, 2021) and *Scald* (2017). *Blowout* (2013) was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. A recipient of fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts, she is a distinguished university professor in the MFA program at Florida International University in Miami.



REFLECTION OF A MAN

For a while now, I have felt that there is a growing body of my work that does not fit with my characteristic rural landscape photographs shot in Washington, Montana and New Mexico. They are images that I shoot without as much intention as the others, seemingly insignificant scenes or tableaux that I am drawn to when I come across them in urban and suburban areas. Whether in my home town or when I am traveling, I see little slices of life that have become sub-groups within my larger oeuvre, such as puddles, graffiti, metal details, worn paint, and sometimes even people in these environments. Much of the time, they are just studies in composition or color. And more often than not, they are encountered while I am doing something else.

I have wanted to do something with these in the past, but felt none of them ever quite dovetailed with my landscape photographs. As I take more of these captivating idiosyncratic images, I now see a growing series of its own within my creative work. So, now they have a place of their own here.

TO MY WIFE, NOW HUSBAND

You are here.

Gathering pieces of yourself over long forgotten timelines
That you share with me at night

Weightful notes of stories that you've carried

Like that one where you didn't want to wear dresses
on the kindergarten catwalk
and none of the adults cared

until you started to take up space
and grow out your hair
and maneuvered a store like a minefield

just to buy a bra.

You are here

Again, at night, you tell me that you're finally comfortable
cutting off the parts that don't fit.

And look at me scared
and I wonder
why you're scared
of being this beautiful
and handsome
and divine.

Every prayer crawls from under the covers of our bed a new born firefly
and races to the heavens.

I hold in my hands other people's monologues, performed like soliloquies. They are the sentences, the pauses, the stage directions, the strength to cry, of strangers.

Sophomore students, who are taller yet more compressible, perform for me. I can feel in their tone a preparation, despite their unaged ineloquence. This is a recital. I feel nothing but practice as they tell me of their unrequited loves, their mean fathers, their dying mothers, their medications and prescriptions, their confessions of secret sin. I hear the strain caused by over-exercise. How many times has this speech been delivered? How many times has saying it not made it go away?

It's hard for me to think about. Especially since I know the other actors, the other ones who are each given more lines than me, the other ones I move the spotlight to and pull the curtains for. I am not in the audience, but I am not on the stage. Imperfect god in the machine, I am suspended, dangling by crane hook, watching the players speak strongly of weakness, hearing them ask for sudden solution from the fool in the machine.

And sometimes they do not speak but write. Which I think helps them, but it also helps me. My mechanical fingers press electronic keys; each story is another Turing test which I pass every time with an ironically robotic perfection. I listen actively. I see them. I hear them. I feel them. I hand out advice and salt, and sometimes they take only one or the other. I mirror and reflect and absorb. I cannot critique plays or give indulgences. I can only honor performances, appreciate practices, and say my lines in return for yours.

There is nothing I can say that isn't in the script, nothing I can do that won't seem to the audience contrived. As you speak, there's a disappearing of mind, someone's mind. We all forget whose. Maybe this time you'll hear the script, and something will change. I'm tired but I know you prepared and suffered hard for this, and I'm sorry that I am not the machine or therapist or lover or partner or artist that's going to make you feel whole again.

I'm here for you if you need me.

SILAS KIM is a 2nd generation Korean American writer living in Southern California. Kim graduated from California State University Long Beach in 2022 with majors in English lit/creative writing and minors in philosophy/psychology, all fields which inform their writing. Kim's poem "Therapist in the Machine" and their short story "Hot Water" are their first two published works, both of which can be found in this issue of RipRap.



REFLECTION

The purpose of my artwork is to invoke an awakening of the sensual. Stimulating a perceptual, internal, and intellectual response for the viewer: a visual that speaks to life's experiences. Creating symbols of universal connection underscores the relationship that one has to another and to nature.

Art conveys my nonverbal view of life. An ongoing portrayal of myself, my behavior, adventure, exploration, risk taking, and non-acceptance of convention and the status quo. Constantly in search of the new and different - I am fascinated with the unconventional. Life has a hard, aggressive side, as does much of my work, represented by rigid, angular lines. However, the soft side is also apparent, visible as curves and soft forms. Combining different elements, I bring forth a duality in the sculptures that I create.

Using the invaluable experience of the mentorship of Bill Prokopiof and Doug Hyde, along with my own vision, I have created an evolving body of work in alabaster, marble, limestone, and bronze. I was recently working on a commissioned piece and, while working, reflected on why I carve stone, a very primitive art form. The client had sent me a photo and specific dimensions. My process is to first draw it out dimensionally and then make a small clay model before beginning to sculpt. Then I start my work, in this case on a block of white marble. I measure and measure, then cut, then measure and then cut again, then recheck my drawing - and repeat. Finally, hopefully having made no mistakes, the figure begins to emerge. It is a great feeling of accomplishment! It is that mental challenge that inspires me to carve in stone. I thoroughly enjoy the cerebral exertion and concentration that is crucial to bringing something out of the stone, something that you really cannot do with clay or any other medium.

"Who organized the mini-con?" I ask, as we drive south down Highway 99. This road trip to So Cal is a big deal since Kirk rarely leaves his apartment.

"A blogger named Cyclopeatron. He's moderating the *Gamma World* session."

"What's that?"

"It's a mutant-inhabited, post-apocalyptic platform. The players are members of a glamour rock band that get their abilities from snorting cocaine," he explains, suppressing a chuckle.

The sheer absurdity of the premise makes me want to check it out, but I don't know anything about the rules. I also don't have any dice or figurines, which are telltale signs of an RPG rookie. I only agreed to this trip because I knew Kirk wouldn't go alone.

I've known Kirk for about a decade, but it's only been in the past few years that we've taken road trips together. Our last one was to a teaching conference at Cal Poly Pomona. I don't remember any of the sessions, but I recall the main topic of conversation on the drive there.

"The problem with videogames these days," he said, rubbing his chin stubble, "is they're all railroads. They're not like real life."

"What do you mean *railroads*?"

"Players aren't given options, only the illusion of options. They're railroaded into a linear storyline. Game developers should create more sandboxes where players can do anything they want."

I didn't feel like having a philosophical debate, so I didn't ask if he was referring to free will. After all, that might have hit a little too close to home, seeing as how Kirk didn't

believe in it, which is why he escaped through games, as they offered a kind of freedom he didn't believe was possible in real life.

Since Kirk received his MFA in poetry, he's coasted down a path that led him to a wasteland of discontent. After graduating from Fresno State, he stuck around campus to fill an "unspecified" position at the writing center where he worked fifty hours a week and received a meager salary for his dedication. The only thing that got him away from that job, for a little while anyway, was an opportunity to live in Poland.

Based on what he's told me about that period of his life, the small town of Rzeszów was far beyond the fringes of his comfort zone. When he got there, he didn't know anyone, and he didn't speak the language, but he met a single mother who had lived in Canada, so she helped him acclimate to the culture. For the next couple years, he got to be a father, which was something he'd always wanted, and he was there to see her son take his first steps and speak his first words. His dream of having a family was ruined, however, when she left him for someone else.

Feeling like he had no other options, Kirk came back to California and resumed his old position at the university. On every road trip we take, I ask him about his plans for moving on from that dead-end job. Since we graduated together, and I got a full-time teaching position, I don't understand why he hasn't started a real career. In keeping with our tradition, I ask, "So you're back for another year at the writing center, huh?"

"Yup."

"Still looking at PhD programs?"

"Not really. I don't want to teach freshmen, and I'm pretty sure that's what they'll make me do if I get into a program." He takes off his ball cap and kneads his forehead. "I want to learn more about writing theory without babysitting students."

From the ridge in his brow and the way his blue eyes fade to gray, I know what's coming next. I've heard it many times before.

"I want people to respect me for my expertise, not my degree. That's what I like

about the writing center. I have expertise there, and it's satisfying when the director and tutors recognize it. But the academy itself is blind. It only sees PhDs."

In the time we've spent together, Kirk has frequently lamented the fact that we don't live in a meritocracy where people are rewarded for their ideas and hard work. This is what has arrested his career goals at age forty.

"The only thing keeping me sane right now," he says, employing a whisper that he reserves for the reading of poetry, "with the university raising my workload and cutting my pay, is that strangers on the internet think my ideas are cool, creepy, interesting, weird—

—and notable," he proclaims, with a fleeting sense of pride.

* * *

When Kirk and I arrive at the condominium clubhouse where the mini-con is being held, most of the players are setting up their figurines and fiddling with their dice. The room isn't very large, and everyone is within close proximity of each other, yet few words are exchanged as the moderators prepare the morning sessions.

"We're looking for the 'Night of the Walking Wet' campaign," Kirk says to the nearest guy.

"That's this table," he replies with a gesture. "I'm playing, too. My name's Nick."

A glint of recognition registers in Kirk's eye.

"You write Castle Dragonscar," he says, offering his hand. "I'm Telecancer."

"Telecancer's Receding Rules," Nick acknowledges, citing Kirk's blog.

They shake hands and make small talk while I check out the snacks in the clubhouse kitchen. When I get back, the players are sitting at the table, rolling dice and scribbling numbers on their character sheets.

I reluctantly ask Tavis the Dungeon Master (DM) if I can borrow some dice, and I set to work creating my character. As we begin filling out our forms, Tavis gives us context for the game. Our characters live in a world ruled by humans, where dwarfs and hobbits are regarded as inferior races, but no one is looked down upon more than elves. With that bit of context, I choose to be a chaotic elf. Being that he's an outlaw who adorns himself with human fingers, I'm hoping to meet an early demise before the others see just how much of a novice I am.

Between rolls, I survey the other players at the table, noting the diversity of the group. To my right is Mobad Deathprong clad in baggy fatigues, followed by the ZZ Top-bearded Staples, Javi the DM's ten-year-old son, the metrosexual Monk, Kirk, Nick, and Cyclopeatron the university professor who organized this event.

The DM begins an eloquent narrative that starts with our party—a ragtag crew of three humans, two elves, a dwarf, a halfling hobbit, and a sleestack—being flown over a valley on an expansive net, which is carried by four giant eagles. We survey the area, looking for treasure, and it isn't long before we encounter a type IV demon (or nalfesh-nee, according to the DM) that kills one of the eagles, causing several of our henchmen to plummet to their deaths.

As the narrative continues, I try to hide my uncertainty at every decision I make, constantly wiping my palms on my pants to prevent the dice from sliding out of my sweaty hands. While in the thick of things, I glance at Kirk to see if he's enjoying himself. Unlike me, he's in his element, as if having ten-sided dice at the ready while weighing his options is second nature.

However, one thing I know about Kirk is he's always analyzing things. From across the table, I can see his wheels turning, and though he pays close attention to the gameplay, he's evaluating the DM's style, the way he strings together the story, the tools he uses to randomize events. Like a scavenger, he's rummaging through the DM's arsenal of moderating techniques, discarding things he doesn't like and thinking about things he can incorporate later on in his game.

Four hours later, our party has lost seventeen henchmen, slayed the nalfenshee, and discovered Merlin's Garden, where hidden treasure, intrigue, and peril await.

"We should stop there," the DM says, knowing that if we continue, we'll encounter more monsters, which could prolong the campaign for hours.

We all agree, and someone begins taking orders for pizza.

Although the eight of us just spent a good part of the day collaborating on an action-filled adventure, we drift to different areas of the room to silently reflect on our experience.

"Well, what did you think?" Kirk asks.

"That was fun," I say, stretching my limbs, hoping he doesn't pick up on my lie. I feel a little bit less tense now that the first game is over, but I'm already worn out. Paying close attention to the events while considering my character's every move feels like I just ran a half marathon.

While the other guys and I wait for the pizza to be delivered, I stand in a corner, observing the awkward interactions of the gamers. When they do speak to each other, they recount highlights from their morning sessions and avoid small talk about their day-to-day lives. Mostly, they just stand along the walls with their eyes down, like boys at a junior high dance.

Amid the uncomfortable silence, I hear Nick tell someone from another table about a funny exchange that happened in our game.

"Javi wanted to shoot multiple arrows at a ghoul that was trying to eat us," he says, pointing at the boy as he helps his dad gather campaign materials. "When his dad told him that each additional arrow on his bow would exponentially decrease his chances of hitting the ghoul, he said, 'Okay, then I'll just shoot five.'"

Everyone within earshot bursts into laughter, but the moment is short-lived, as the players go back to avoiding each other.

Once the pizza arrives, Kirk and I take our plates outside, away from the other gamers. We've talked about nothing but role-playing since we got here, and I need a

break, but Kirk remembers something he meant to tell me during the drive.

“One of the things I blogged about before we left was two-word monsters,” he says, folding a slice of pizza in half. “I figure the constraint of limiting the DM to two words would help spark creativity.”

I pick a piece of pepperoni off my pizza and shove it in my mouth. My brain is too tired to concentrate on any more *D&D* theory.

“I listed a few examples for my followers: Albino Ninja, Narcoleptic Gladiator, Gilded Lich . . .”

He provides a brief commentary on each one, but I find myself stuck on *lich*. I've heard him reference this creature before, but I can't recall what it is. Then I remember a campaign he told me about where the players collected a handful of magical items, including the heart of a vampire, in order to become liches. Then it comes to me—a lich is an undead wizard. Kirk is obsessed with them, partly because of their limitless power but mostly because of their renown. The way he talks about them makes me think he would love to be one in real life.

When he finally runs out of steam, and I've finished my pizza, I ask, “You ready to DM your game?”

He peers through the clubhouse window at the players anxiously standing around, waiting for the afternoon sessions to begin. He retrieves a flask from his back pocket and takes a long, steady pull.

“I am now,” he says.

* * *

“You've come together to help a tavern owner rid his basement of rats,” Kirk says. “But once you descend the cellar steps, the tavern owner bolts the door behind you.”

Joining me on this adventure is our former DM Tavis, his son Javi, Staples the bearded, Mobad Deathprong the militant, and a guy named David who wasn't here for the morning sessions. This time we're all first level humans, and we have one cleric, two fighters, and three magic users in our party.

As we cautiously advance through the labyrinth of underground corridors, we notice a few wildly outlandish and disturbing details, which are characteristic of Kirk's imagination. First, there are no rats, only straw statues, or idols of some kind, shaped like rodents, placed throughout the rooms of the dungeon. There are other unusual things scattered throughout the lair, such as a giant rat monument made of human flesh and a small dirty boy with an iron mask bolted on his neck that's shaped like a rat's head. The creepiest thing, however—that has me and the other players gripping the edges of the table while exchanging worried glances—is the mysterious rail in the concrete floor, and the faraway grating of metal on metal, which Kirk imitates with his keys against the leg of the table.

After some exploring, Staples gets restless and begins shooting arrows at an arrangement of rat statues hanging on the wall.

"Your first three arrows pass through the straw rats, but the last arrow sticks in the straw, and you hear a low moan," Kirk says, summoning a deep, muffled wail from the recesses of his throat.

"I'll get the rat statue off the wall," Staples says, with a tinge of guilt.

"I'll help him," Mobad says, momentarily sheathing his weapon.

"As you pry the nailed hands and feet from the wall and lower it to the ground, you can see through the loose thatches of blood-soaked straw the body of a gaunt, bearded man."

I glance around the table to see how the others react to Kirk's moderating. At times their mouths are agape, and they completely forget they are in a condominium clubhouse across the street from the happiest place on earth. At one point, when David's character slides open a hatchway in the ceiling of a small room, thousands of baby rats

rain down on our party, and I watch everyone shake and shiver, brushing off their arms and shoulders as if the tiny, pink creatures were really falling on them. Javi leaps up from his chair and runs around the table, swatting imaginary rodents out of his hair.

When our party finally discovers the source of the grating noise, I too forget that this monster is only a figment of Kirk's imagination, as I'm overcome by the vileness of our enemy: A giant, hairless rat-like beast the size of a grizzly bear with a thick metal leash around its neck that keeps it chained to the rail on the floor.

"I want to slash its throat with my broadsword," I say, intending to protect my fellow adventurers.

"Roll a ten-sided die," Kirk prompts me.

When my roll is too low, Kirk explains: "As you swing your sword, your boot gets caught on the rail, causing your blade to just barely graze the torso of the lumbering beast."

The rest of the party rushes the monster, and after a few rounds of attacks—during which time Tavis's character is severely wounded, David's character exhausts all his spells, Staples's character runs out of arrows, and the boy with the iron rat mask flees into the darkness—we stand over the giant carcass, bruised and bloodied but satisfied, as entrails spill from a gash in its belly, and its head dangles by a few tattered muscle fibers.

In real life, we exchange high-fives and let out sighs of relief while, in the game, the magic-users heal our wounds.

With the entire dungeon mapped out, we have only one way left to go, so we head east, stomping on the remnants of straw statues and wading through the blood of our enemies. The final room is a massive chamber containing a long, crystalline boat, surrounded by eight transparent orbs. These objects magically hover above our party, several feet in the air. Since the boat faces the direction of a dark passageway, we all scramble aboard and begin rocking it, in an attempt to get it moving.

"Try hitting the orbs," I say to David, who wields a long staff.

He strikes the nearest orb, and the note of C resonates throughout the chamber. When he strikes the other orbs, they too ring out in specific musical notes.

When we tap the orbs in succession, nothing happens. We try every other note, and still nothing happens. Only after we've attempted every pattern we can think of, does David, who's apparently a musician in real life, say:

"Let's play the notes to 'Row, Row, Row Your Boat.'"

It glides across the chamber, toward the entrance of the tunnel at the far end of the room.

"As your boat drifts into the cavern, you are engulfed by a darkness so deep that you can't see the person in front of you," Kirk says, watching as we unconsciously narrow our eyes, trying to discern shapes in the darkness.

"After a while, you see pinholes of light, twinkling beneath the boat. They're stars, as if stolen from the night, illuminating the sea of darkness below. You coast along the eerie under-sky in silence, and at some point you realize you've escaped the tavern basement."

Kirk's whisper echoes through the seemingly endless abyss of shimmering under-sky. As I glance around the table, I see a variety of reactions on the faces of my fellow adventurers:

Cool-

Creepy-

Interesting-

Weird-

Notable, I think to myself.

JEFF TANNEN backpacks in the Sierra Nevadas, plays Gymnopedie No. 1 on piano, and speaks conversational German. He finds all of these activities to be easier than writing, which he couldn't do without the love and support of his wife, Lucille, and their one-eyed pug, Loki.



FORENSIC GALLERY

William C. Crawford is a prolific itinerant photographer based in Winston Salem, NC.

There was a woman who made trades for a living.

She wasn't always a woman. First, she was a girl, with a quiet house and a kitchen of raw materials and fingers itching to fill the empty space. She had few skills, and wasn't considered particularly pretty or charming. Once, she tried asking a shopkeeper for a spare piece of bread—something that had gone hard, even, if it wasn't too much trouble. (She wasn't that hungry: simply curious what he'd say.) He turned her away. So she began to experiment with items in her kitchen, her yard: knowing if she wanted things she'd need something to trade with.

She tried making a great many things: shoes and hats, engines and chairs and devices that perfectly watered plants. What she found she was good at, however, was hearts. Real-looking, beating ones: she pulled out her own each day to use as a model. She practiced making hearts so often that eventually they became indistinguishable from the real thing.

By this time the girl had grown into a young woman, and was running low on things she needed. The house with the kitchen and the yard had stopped being hers to go to.

So one day she went out looking for someone who'd want to buy a heart. They were running for a pretty high price, she knew: times were hard, and they'd grown more difficult to come by. She decided to go back to the store. People rarely went to the store if they weren't already looking to buy something. She wandered until she found a man near the produce.

"Hello," the woman said. "Are you interested in buying a heart?" (Over time her sales pitch improved).

"A heart?" the man asked. He looked her up and down, as if to see if she was really hiding one.

"Yes," she said, pulling it out of her bag. "I have an extra, and I'm willing to sell it for the right price." It really was a very good heart. Pink and pulsing, undamaged. Hearts like these often went as collector's items.

The man seemed to recognize this. "Perhaps," he said. "It *is* in impressive condition." There was room left in his cart; both of them glanced at the open spot. "Alright, I'll take it. What's your price?" He began to open his wallet.

"Oh, no. I won't take cash for it. I'll only trade it for something you find equally valuable."

He clicked his tongue, considering this. She could tell he had already grown enamored by the heart. Finally he dug a hand into his pocket.

"I have this." The man held out a key.

"What are you trading?"

"This is my Place To Go. You can use it, if that sounds like a fair trade." It did, and the woman accepted the key.

The Place To Go turned out to be a small upstairs apartment with a water problem, but the woman still felt it was a fair enough trade. It was her first heart, after all.

They lived there together until, eventually, the man stopped coming back. Once she realized she didn't need to watch the door, she began making hearts again; she'd grown low on things she needed anyway.

Only, her real heart didn't like the way she threw together imitations and pawned them off. After that first deal it stuttered, weakening to a diminished version of itself. The woman ignored this. It hardly affected her craft.

(The first time the woman told me this story, she shrugged past this part of the tale: a too-casual wave of her hand onward.)

Over time she amassed quite a collection to fill the man's Place To Go. Her hearts had become masterpieces—better, some said, than real ones. Not that many customers cared to seek out the difference. She grew wealthy from her winnings, but with every trade her own heart grew frailer, harder. It stopped functioning altogether a few years into business.

Nevertheless, she had all she required. A car, a safe of valuable stocks, a shower head that emitted a perfect stream of water. She traded with men and women from all over: someone's luck, another's confidence, a few years off one's life. Eventually she traded the man's apartment for a better one uptown.

Some years after she began, she traded for a child. She didn't tell me this part of the story—the first time or now—but the child had been offered without much thought, and the woman felt the weakest of brittle tugs in her long-abandoned heart. She picked this girl because she'd been on the sidewalk, scraping together mud and sticks into an unpracticed but impressive sculpture. The girl was a maker.

So the girl and the woman lived together uptown, and the woman did what she knew how to, and, to her credit, she made sure the girl knew this was her Place To Go even as years passed and she grew into a young woman herself.

This time when the woman tells me the story—many times after the first time she'd told me—she pauses here, and gives a dusty sigh. Normally she made more hearts as she talked; today's was a particular beauty. Ruby red and bleeding a little, like a paper cut.

"The thing is," the woman says, tiredly. "Even with all these things, and the life they gave me, I think I would've been better off with a real one." She tosses an apathetic look at the art on the table. "You were the only one that would've been worth the real trade, anyway." She pats my hand where it rests on the kitchen table—master and apprentice, both little girls grown-up.

Once she is gone, I gather my supplies. It's time to begin work on my next project. I have not yet selected a particular focus as she did, though the time is approaching.

But I am unworried. I have always been good at making things.

SHELBY PERLIS is pursuing a career in Literature and Creative Writing upon completing her English Master's from CSU Fullerton in May 2023. Her interests include contemporary novels, theater, romance, mythology, feminism, and film, and anything that makes her feel something new. She has previously published with Toyon Magazine, the Frida Cinema (Santa Ana), CSUF's Zines to the Future!, and DASH Literary Journal. She thanks you for your time, consideration, and care for the written word. IG: @shelbyperlis



INTO THE LIGHT

Bette Ridgeway is best known for her large-scale, luminous poured canvases that push the boundaries of light, color and design. Her youth spent in the beautiful Adirondack Mountains of upstate New York and her extensive global travel have informed her colorful palette. For the past two decades, the high desert light of Santa Fe, NM has fueled Ridgeway's art practice.

Her three decades of mentorship by the acclaimed Abstract Expressionist Paul Jenkins set her on her lifetime journey of non-objective painting on large canvas. She explores the interrelation and change of color in various conditions and on a variety of surfaces. Her artistic foundations in line drawing, watercolor, graphic design, and oils gave way to acrylics, which she found to be more versatile for her layering technique. Ridgeway has spent the last 30 years developing her signature technique, called "layering light," in which she uses many layers of thin, transparent acrylics on linen and canvas to produce a fluidity and viscosity similar to traditional watercolor. Delving further, Ridgeway expanded her work into 3D, joining paint and resin to aluminum and steel with sculptures of minimal towers.

Ridgeway depicts movement in her work, sometimes kinetic and full of emotion, sometimes bold and masterful, sometimes languid and tentative. She sees herself as the channel, the work comes through her but it is not hers. It goes out into the world - it has a life of its own.

MY JEWISHNESS IS A PAIR OF HORNS

some anti-Semite envisions atop my head,
is a crumbling synagogue

abandoned in the center of a metropolis
of non-believers. It's a cabalistic

series of abnormally-high IQ tests; a fear
of athletics; & a first-class trip

accompanied by guilt. My Jewishness
is an industrial oven gifted

as genocidal threat, a pointed assemblage
of crooked noses. Jabbing like

a 9-canded menorah, it's a cultural identity
I was born & raised with.

My Jewishness is both historical victim
& Middle-Eastern aggressor

leading to a thousand intifadas, serves me
as password into Council meetings

with the Elders of Zion, is a golden ticket
into Hollywood backrooms.

It makes me a bit sheepish when devouring
bacon-wrapped scallops.

My Jewishness explains my hurried exoduses,
this cross I bear in the shape

of David's yellowed star. It's not enthused
with being singled out

as different; though this partially accounts
for my passion for poetry

& why I spent my teenaged summers
with fellow hay-fever sufferers

at Creative Arts camps, why I'm considering
a midlife Buddhist conversion.

JONATHAN GREENHAUSE's first poetry collection, *Cupping Our Palms* (Meadowlark Press, 2022), was the winner of the 2022 Birdy Poetry Prize, and my poems have recently appeared or are forthcoming in *Barrow Street*, *Bayou*, *The Fish Anthology*, *Michigan Quarterly Review*, and *Permafrost*.

I HAVEN'T TOLD MY THERAPIST I'M NOT A WOMAN

Cherrie Moraga once said,
 "silence is like starvation,"
But really, it's worse than that
Because at least starvation kills you.

for 45 minutes every Thursday afternoon,
I am a traitor to all facets of my being.
I drive my fingers into the leather couch
as if I can dig up the words
lodged in my throat.

Before me sits my therapist, Maria.
Thick black hair and brown blessed skin
I can't help but blame her
for sharing my mother's name
for sharing my mother's pain.

Mija, she calls me
and I suddenly I'm home.

I'm scared of losing that-
I'm scared of being told to choose
my blood over my body

She'd moved to Rochester in the middle of March, more than a decade ago—and still, look at you! You can't even write her name. Sam. Her name was Sam, and you loved her, bone-deep, a suffocating, selfish love—maybe the only way you know how to love. But this story isn't about you. It isn't even yours. And no matter how many times you tell it yourself and tell it to yourself and tell it to yourself, it will end the way it always does, and it still won't belong to you.

You started losing her that day on the kitchen loading dock, when you should have been in gym class but instead sneaked out to smoke cigarettes. You played a game—who can hold her breath the longest. Normally, you'd sit and trade stories, her thigh against yours, feet swinging. That day, Sam was sullen, silent, standing as far away from you as she could without falling off the loading dock, not wanting to give you what you were asking for. She figured you'd be better off not knowing. And maybe you would have.

"It's someone older," you said, exhaling smoke, admitting defeat.

She nodded.

Your cigarette withered. She'd taught you to stand downwind so that later your hair wouldn't stink of smoke. You dropped the cigarette and crushed it underfoot.

"Hey," she said. "I would've finished that."

You reached into her pocket, where she always kept a tin of mints. "He buys them for you."

"What?"

"The Camels." You popped a mint and took your time putting the tin back, her thigh warm against your knuckles.

"Yeah, so?"

"It's him," you said. "Just say it, it's him."

You saw her for the first time in Mrs. Browne's second period Language Arts class. She raised her hand to identify Hamlet's first soliloquy, and Mrs. Browne called her to the front of the room to read the soliloquy in full. She slid out from her desk, banging her knee as she went. You winced and rubbed your own knee. You bruised yourself just moving about a room, and you weren't even tall like she was, didn't have an excuse for being clumsy. Her face was narrow, angular. Beautiful bones, like a model in thrift store clothes. One of her incisors was grey and jutted out. It must have constantly prodded the inside of her upper lip.

At the front of the room, she stood, slightly hunched over, but even then she was at least six inches taller than lean, wiry-haired Mrs. Browne, who had fought to keep *Hamlet* in the seventh grade curriculum after the board of education had questioned whether twelve- and thirteen-year-olds would be able to digest Shakespeare, and she had stood her ground, said that if they assumed you were too stupid to read then you *would be* too stupid to read.

You'd been too nervous even to raise your hand, flipping through the yellowed pages of your book, tracing over notes you'd scribbled in the margins, and in that time, Sam had raised her hand and answered, and there she was, standing at the front of the room, hunched over, it seemed, for the teacher's benefit. You followed the curve of her clavicle until it disappeared beneath faded flannel.

"O, that this too too solid flesh would melt / Thaw and resolve itself into a dew," she read, her voice brazen and bare. She took deeper breaths, from the diaphragm, and her voice came out even louder, it vibrated through the air, made you sit up straighter.

You scribbled your email in the corner of your notebook—your mother wouldn't allow you to have a cell phone. As Sam slid back into her desk, you tore off the corner and handed it to her. Your stomach did somersaults as she sat there next to you, but she smiled, tucked the paper into her pocket.

By that time you'd kissed one boy, Matt, at a dance, on a dare. He'd had fish breath. Thanks to Sam, you got to kiss two other boys at the roller skating party. The skating parties were planned in shifts: sixth graders skated from four to five-thirty, seventh graders from six to seven-thirty, eighth graders from eight to nine-thirty. The gym stank as it was, but it really reeked when a hundred seventh graders took off their sneakers and padded across the waxed floor toward rows of skates whose soles were still warm and wet. The speakers blasted songs that were popular on the radio—censored rap and hip hop, and whiny, nasal voices that didn't need censoring. You and Sam dared a couple of boys to race once around the gym. You managed to keep up with Sam, her long, muscled legs carrying her effortlessly, then waited until the chaperones were distracted by a fight that had broken out between two girls, their hands in each other's hair, pulling, pulling, seeing who'd be the first to scream, and then you rolled out with the boys to the kitchen loading dock. There were three other kids there besides your group, all eighth graders, two boys with piercings—in their eyebrows, spiraling all the way up their ear cartilage, in their lips, tongues, noses. The other was a girl in a pleather jacket who was shaking with the cold. They nodded to Sam, they shifted their circle to make space for her, for you. Sam let you kiss first, lit a cigarette and rolled off to the side.

Ned had dry, chapped lips. His hands were like pincers at your hips, pinching rhythmically as though he thought that would do something.

Greg was beautiful, except earlier that day a group of kids had bullied him into shaving off his thick, dark curls, and so he stood, bald, before you, and then his face was pressed to your face, his tongue was wedged down your throat. He cupped your face in his hands, and you felt your pen slide out from behind your ear. You waited to hear it hit the ground but you couldn't hear anything. Then he slid his hands beneath your shirt, under the cups of your bra. He squeezed, then released, squeezed, then released. Your mouth, filled up with his tongue, no longer felt like your mouth. His tongue tasted like lemon garlic chicken. He pulled away just as you were about to gag.

"Was that all right?" he said.

"Sure," you said.

"Jade," said Sam, though she was laughing, "It was not." To Greg, she said, "You kiss

like a dog. All slobber, no nuance." She waved both boys away, and they went, reluctantly.

By now the other kids on the loading dock had drifted away, and it was just the two of you. She came over and wiped your mouth with the sleeve of her shirt. She had your pen in her hand.

"You're going to wear this," she said, "you ought to use it more."

You took your pen from her but didn't put it back behind your ear.

She finished her cigarette and lit another. She smoked whatever she could get her hands on, but when she flirted with the boys who hung around in the CVS parking lot drinking vodka and Red Bull, she asked for Camels. Soon she'd no longer need those boys at all.

"Want to try?" she asked through an exhale of smoke.

You took the cigarette, pinched it between thumb and forefinger, afraid you would drop it.

"You're holding it like a joint," said Sam.

You glanced at her. "Is that wrong?"

"No," she said. "Go on, inhale, but just a little first, and then hold the smoke in your mouth, that way you won't burn your lungs."

You did as she said. The filtered end of the cigarette was wet from her lips. You breathed in. The taste that filled your mouth wasn't as smoky as you'd expected. It was smooth, almost. When you inhaled, you expected to cough, but you managed to breathe in and release a tiny burst of smoke. You handed the cigarette back to her.

You invited Sam over, warned her ahead of time about your mother. Together you baked sugar cookies with butter-cream frosting and sprinkles. From the five different colors of

sprinkles in the cupboard, Sam chose the green ones that glittered like gemstones. You knew how to follow the recipe, but your mother hovered in the corner of the kitchen. She was very particular about where the spices and the vanilla extract and the salt and the baking soda went in the cupboard. She wanted to make sure you didn't let the flour puff out of the mixing bowl. She wanted to make sure you didn't burn yourselves when you slid the cookie sheets into the oven—in fact, she would put them in for you, and take them out when the cookies were done baking. She was also curious about Sam, kept asking questions, questions that Sam would've gotten around to answering on her own, in good time, after your mother had gone to bed for the night. You gritted your teeth but let her keep asking because doing anything else would raise even more questions.

"I've lived in a lot of different cities," Sam said as she turned on the mixer and gradually poured the dry ingredients into the wet. "I can't remember all of them."

"Your father a military man?" said your mother, because her father had been.

Sam kept her head down. She grabbed a paper towel, ran it under the faucet, and wiped the counter, which, despite your efforts to be neat, was dusted with flour. "I don't...I never met my parents," Sam said. She turned off the mixer, asked you, "How's this?"

"Almost ready." You scraped down the sides of the mixing bowl with a silicone spatula, then switched on the mixer again. You grabbed another paper towel to dry the spot that Sam had just wiped clean.

"I have new foster parents now," Sam said.

"Oh," your mother said, "I didn't realize you were...how many foster parents have you had? Or is that a nosy question? It is, I'm sorry—don't answer, if you don't want."

"It's not so nosy," said Sam. You marveled at her, how she knew to comfort your mother for saying the wrong thing, the way she forgave her instantly, didn't even flinch. "Six—no, seven. This is the seventh home. Hopefully they'll adopt me. They've got two young kids, both adopted. They seem nice, so far."

"I hope they adopt you, too," you said.

You and Sam rolled the dough into walnut-sized balls and dropped them onto the parchment paper. Your mother opened the top oven door, reached out for the cookie sheets like she was reaching for a raft.

When she was gone, you showed Sam how to use the hand mixer to cream the butter for the icing. You added a little milk, then dumped in heaps of confectioner's sugar. "When you think it's enough, add one more half-cup," you said.

"That almost rhymes," said Sam. "How long have you been baking?"

"Ever since I can remember," you said. "After Dad left, Mom started coming down to the kitchen in the middle of the night to whip up cakes and pies. I'd help, when she let me. It's like she thinks she has to make up for Dad being a dick. Keeps me away from the oven and her chef's knife, like I'm still a baby. She cooks like she has a house full of children to feed."

"Must be *awful*," Sam drawled.

"No," you said, "but I could stand to lose a few." How you said this without cringing, it confounds you now, but you remember not wanting to be in your own body, you remember feeling your belly and thighs and upper arms jiggling, you saw reflections of yourself in a mirror or a window or a knife and hated the girl you saw, didn't want to believe that she—oddly proportioned, not enough of a chest to make up for the curve of her stomach, or the way her thighs pressed together—*she, that girl* was you.

"Men like a woman with a shape," Sam said. She leaned over and traced her fingertips along the slope of your hip. "I like it." Her eyes reflected your body in miniature, and in this brief moment, you felt that everything—your arms and legs and stomach and chest and neck and face and hair—*everything* was exactly the way it should be. Sam blinked and you tried to hold onto that feeling, that image of your body, perfect. "What was wrong with your Dad?" she said.

"He lied. A lot. About money and other stuff."

"Other women?"

You shrugged. "I was seven."

"You were seven," she said, "not blind."

"It was just the one." You stirred the icing though it didn't need stirring, thwapped the spatula against the bowl until globs of it splattered down into the center peak. "That's where the money was going, to his other kid. I think my mother would've forgiven the money, eventually, if it had just been that."

The other woman was younger and thinner than your mother, though her face was horsey. You'd seen her with your father at the mall. He tried to say hello, introduce you, but you ducked into Hot Topic. Your mother was waiting for you at the food court, where you promised you'd meet her at two-thirty and not a minute after. Your mother had gotten sole custody of you, but you knew the child he'd had with this other woman was your half-brother. His name was Clay. You'd meet him exactly once, when you were in college. He was just out of rehab, and you tried not to feel smug that he seemed even less well-adjusted than you.

You and Sam set up your sleeping bags in front of the gas fireplace, which was unlit, quiet and dark, though you could still see clearly the outlines of fake logs, concrete chiseled into a passing semblance of bark. It wasn't cold enough for a fire, that night.

In 1991, that fireplace had kept you and your family warm during the ice storm. You'd been an infant and had no memory of it, but your mother had shown you a photograph of you and your father, bundled together in blankets by the fire. The three of you barely moved from that spot the entire week. In 1991, Clay would have been five. But in that photo, your father stares down into your face, ember-bright, with something like awe.

Sam was admiring your notebook, now, black leather and stone-smooth paper, which you'd left on the coffee table. Your mother had given it to you for Christmas, for your stories. As a young girl, you'd filled page after page, but as you'd grown older all you felt worthy of writing were quotes from what you read. A few pages were filled with lines from *Hamlet*.

Sam turned the pages with her slender fingers.

"How about this," she said. "You only get to wear your pen behind your ear if you write at least one word or sentence that's yours."

You pulled your pen from behind your ear. "Yours, too," you said. "If you want."

She smiled. "We'll start tonight."

You slid into sleeping bags and told each other stories, took turns being storyteller and scribe. You passed the flashlight back and forth, held it under your chins and spoke in scratchy, ghoulish voices. The stories began with a girl alone in a cabin, a girl alone in the woods, a girl alone in a car, a girl alone in a haunted school bus, a girl alone at the lunch table. They began reasonably enough, but ended with ax-men or zombies or catfish-clown creatures taking over the world. The house echoed with your laughter. You came up with one about a girl who can kill someone by kissing them, but only if she kisses with tongue.

"You picturing anyone in particular?" said Sam, still scribbling, her smile wide and revealing the greyed, crooked tooth. Then you were nose to nose, and you realized her pale eyes were actually blue.

"I like you," Sam said.

"Me too," you said.

You both closed your eyes, pressed your lips together. She tasted of sugar. You ran your tongue over and over her crooked incisor. You tried to stay awake, tried to keep telling each other stories, these less scary and more dreamy. Sam came up with one about a girl who finds a mirror that is broken with a single, straight crack down the middle. The mirror no longer reflects anything back. Instead it is black, matte. The girl steps closer and carefully pries the glass pieces apart, and she falls into another realm, full of sparking, swirling colors. She falls and falls, into eternity, and eternity is not blinding white or hopeless dark. Eternity is color. Eternity is Sam's eyes, but only if you are lucky enough to lie nose to nose with her.

Sam turned fourteen even though she was in the seventh grade with you. She made you an invitation, hand-written in gold and silver gel pen ink on seaweed green cardstock. Her letters were all like little squares, all capitalized. Her handwriting was a neater version of your own: blocky, boyish. With the blunt end of your pen you traced her letters.

Sam's house was small, and a "Happy Birthday!" banner hung from the living room wall, the glitter-glue letters loopy and lopsided—the work of Sandra, her foster sister, who was half-Mexican but didn't speak much Spanish anymore. Your mother stood by the door, holding two plastic-wrapped loaves of her cinnamon raisin carrot bread—one with roasted pecans, one without. The bread was an excuse to meet Sam's foster parents. Michael, Sam's foster father, stepped forward and took the bread from her. He was shorter than your mother. His grin was wry, smart. He had thin, light brown hair, frizzed from static electricity. You'd just tried to smooth down your own hair, to no avail. Rochester was caught still in the icy claw of winter, the air frigid, dry. No matter how much lotion you rubbed into your hands or conditioner you combed through your hair, your skin cracked, your hair stood on end. You watched your mother smiling at Michael. He had an energetic manner, his voice bright like he was singing. He would have made elaborate hand gestures had his hands been free. Instead he waved the loaves of bread around in the air as he spoke. His wife Carla greeted your mother with the baby boy, Ralph, on her hip. Your mother glanced at you, blew you a kiss, and left.

There was pizza, cake and gifts—Michael and Carla gave her a set of nail polish and the complete works of Shakespeare, its pages gilded. Sam loved the notebook you gave her: it was leather-bound like yours, only this one was lime green. Still, you felt a twinge when she unwrapped that gilded book, when Carla said Michael had picked it out. She and Michael had met in high school on the cast of *The Tempest*, she explained. If he shaved his beard, you could picture him playing Ariel, with his slight frame and boyish face and flyaway hair. Elfin, you decided, was the word to describe the way he looked. You wished you'd been the one to give her that book.

Sam led you to the living room and put on a movie. On the couch, you linked your arm through hers, and her head fell to your shoulder, her hair cool against your cheek. The movie was based on a Nicholas Sparks novel. You'd tried reading one of his books but hadn't gotten even halfway through. The opening scene of the film had a lot of

dramatic, torrential rain. You felt Sam laughing into your shoulder. You began to laugh, too, as the camera panned over to a forlorn-looking girl. When the movie was over and the credits began rolling, you lifted your head. You were startled to see Michael leaning against the wall. He was wearing sweatpants and a black t-shirt that clung to his shoulders and torso.

“You girls sleepy yet?” he asked. His smile dimpled his face on one side. You couldn't see his eyes because of the long shadow that swept, slanting, over his face. You wondered how long he'd been standing there.

In Sam's room, she opened a window and tapped out two cigarettes. She had a brass four poster bed, and her comforter was covered in tulips. Michael had helped her paint her desk and chair green. You put your hand on the chair, the wood waxy beneath your fingertips. The color was somewhere between emerald and grass, deep but bright. Sam told you she had never had her own room before, never had a bed like this, a desk and chair all her own. You were careful not to let any smoke curl into the room.

You and Sam brushed your teeth in the bathroom, which had peach tiles, peach walls, a peach sink, peach tub, peach shower curtain. You hadn't realized there were so many different shades of peach, and there they were, all in one bathroom. It was dizzying to look at.

Back in her room, you got comfortable in her bed, lay on your stomachs, snuggled together, began telling stories, recording them in her notebook, this time. Sam told one about a girl who becomes a wolf. You told one about the ghost of a woman who possesses other women so that she can feel what it's like to have thighs that don't touch, or breasts that are full, or a stomach that is flat.

“Jade,” Sam whispered, her breath still sweet with garlic.

You wondered if she'd kiss you again. You leaned in closer, tilted up your chin.

She said, “I've started seeing this guy.”

You forced yourself to hold her gaze. You swallowed before saying, "Who?"

She shook her head. "I don't want to say who yet."

"Oh," you said. "Why not?"

She grinned and hid her face in her folded arms. Her voice came out muffled. "It's confusing."

"Confusing how?"

"Just confusing. Like, I wasn't expecting it, that kind of confusing."

"That's exciting," you said. You tried to make your voice light, happy.

She lifted her head. "You really think so?"

"I really do."

Lunches, you dragged your fork through a dome of rice topped with a caul of gravy. Your mother couldn't understand why you refused to take lunch to school, and always managed to slip something into your backpack—a bag of cashews, a tangerine, which you often ate instead of the slop on the Styrofoam tray. Lunches, you played the guessing game, but Sam wouldn't budge, not for a while. You went to CVS with her, for chocolate-dipped almonds and lipstick, and every time she walked right past the boys she used to flirt with for Camels.

Truly, who did you think it was, when she admitted it wasn't anyone at school, not even the high school across the yard? You'd hoped it was a guy she'd met when she'd lived in another home, another town, another city. Just a fling, you told yourself. You made yourself be bold and kissed her, when she slept over at your house, or you at hers, and she never said, *I can't*.

"Won't he be jealous?"

"He'd probably think it's hot."

That day at the loading dock, she said, "You really want to know?"

"Yes."

She took another drag, exhaled. "He came in to say goodnight one time, and it just sort of happened—we kissed. He told me that a girl like me should know how it is to be loved, and if I wanted, he would show me. He tells me I can tell him to stop any time."

"Sam." You felt yourself floating away from your body. You weren't there, that wasn't your voice speaking. Or maybe it was really Sam who was drifting away, out of reach, Sam with eternity in her eyes, Sam who could have anyone she wanted. "He's supposed to be your father—"

"And your father's so much better?"

By spring vacation—though it felt nothing like spring, wouldn't until mid-May—the pages of your notebook were full of the words and rhythms and phrases you and Sam loved, your own fledgling stories right alongside Shakespeare. Michael took Sam to see an off-Broadway performance of *Macbeth* in New York. You read ahead in *Hamlet*, finishing it. Ophelia's fate hurt and inspired you the most. You wept and wept, read her last words over and over. You tried writing a poem about her. You tried writing a story about her. Then you tried not to think about her at all.

After the break—*Magical*, Sam gushed, *it was absolutely magical*—you asked her about Michael whenever you had a moment alone.

In study hall, the room was freezing—the air conditioner on full blast—and you and Sam huddled together, reading.

"What else does he do to you?" you whispered.

Sam turned to you and gave you a smile that looked like it would wash away in warm water.

"You think I just lie there silently?" she said.

"Fine. What else do you do with him? Besides kissing."

"Touching. So far just kissing and touching."

You met her at her locker in the morning, before homeroom. The hallways were teeming with students who called to one another, laughed, shrieked, slammed locker doors. Their bodies moved fast and reckless—they still moved like children, not knowing their own strength. A florescent bulb was dying overhead. Under its erratic flickering, you said, "Listen. What if it goes farther than what you're saying? Will you tell me?"

She closed her locker, spun the lock. "If you're so curious, why don't you come watch us?"

"He showed me how it doesn't have to hurt. All you need to do is stretch yourself, little by little. You only tear if you go too fast or if you're not wet enough."

"Like this?"

"Here. Let me."

Your mother was downstairs making baba ganoush and you worried she'd burst in and see what you were up to. That fear of being discovered wasn't really fear. It was thrilling. You understand, now, that this must have been part of what fed his desire for her, and hers for him.

Two fingers. She licked them first. Then three. Then four. It felt nice if you kept your eyes on her, but then Sam's head was between your legs and you closed your eyes, and though you grabbed hold of her hair, like silk in your fist, you couldn't help imagining

him, that dimpled cheek, those elfin limbs, and then it stopped feeling nice because it was Sam you loved, and he was just a nobody, he was the one standing in the way.

You made her cry in the bathroom at school. The air was putrid—one of the toilets backed up with some other girl's vomit. She'd been trying to tell you something, and all you could think of was your own selfish need.

"Sometimes I'd rather just go to sleep," she said. "But he says I'm the teenager—when he was my age..."

"What about when you're thirty?"

"I don't want to think about thirty. I like that he likes me this way, just...sometimes I'm tired, or I'm still sore, or crampy."

"You mean he...he wants to do it when you're on your period? Gross."

"That part doesn't gross me out, actually," she said.

"Oh."

"It's just..." She sighed. "You wouldn't understand."

"I understand," you said. "I guess he won't stop, even when you tell him to."

"Fuck off," she said. The whites of her eyes were veined with red.

You grabbed toilet paper out of a stall and went to her. "I love you."

"I know." She took the wad of toilet paper from you, blotted her eyes. "I do, too," she said. "But not the way you mean, not that kind of love. With him, it's different."

"I could be different," you said.

"I don't want that. I want you to be you and him to be him and me to be me."

You wondered if you were less childish, less insecure, more daring, more beautiful, if maybe then she'd have chosen you.

You helped your mother make salmon with wild rice and broccolini, one of her latest low-cal recipes. All that cooking, and she'd outgrown her clothes. She gave you the smallest, dullest knife to chop the broccolini. She thought it safer, somehow, though an imprecise blade was the one most likely to give you a bad cut. Everyone knew that, even her, but somehow she had convinced herself that the chef's knife was the thing to be worried about.

You took a bite of the salmon. It was tender, lemon juice bright on your tongue.

"Don't slouch," your mother said. "It wouldn't matter if you were skin and bones—it's all in the way you carry yourself. Shoulders back. Pretend like there's a string tied around your lowest ribs, and it's pulling up, up."

You didn't tell your mother that Sam was stunning no matter what posture she held. You forced yourself to finish the meal, tried to savor it the way it was meant to be savored. Afterward, you went to the bathroom and locked the door. You knelt down and scooted forward on the pearly hexagonal tiles. You hugged the cold porcelain toilet with your knees and let your body be wracked with nausea. You threw everything up, and when there was nothing left in your stomach, you dry-heaved, until your abdomen was sore, your throat raw.

You sat next to Sam, in the second row of desks, while Mrs. Browne led the class in discussing Act V of *Hamlet*. Winter was finally beginning to thaw itself out, tiny buds on the maple tree outside the window. You glanced at Sam. She kept her eyes averted. You'd never felt farther away from her.

"Do we believe him?" Mrs. Browne was asking. "Do we believe Hamlet when he stumbles upon Ophelia's funeral and proclaims that he loves her *more than forty thousand*

brothers? What is the nature of his love for her?"

"If he loves her so much," said Sam, "why did he treat her so terribly when she was alive?"

"An excellent question!"

By turns you stared up at Mrs. Browne and then down at your book. In *Hamlet* there was darkness, madness, flowers, a skull. In Hamlet there was poetry and puns. In *Hamlet* there was the word *incest* five times. Incest wasn't quite the word you needed, but it was close. So were *molestation* and *sexual abuse*, but even they weren't right, not really. There might have been no word for what was happening to Sam, but that possibility was more frightening than anything. The more you studied the play, the more you hated Hamlet, his worthless platitudes, his long soliloquies on whether or not he should kill himself. So much grief, and none of it for Ophelia. Seven soliloquies and not one of them was for her. In *Hamlet*, you had hoped to find some answers, some deeper truth, some sign that wise, prescient Shakespeare had left for you. But all you could see was lust, anger, betrayal, sorrow, death.

Afterward, in the hallway, she grasped your arm.

Her eyes looked grey, cloudy. "I made it up," she said. "Everything. I made it all up, okay? Listen. Forget about it—forget everything I said. Just come over after school and stay over for a night the way we used to."

You thought you knew what she was asking. If you were there, he'd stay away.

The story ends with you in Mrs. Browne's room, knees jerky, breath shallow because you knew what you were about to do was not for Sam. The desks were empty, all except for Mrs. Browne's, where she sat, preparing for her eighth period class, her lithe body barely visible beyond wayward stacks of papers. In fact, the only parts of her you could see as you approached were her springy curls, and her fingers worrying them. She had a habit of twirling her hair when she was deep in thought. When she saw you she was mid-twirl, and she smiled and loosened her fingers, shaking out the dead strands. You watched

them drift to the floor, coiling there by the wastepaper basket. You knelt before her, though there was a chair, and she'd invited you to sit—*How lovely to see you!* You couldn't look at her. With your sweat-slick fingers you pinched one of her discarded hairs and wound it tightly around your index, until the tip turned white.

You tried to backpedal, in the end, because you couldn't stand the thought of losing Sam, though you'd lost her already. You said, "But maybe I missed something. Maybe she did make it up, for attention. I think she did, really."

"I don't think so," said Mrs. Browne, kneeling too, by then, her hands on your shoulders. "You did the right thing."

The most untrue words you'd ever heard.

Where it really ends is here, in Sam's bedroom, the last night you spent together, the night before you went to Mrs. Browne. She pulled out a pair of flannel pants and a cotton shirt for you and laid them at the foot of her tulip bedspread. You half-listened as she told you what you could have for dinner: mac-and-cheese, leftover lasagna, broccoli casserole—

"You have to end it."

"What?"

"You have to end it, or I will." You felt like crying, but you had no right to cry. You still don't. Whatever you felt—whatever you feel now—it's not yours, it isn't real, it's your body thinking it can feel Sam's pain, which it can't, and won't, no matter how much you try.

Sam's face changed, seemed to shrink in on itself. She hurried to shut her bedroom door, then turned and towered over you. You crumpled under her shadow. You tried not to flinch. She grabbed you by the shoulders, her nails digging in. They'd leave white, then red welts, but you kept your eyes open, kept your face still.

"Don't you dare threaten me."

"I'm sorry—"

You heard the slap before you felt it. Your cheek burned from the flat of her hand. You felt prickling at the backs of your eyes, but you wouldn't let the tears fall, not yet. The pain felt good, felt right.

"You want them to take me away, send me somewhere else, maybe somewhere worse, somewhere not even you will be able to find me? Is that how much you love me?" she said, blue eyes wet with fear. Then she smiled, a cruel closed-lip smile. "You really want your mother to know you slept over at the pedophile's house?"

"I don't *want* any of this—"

"Shut up," she said. "I'd tell you to get the fuck out but that'd look suspicious."

You took a breath, but it made no difference—your lungs were straining, you couldn't get enough air. Your voice tripped over itself. "I came here because I figured, just this one night, maybe he'd leave you alone."

"My little hero." Sam said this with a flash of her teeth—you caught one last glimpse of the crooked grey incisor. "And what if he comes in and fucks you?"

You couldn't tell if she was actually worried that that would happen, or if she wanted it to happen. Maybe it was both. She went over to the window, opened it, took out the screen, then pulled a pack of cigarettes from her shoulder bag and tapped one of them out, lit it, inhaled. She exhaled a cloud of smoke out the window. The bright orange tip sizzled as she inhaled, the ashes fell out the window and down as she tapped her index finger once, twice, three times. You watched her breathe out more clouds of smoke.

"Don't worry," she said, "you're safe. He won't come near your half-formed tits and Jell-O for thighs."

You looked down at yourself. Your breasts seemed to be coming along. And your thighs, Sam had seemed to love them, parting them with her tongue.

She stubbed out the cigarette and flicked it out the window, replaced the screen.

You put on Sam's pajamas. The flannel pants dragged on the floor so you pulled them up to your ribs. The shirt fit fine. You shivered and felt your nipples prickle against the cotton fabric. From beneath her bed Sam pulled out a sleeping bag, rolled it over to you. You unrolled it, got inside, and lay there without saying a word. You heard Sam start to snore faintly, a wispy, frail sound that used to lull you to sleep. You listened to the sounds of the quiet, dark house. You thought you heard footsteps approaching Sam's bedroom, so you turned and peered out over the blue-dark room, narrowing your eyes, trying to see if there were the shadowy outlines of feet in the small gap under the door. There was only silence, there was nothing there. You tried to think of something else. You thought of Greg and how he kissed with tongue, how it almost made you gag, his tongue that tasted like lemon garlic chicken, it was bulky and he plunged it into your mouth and down your throat like he was trying to fish something out of there. You thought about biting it, drawing blood, next time, if there was a next time. You thought of the metallic liquid coating your tongue, the roof of your mouth, your teeth. Maybe he'd like it. Maybe he'd spit in your face, call you slut, whore, bitch. Maybe he'd flinch. Maybe he'd let you show him what you wanted. You slipped your fingers under the waistband of the pajama pants. You slid your hands down over your thighs and inward, toward your crotch. You kneaded, slowly at first, then faster, harder, then you slid your fingers beneath your underpants. Your fingers got tangled in curls of pubic hair, they parted your labia, kneaded and kneaded. You closed your eyes and felt your body start to tingle, your breath quicken. You knew you had to keep quiet. You felt yourself getting wetter, and imagined someone else's fingers there, kneading, you felt someone else slide a finger inside and pull out slowly, then slide in deeper. You saw his face, the wry, smart grin that dimpled his left cheek, you felt his hand touching you. You felt his mouth on yours, kissing down your neck and stopping to suck on your nipples, until they peaked, until they chafed under his teeth and the bristle of stubble.

You pulled your hand away, panting. You opened your eyes. Your fingers were warm and sticky. You wiped them on the leg of the pajama pants and felt sick all over again. You rolled out of the sleeping bag and exhaled as the cold air greeted your bare feet and swept over the rest of your body. You rushed toward the door. You wanted to forget that feeling of intense, primal pleasure. You wanted to forget that it was his face, his

hands, his mouth, behind your closed eyes, it was him, or the idea of him, and not Sam, it was him who made you come, almost, before you pulled your hand away from yourself. You were the one who should be locked up, sent away. You were the one—not him, not Sam.

You shut yourself into the overwhelmingly peach bathroom. You washed your hands under scalding water at the sink. The room around you turned searing red, like an open blister. The pain was not enough. You could have cut your fingers off and it still wouldn't have been enough. On your way back to Sam's room, you nearly walked into him. He gave you a sleepy smile. Your breath caught in your throat, and you choked on your own spit.

"How you doing?" he said, rubbing his eyes. "You girls warm enough in there?"

"We're fine," you said, and side-stepped away from him. You ran back to Sam's room and slammed the door behind you, pulled out the green desk chair and propped it beneath the doorknob.

Sam stirred in her bed.

"Sorry, it's just me," you said. "Go back to sleep."

"The chair doesn't work," she said, and she rolled over, pulled the covers over her head.

You listened to her breathing and sank down to the floor, pulled your knees against your chest. You were shaking. You rocked yourself and the tears fell, finally. You wanted her to forgive you, even for what she didn't know, what you'd never tell her, what you'd done there on the floor beneath her.

Even now, you want her to forgive you. You want, you want—no end to what you want. What you've no right to ask of her and she has no reason to give.

JENNI MILTON is a writer whose fiction aims to center the embodied experience of queer people. Her work is as much focused on how we navigate trauma and mental illness as it is on how we insist on love and joy in a world that is increasingly hostile toward us.

Born in Rochester, NY, she studied at Connecticut College, Oxford University and the Columbia Publishing Course. Afterward, she worked in book and magazine publishing—at One Story, Oxford University Press, and Grove Atlantic. She then went on to earn her MFA at the Programs in Writing at UC Irvine and was the Fiction Editor of the Pushcart Prize-winning journal *Faultline* in her final year of the program. She works as a freelance copywriter, carving out as much time as possible to work on her novel and a film adaptation of her short story "Beach House." In her spare time, she volunteers at H&H Books and plays violin with the Roxborough Orchestra. Her work has been published in *Juked* and *A Distant Memory Zine*.

She founded the Embodied Writing Workshop Series in 2022. Informed by her own experience as both a workshop participant and leader over the years, as well as by the invaluable books *The Anti-Racist Writing Workshop: How to Decolonize the Creative Writing Classroom* by Felicia Rose Chavez and *Craft in the Real World: Rethinking Fiction Writing and Workshopping* by Matthew Salesses, this workshop seeks to empower emerging writers whose work is somehow engaged with social justice.



SHIFT VII

On July 23, 2018, a 10' flashflood swept through our Santa Fe property, a tsunami in a quiet valley, washing downstream animals, debris and boulders. My work went from the universal to the personal, understanding that the presumed control over the environment had changed to a "new norm." These paintings reference the horizontal line between the sky and earth, trees and water reflections, gates and fences, cracked ground in the microcosm and celestial vaults of the macrocosm. The work stands witness to the universal dissolution of life energy between the dark and the light.

the moment of painting
the power of not knowing
not thinking
not asking major questions
marking
scarring
erasing
compilation
layers acknowledging
recognition of change
water
ether
earth
fire
wind and woods
cosmic archetypes

Whether marked in the landscape of the earth or in the features of our bodies and minds, the five elements stand as memory of time. In these paintings they come into actual physical form; beeswax, resin, graphite, oil stick, linen and wood. The bridge of 108 sacred red dots acts as a meditation for our future. The possibility of hope for our environment and ourselves as humans comes in the form of the returning light in the morning sky.

We live in a world in which it is difficult to feel a part of the whole. Within this chaos there is a loss of control and balance: personally, politically and spiritually. There is an acceptance and letting go of what cannot be corrected. Hopefully we'll continue to find ways to understand and bond, not only to our environment, but most importantly, to each other.

THE EXACT MIDDLE

Maybe a child
will make your sadness
go away
maybe a husband
will make things better

these thoughts race through my mother's mind
when she reads the sadness in my eyes

but she never states them
and I'm glad

because then I would ask her
to look back
to when she was in her thirties
crying herself to sleep
mending another black eye
wishing she was
away from everything

the husband
the children

longing for a do-over

instead
we sit in silence
hold each other's hands

for me
this is enough
an unspoken understanding
that there is no right way

MARITZA OCAMPO is a Cal State San Bernardino MFA graduate and CSULB Alumni. She currently shares her love of stories with elementary school students as their spooky librarian. You can find her work in *sin cesar* (formerly *Dryland*), *Huizache*, *Acentos Review* and other literary journals.

Alma was a disposable branch,
brown, twisting, barren of leaves,
guarding a deeply buried fire.

She was allowed a spoon and a bowl
and ate her oatmeal in secret;
her soup, her mash of cottage cheese.

She spoke no English, never spoke; and no one knew
how long or hard she worked
to pull truth through her tortured roots,
with twig hands deftly scaling and smoothing

until she transported her finished piece
on a purloined aluminum tray
and centered it with authority,
letting its dark vowels overwhelm
the thin stupid whine of normalcy
atop the white Formica table;

the magnum opus of her bowels
an astonishing mountain that had come
to the locked in women of the mental ward.

It was whisked away in a flush of consternation and alarm,
and a hose of disinfectant flooded the lingering nose,
its earthy, complex bouquet.

Behind closed doors, the elemental Alma
was blown apart with insulin shock, or ECT,
perhaps suffocated in a zombie swaddling

of high dose Thorazine. We did not know for sure.
She was never visible again. Nor did we speak of it
to the strangers who cleaned up our messes.

LEAH SULLIVAN lives in Pasadena, CA, is active in The Eastside Los Angeles Writers Group, and a member of The Los Angeles Poets and Writers Collective. She grew up in The Bronx.

At eighty, she earned a BA in Literature/Creative Writing from Antioch University. She's published in *OnTheBus*, vol 23, Bambaz Press; the anthology, *Golden Horses*, Poetry for a New Generation, Admiral Books (available on Amazon); and her self-published chapbook, *Coda*.

With the exception of government officials, everyone in the country was dead before they were born. Dancing was outlawed. As was singing, hugging, shaking hands with a member of the opposite sex, caring for strays, and—only for women—consuming anything red on television. Humanity itself was illegalized, and when humanity is verboten, the human part of us dies. When this prohibition occurs for decades, all future generations are sentenced to death before they can live.

But of course, you couldn't actually say any of this. That is, if you valued your own life. The mass, premature deaths was an unspoken rule among Iranians. Government officials were conveniently exempt from this. Voicing any dissent was completely out of the question. The regime's national sport was slaughtering doves, so peaceful protest was incorrigible. Peace was the regime's boogeyman; the more peaceful you were in your opposition, the more terrified the government became, and thus the more bloodthirsty.

This was what Parwana contemplated as she toyed with her pen in class. She couldn't understand why peace posed such a paramount danger to the dictatorship. As her instructor droned on about the glory of the Islamic regime (which really had no place in a math class), Parwana ignored the rehearsed lecture and instead concentrated her attention on solving the puzzle that was Iran's government.

How can peace be danger if they are two opposite things? she thought to herself.

Parwana squirmed. There was a black snake on her head she could not remove. Well, technically she *could*, but it was illegal in public. The snake's long body tried to strangle her each day, weaving around her hair down to her jaw and then her neck. Parwana cast a glance to her left, then her right. Perhaps she could move it back a centimeter. No one would notice she was doing it. She brought her fingers up. Just a centimeter—

A hand on her shoulder made Parwana jump. She exhaled a sigh of relief to note it was not a man in black, but her good friend, Noor.

"Biya, class is over. Let's go home."

The sky was ashen today—it seemed to suffocate the sun, as not a single ray escaped from behind the blanched clouds. As they walked out the gates of their all-girls school, Parwana noticed the schoolgirls huddling in groups and talking with hushed voices. At least one girl in each group was on the watch for a staff member. One made eye contact with Parwana.

"Allah be praised," she said.

"Allah be praised," Parwana repeated, nodding. The girls turned away from each other. As the most defenseless population, girls clung to this phrase like a shield. It didn't matter if the girls believed in it or not—many didn't—but simply by saying it, the girls appeared to be supportive of the regime, and that was their best, and only, defense against being accused of corruption on earth.

Parwana and Noor continued to walk home. Usually, the boys played on the streets after school—far from the girls school, of course—but this time, not as many voices were present. Parwana noticed a few were missing. She lifted her chin in their direction.

"Why are there less than yesterday?" she asked Noor.

Noor pursed her lips. *"They 'enlisted' in the army,"* she replied, using air quotations. Parwana looked at them again. The oldest could not have been more than fourteen. She had heard rumors of poor boys being drafted to serve for the army, but never really believed it. Parwana opened her mouth to comment, but was suddenly acutely aware of the cameras glaring at her from the stores they were passing. She forced a smile and walked onwards. The rest of their walk home was silent.

Door closed, the snake was finally rendered powerless. Parwana yanked it off and threw it on the couch. She inhaled deeply, glad to be free of the charcoal snake. Perhaps in another life, where she had chosen what to believe in and had bodily autonomy, she would not be so critical of it. But, she was not in another universe, as much as she prayed to be.

"*Azizam*, is that you?" her grandmother called out.

"Yes, grandma. I'm home." Her grandmother emerged from the kitchen, an apron tied around her portly stomach. Her seventy-five year old grandmother walked with a hunch in her back, as though she always carried some great burden. Even with glasses, she squinted to see. Then again, it may have been because one of the lenses was cracked.

"How was school?"

Parwana shrugged. "Okay, I suppose."

"Would you like a bowl of fruit, *Parwana-jan*?"

She shook her head. "No, I'd like to dance right now, *madarbozorg*."

"Again?" Her grandmother cast a wary glance out her window. She adored Parwana's captivating dances, but feared someone seeing her. "*Basheh*, just remember to draw the blinds."

"I always do."

In her room, Parwana changed out of her burka and into her dance clothes. Her room was very small, but she had to make do. She drew the blinds shut, pushed aside her desk chair and other things which were currently cluttering her room, then tied her hair into a bun. There was an oval mirror on her desk which she used to watch herself and correct her form. She was particularly taken with ballet. Of course, no one was teaching it, so she relied on the internet for videos to teach her. Noor, who had learned it from her parents who had learned from their co-workers, taught Parwana how to download and install VPNs; most people had about ten active VPNs in case one should fail or be compromised somehow, which occurred rather often. The VPNs were the only connection she had to the outside world. She chose a video on *Swan Lake* fouettes, in which a ballerina stood on one toe and twirled repeatedly while extending and retracting the leg which was off the ground. It was rather advanced for a twelve-year old, but she had been practicing ballet in secret since she was three.

She watched the tutorial, entranced by the dance instructor's expertise, and soon began to copy what she had seen. Parwana was amazing at spotting, which allowed her to spin repeatedly without becoming dizzy. Despite the cramped space, Parwana was as free as her namesake, the butterfly. The dim light illuminated her silhouette in a soft and hazy light. With every twirl, she ascended from the world and burst through the dreary skies onto the other side of the clouds, where the sun rays were so rich and pure it was like bathing in silk; where all the vibrant colors blended together in a magnificent display of breathtaking, multicolored light. Above the skies, Parwana's wings unfolded and she could taste the honey of freedom on her tongue.

She spun for a little over a minute before she had to stop and crash-landed back into the compact cocoon that was her room. She noted to herself that she was somewhat tilted when she spun, so she would have to work on correcting that. Parwana stared at herself panting in the mirror, then noticed her mother's gold necklace lying on her desk. She got up to retrieve the necklace. She would never dare wear it outside, for fear of losing it.

Her mother, Naheed, was given the Persian name for Venus, and suited it well. Her mother was the most loving, caring person she had ever known. Naheed was enamored with 4 butterflies; Parwana's grandmother said Naheed used to chase them as a child, and her affinity for butterflies was reflected in her daughter's name. Perhaps it was because butterflies were free that her mother loved them so much. Parwana never had the chance to ask. When she was six, her mother had published a story on how the notorious Evin prison was a torture center for Iranians who spoke out against the government. Parwana didn't see her mother again until the day of the funeral.

They had slaughtered love.

Her father was an oil worker who had died in a work-related accident a month before she was born, so she had never met him, but her mother said he was very handsome. He had worked hard to provide for his wife and unborn child, but like most oil workers, was paid very little. So all Parwana had left of her family was her grandmother.

Her grandmother never liked the name Parwana. She said it reminded her of the story of the butterfly who fell in love with the flame and dance around it for so long,

eventually, it died in the flame's embrace. It was a popular Persian story, but one which unnerved her grandmother. But, her grandmother did like how Parwana had her mother's eyes. Her grandmother said that their eyes were the same shade of hazel, like coruscating sparks of fire.

A knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. Her grandmother gently opened the door, holding a small bowl of pomegranate seeds. Parwana smiled. "*Mercy, madarbozorg.*"

"*Noosheh jaan.*"

At dinnertime, the pair sat on the floor on the white *sofreh*. Grandmother had prepared *ghormeh-sabzi* with mint and radishes on the side.

"There is much danger in the streets, *Parwana-jan*," her grandmother cautioned. "Stay away from it."

"You mean the protests?"

"Yes, dear. I do not want you involved with any of that. The people who go there come back in coffins, or worse if they do not."

"Alright, *madarbozorg*, I understand."

"The *Basij* have arrested thousands. You are just a girl. *Allah* knows what would happen to you in prison, ay-ay." She lifted a wrinkled hand to wipe her eyes.

"*Madarbozorg*, it's okay. Calm down. I will come home."

"Good. Now eat, you are too skinny."

The only reason Parwana paid attention in history class was because she didn't

want a failing grade, otherwise she would have tuned out like she had done in math class the previous day. Math was easy and simple; all truths and facts, no distortion or manipulation to cloud critical thinking. But history was different. Were it not for her grandmother, Parwana would not know her left from her right.

"And so, Western societies perpetuate this myth of a mass Jewish genocide, when in reality, Jewish billionaires paid for the false news to spread so they could continue ruling over innocent people," their teacher claimed. The snake on Parwana's head seemingly purred, as if in agreement with this narrative. Parwana resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "During lunch next week, a historian will be visiting our school to give a lecture explaining why this so-called Holocaust is a myth and how western societies claim to be free whilst arresting people who speak the truth of this false history. If you attend, I will give you ten points of extra credit. That is all for today, enjoy your lunch." Parwana could not leave any faster. She found Noor in the courtyard and joined her.

"I did a bad thing," Noor giggled.

Parwana raised an eyebrow. "Oh really? What?"

Noor grinned mischievously and opened the front page of her textbook. Parwana gasped. In every textbook in Iran, on the front page, there is a picture of the former Supreme Leader and founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini. Noor had ripped his face out. She flipped through the pages. Every picture of Khomeini, or the current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, had been ripped out.

"Noor! Are you crazy?! If anyone finds out, you could be arrested for waging war against *Allah!*"

Noor giggled again. "The protests are gaining momentum. Soon, I'll be 'charged' with throwing trash in the bin!" The snake on Parwana's head hissed and tightened its grip. Parwana could feel its venomous fangs bared.

"Just be careful, okay?"

Noor scoffed. "You are so pessimistic."

"And you are too optimistic!"

"Maybe that is why we are friends. Oh, I have to show you something else."

"Have you ripped the Ayatollahs out of another textbook?"

"Pfff, no silly. It's on Instagram. Look!" It was a photo of a woman wearing two pieces of string for a top and shorts so small, half her butt was poking out. In her left hand, the woman held a half-empty bottle of vodka. Her right arm was wrapped around a man's neck, and her tongue was halfway down his throat. "Her father works for the regime. She's in the US right now studying at Harvard. Can you believe that? Imagine she did this here!" Noor exclaimed. Parwana knew the answer to that. She would spend the rest of her life in prison until she was sexually assaulted to death. Or perhaps sold into prostitution for the soldiers. It had happened many times before. "They send their kids abroad to live in free countries, and punish us for doing far less than this! Hypocrites, all of them!" Noor nearly shouted. Beneath the hatred in her voice, Parwana sensed the green sting of envy. She had it too. Despite herself, Parwana stared at the girl, not in disgust or admonishment, but in wonder and envy. This girl was free. It didn't matter what she did with her own life, she was free to live it as she pleased.

"It must be grand, living in a free country," Parwana said, more to herself than Noor.

The protests died as quickly as they began. It was an especially bloody November. It had not mattered that many protesters were true, devoted Muslims themselves, the very people the government claimed to have honored and protected. The issue was never about religion anyways, it was always about *control*, which was wielded through the distortion and poisoning of religion to be weaponized as a beating rod.

Following the deaths of 3000 protestors-1500 of which were massacred within the span of *three days*—the survivors (who had not been arrested) returned home and locked themselves inside, fearing the *Basij* would learn of their involvement and knock down their doors to arrest them too. But this was not enough. The government needed to be sure they had mutilated the spirits of the people.

teacher's demands for them to stay calm despite her own coughing was drowned out by the shrieks of the students. Parwana thought she might die. Suddenly, a blur of black broke down the door and ran into the classroom. They grabbed the children and hauled them outside.

Once outside, Parwana's vision began to clear. There were still tears in her eyes, but she could see much better. The entire school was brought to the courtyard, schoolgirls in the jaws of death, better known as the *Basij*. They were all men exerting power over these girls. Unlike the students, they had on protective gear and helmets which shielded their identities. A few minutes later, the initial chaos dissolved into muted panic.

Approximately ten minutes later, one officer emerged from the building with a textbook. But it was no ordinary textbook. The front page was open, revealing the Ayatollah's absence.

"Who did this?!" screeched the officer. Parwana kept her gaze forward, not wanting to betray anything. Parwana had heard of random security checks at schools, to make sure the students were faithful to the government, but had never seen it. Until today.

She could feel her arm aching under the pressure of the officer's crushing grip. The officer with the book, who appeared to be the leader, sighed and took his gun from his holster. He fired three shots in the air, scaring the students. Their screams reverberated in the playground of discord they were trapped in. "I'm going to ask one more time. If no one confesses, I will shoot all of you until someone does. Now who did this?!" The whimpers and sobs of the girls permeated the atmosphere, but still, no one dared speak. Some officers hit the girls if they were crying too loud to quiet them. The officer lowered his gun and aimed it at a young girl, no more than ten years old. The barrel of the gun was pointed at her head. Despite the distance between them, the leader would undoubtedly hit his target. His finger rested on the trigger.

Noor raised her arm high, jumping up and down. "Me, me, me!" she yelled. Her face was red from tears, although whether they were caused by the gas, the stress, or both, Parwana could not determine. The lead officer turned his gaze towards her and holstered his gun.

"Bring her here," he commanded. The officer holding her dragged her to the center of the courtyard and threw her with disgust in front of the man, as if by touching her, he had dirtied himself. The main officer lifted his right arm, index and middle fingers raised, and bowed them twice. Two officers emerged from behind the crowd. The four officers crowded around her. "Watch," the main officer addressed to the audience, "and see what happens when you wage war against *Allah*, when you commit corruption on earth." The officers all raised their metal batons.

It was a sick joke to call the ambulance. Even before they arrived, it was clear she was dead. Any fool could take one look at her mangled corpse and the pool of blood around her and confirm that. Still, the *Basij* called the ambulance. The first responders grimaced when they saw her, but said nothing. They carried her out on a stretcher.

The sky was darker than ever today. Night seemed to arrive earlier. They killed Noor; they killed *light*.

All the children were driven home by their parents that day; all but one. The parents didn't want to risk anything else happening to their kids. After what the *Basij* had done, the students acted like walking corpses. They moved with blank expressions and dried tears. They even dragged their feet. No one made eye-contact. No one spoke. The *Basij* stole their voice, too.

Parwana stared out the window of her grandmother's car. She refused to close her eyes, because every time she did, the bloody scene repeated itself. Noor's cries, the raised batons, and the bloody footprints of the officers when they left. As the officers had beaten Noor, Parwana could only watch helplessly. She wanted to scream, but knew she could not. She dared not cry or scream, for fear of retaliation. She tried to look away, but the officer holding her held her head and threatened to hurt her if she closed her eyes. Parwana was in agony watching her best friend's demise, especially knowing she was prevented from helping her.

Despite herself, Parwana was glad she had left before Noor's parents arrived. She had already heard her grandmother's wails at her mother's funeral; she did not wish to hear another mother cry for her daughter. That was a sound you could never forget.

At home, Parwana's grandmother turned on the television and switched the channels until she landed on Parwana's favorite childhood cartoon, *The Adventures of Asterix*. Her grandmother gave her a bowl of pomegranate seeds and sat by her side. She wrapped a protective arm around her granddaughter and kissed her head, breathing in Parwana's scent to memorize it, to preserve it within her own bones.

Parwana was used to crying; she had cried over the father she never met, over the mother who was ripped away from her, over the thousands of protestors over the years who had been slaughtered. She could only cry silently over the death of her best friend. Of her only friend. As tears streamed down her face, she could not bring herself to eat the fruit. She watched the cartoon, but barely. It was just images on a screen she did not pay any attention to. She recognized the colors changing, but did not register the actions. Her grandmother ran a hand over Parwana's hair repeatedly, like she had when Parwana was very young. Her grandmother scooped the pomegranate seeds with a spoon and raised it to Parwana's lips.

"Eat, *azizam*." Parwana said and did nothing. Her grandmother tried again. "Please, *Parwana-jan*." This time Parwana complied.

She blankly stared at the screen as her grandmother fed her.

An hour later, her grandmother had fallen asleep by her side. Parwana was still watching the cartoon. She started to understand what was happening now, in the cartoon. Most of the characters were male, but there was one female. She was drinking something blue, most likely water. Parwana's brows furrowed. She wondered why she never saw a woman on television eat or drink anything red. Parwana ate red things, like pomegranate and radishes. But why did the woman on the screen not? The scene transitioned to a bright red fire. The woman spit the water out onto the fire and it died down. Parwana's eyes widened as she understood.

Women cannot see themselves consume red on a national, or even local, scale. To consume red is to invigorate the fire within. If women were to see that, they would remember the passion that burns within them, calling for freedom.

And if women wanted freedom in a dictatorship, they would have to burn the empire of terror down. So, women are promoted drinking water, because that douses the fire—keeps them docile. Parwana licked her lips, tasting the sweet flavor of the pomegranate which lingered upon her lips.

And so this must be why peace is dangerous, she reasoned. Peace and danger are two opposite forces. In a regime of terror, peace is its remedy, its undoing. If even a moment of peace is allowed for the people, then the regime of destruction will crumble like sand.

She turned off the television, placed a blanket on her grandmother and a pillow under her head, and dashed to her room. She gripped the black snake by its throat and threw it in the garbage can. It hissed viciously, but she ignored it. She quickly tied her hair into a bun and 13 changed into her dance clothes. Parwana danced for hours, invigorated by the flames of freedom burning wildly inside her.

Parwana's grandmother knew she would protest when she didn't return home that day. Most likely, her granddaughter would be arrested and thrown into the nearest jail. Despite her bad back, her grandmother endured the shooting pains to hobble into the car and drive to the prison. She parked just outside the gates. She could see the faceless guards staring at her from their stations at the top, their watchhouses. Completely safe and guarded from the terrors they inflict.

Summoning all her strength, she banged on the gates. Nothing happened. She banged again. And again. And again. And again. She banged until her arms were red and knuckles bloodied. The guards looked at her, confused as to what an old lady was doing there.

"I will tear this door apart!" she screamed. "I will get killed here! But I won't leave without my granddaughter! Shoot me! Kill me! You have killed my daughter! Isn't that enough?! How much more do I have left in me?!" She banged against the gates again. The guards looked at each other, none knowing what course of action to take. Arrest her? Shoot her? Drive her home? One of the guards radioed in, asking directions for what to do.

The grandmother could finally take no more. With a heaving breath, she sat down, directly in front of the gates. It did not matter how much time it took. She had all the time in the world. She would not leave without her granddaughter.

On her thirteenth birthday, Parwana took a detour on her way home. She stood on the sidewalk, staring at the cars passing by. The green light turned red. She took a deep breath in, and ran to the middle of the street. The passerby all halted and gasped. They yelled at her to come back, 14 some even tried pulling her, but she would not budge. The light turned green and people honked their horns at her.

The snake was on her head again; her grandmother had insisted on it. Once again, she grabbed it by the throat, but this time she didn't let go. But, on her neck, her mother's necklace glimmered, reflecting the few remaining rays of light in Iran. In her other hand, Parwana held a clear plastic bottle filled with a red drink. She guzzled it down and used the snake to wipe her face. Then, she danced in *public*. Pirouette after pirouette, fouette after fouette. She had to do this. For Noor, for her parents, for all of Iran. She danced to rebel against the dictatorship which would sooner burn down its own country than grant its people basic human rights, like freedom.

Finally, a move she had never attempted before: the grand jete.

And she was perfect. The horns stopped blaring, the people stopped walking. Time had stopped completely. All that was left was her, dancing with the snake like it was a ribbon. And in those moments, she was a butterfly, flying higher and higher with each grand jete. The people were mesmerized; Parwana knew all eyes were on her, and she smiled to herself. Her long, untamed hair flew in the wind, finally free. Her body moved uninhibited, free of the forced burka. And the snake in her hand went limp, now a powerless head scarf. Parwana was free, dancing in the wind like a monarch butterfly.

An undercover police officer in the crowd called into the station. "Come quickly!" he whispered. "There is a terrorist dancing in the streets!" That was the call which echoed throughout the police department. A terrorist was dancing in the streets. The *Basij* mobilized quickly and drove to the scene of treason.

The people barely noticed them arriving. So enchanting was Parwana's dance that the people focused solely on her. She was beautiful, a living work of art as she danced in the streets. She was beautiful not just because of her looks, but because she was *free*.

The *Basji* loaded their weapons. Some were uneasy, threatened by a girl dancing because of the bizarre nature of the act; dancing.

Parwana was dancing around the flames of freedom, losing herself in them.

The bullets soared in the air, aimed at the butterfly.

TRANSLATION KEY

Aban the Persian year (their calendar)

Azizam darling

Basheh okay

Basij the name of a military group in Iran

Biya come

"-jan": dear

Madarbozorg grandmother

Mercy thank you

Noor a girl's name, meaning "Light"

Noosheh jaan may it nourish/sweeten your soul, bon appetit

Sofreh a white sheet Iranians place food on and gather around to eat (on the floor) for communion

DARYA JAFARINEJAD is a 19-year old Iranian-American Creative Writing major at CSULB. She has been an avid reader and writer since childhood. Her two main fears are writer's block and spiders. As long as they don't follow her, she is excited to continue her writing journey in the future.



MONSOON SUMMER FROM THE LONELIEST ROAD

Having been an art teacher, woodcarver and a printmaker in my formative years, I emerged as a painter, joyously overwhelmed by color and searching for pattern. Color and pattern are everywhere, but the seeing and interpretation of them are different for each of us. Pattern in nature is primal to me - which fuels my desire to find a glimmer of logic in vastly complicated, confusing and tumbled landscapes. I do also seek out the vibrant hues in landscapes.

My oil paintings begin with a saturated red orange backdrop. This is overlaid with the main imagery, applied with distinct brushstrokes of brilliant color. Hints of the red background peek through like a woodcut, creating subtle impact without drawing attention away from the primary subjects.

Several times a year I travel throughout the Southwest, hiking and photographing vistas for future paintings. The goal is to catch the light and design in these scenes in all its strangeness and beauty. It is a lofty goal, but I find when the quest is shepherded with paint and brush it is a delightfully daunting adventure.

HOT WATER

Three voices from three generations fill a car driving 5 miles per hour over the speed limit.

"Selfish boy." A voice speaking some of the little English it knows.

"How could you leave us, especially now?" A voice speaking their new dominant language.

"I'm sorry, but I decided this is what I want" A voice speaking the only language it knows.

"How do you expect me to take care of your Halmoni all on my own? What would Halabeoji think?"

"I'm not saying I feel entirely good about it or that I'm not going help with anymore. I'm not moving far. You're forgetting that I'm my own person. I should be able to make my own decisions. I'm an adult now."

"No... You forget that none of us get to be our own person and that's what it means to be an adult. You're an adult, but you're also a son and a grandson just like I'm a mother and a daughter."

The car goes silent after this. All three voices disappear into nothing as they stop being heard. The voices the bodies belong to disappear too as they stop being seen. But the car moves on anyway despite being empty.

We arrive at a Korean Japanese restaurant, that is, a Japanese restaurant that is Korean owned. It's 2 pm and we're the only ones eating at this place. It's a little place, old and brown, quaint and Asian. The room is cold and imperfectly lit. A solar-powered lucky cat, absorbing the light let in by the glass doors, waves its paw continuously at nothing but the emptiness of the restaurant. We take the usual first steps, getting seated.

receiving menus, browsing them. Though our seating arrangement forces us to look at each other now, we still don't talk to each other. We let the restaurant stay quiet for a little while longer. Then silence is finally broken when the waitress, a 40 something-year-old Korean lady who is also the owner of the place, asks us if we want drinks. We each get water.

If you're Grandmother, you like this place enough. It's not as well-lit as you would like, and your daughter hardly listens to you when you tell her you don't like the way the chairs here arch your back. Still, you like that the owner is Korean, so she knows that she's supposed to respect her elders. But though you don't recognize it consciously, there is a feeling, an instinct, that this place is only an imitation. Not an imitation of Korea, or Japan, or even East Asia, but some American perception of Asia. This place is an imitation; It isn't your home. This place is not your home, and you are not Grandmother. You're Halmoni. This place could not be your home, especially since Halabeoji passed last year. South Korea was your home. Korea is your home.

You really do like this place though. You like that you can speak Korean to the people who work here and it's easy. You order hot water. "Hot water" is some of the only English you know. You learned it so that you could ask your grandson for it. You order in Korean anyway.

If you're Mother, you like this place too. Well, you like that your mom likes it. It's hard to get your mom to eat anything nowadays. The food here is about the only thing she'll eat other than Korean food, even though it is still kind of Korean food. This place is not your home either. Not because of any attachment to Korea. You moved from there when you were in grade school. Korea is in your heart, but it isn't in your soul. No, this place, this restaurant, this country, this Earth, they're not your home, because Heaven is your home. You believe in God. You think it's what you have that your mom doesn't. Why she's on antidepressants with names too medical to remember and you're not, though you would never say that.

But it's still true that you think this is a good place. The food is comforting, and the owner is very kind. You feel sort of bad for her, especially when your mom says things that make you think she could be nicer, but you find solace in the fact the waitress gets it, because she, too, has an older Korean mom. You didn't ask for this though. Not being

a mother, but having an older Korean mom, being a daughter. You've been the oldest one since your sister passed in childhood and the only one since your brother died in adulthood. If you didn't have children or nephews, you'd be the only one who spoke English again. And now you're speaking English for her again and living with her again. It's nice sometimes but mostly hard. But the least difficult thing you do is take your mom somewhere where she can order hot water in Korean.

If you're Son, this place is okay. It's not that different from any other place, other than the fact you have to tell Mom your order in English so she can repeat it in Korean. That embarrasses you, especially since you're an adult now, supposedly. But this place has its good points too. You like Japanese food. Though, you wonder why this place does not serve Korean food. You wonder if it's a choice. You also like that it's close to your college. This year is your last year of it. You still live at home though. That place must be home. Yes. It must be. It's where you've always lived after all. Despite your Korean last name and your biblical first name, both Korea and Heaven to you are only concepts, lacking physical form. This year you wonder what it'd be like to live somewhere different. Sometimes you feel like you can't take it anymore, living with them. You feel you have to change homes now. But it's hard to imagine it. That home is where your family is.

And in your family, you know that your choice of water temperature is already predetermined. You order cold water. Older people, halmonis and halabeojis, order hot water, and you order cold. Mom says "It's a Korean thing." But you've googled it and a certified man who once worked at a Chinese restaurant told you that it's a "Chinese thing" not a "Korean thing." It's always been hard for you to tell. But you know to order cold water. You suppose that's easy. What surprises you is when, alongside your cold water, two hot waters are ordered instead of just one.

"Oh, so you're old now?"

The server brings the waters in what seems like an instant. It isn't hard. There's no one in this little restaurant. Cold palms and inner fingers rest on the teacups the water is carried in, the second law of thermodynamics takes effect as osmosis begins trading heat for coolness. Two of the hands, which are aged and somewhat coarse but not leathery and wrinkled like the two oldest hands, grasp the water to drink it carefully, as if it was the first time they've ever drank something that hot.

"Haha. You're right. I guess I am getting old."

This response, which is spoken slowly but not with any incredible seriousness, is mundane but somehow unexpected. Banter is usually met with banter, but here it is only given acceptance, a lighthearted yet sincere acceptance. *Getting old...*

A sudden terrifying awareness turns all things into evidence for time: faces, hands, wrinkles, water, home, Mother, Daughter, Son, Halmoni, *Halabeoji...*

Time does not speed up nor slow down, but for a moment, in the brief silence between the sentences of the conversation, time makes itself known.

The day is hot, but the restaurant is cold and it's only getting colder. Colder as the time becomes 2:07. Colder as it becomes 2:08. Colder as it becomes 2:09.

Mother's mother continues drinking the hot water, staring blankly absorbing nothing but heat, the warm heat of the water and the cold heat of the language that isn't home, spoken by the only two pieces of home left. She begins to feel hope, fear and peace in the fact that these two pieces of home will outlive her. Peace for her, hope and fear for them.

Grandson's mother drinks again too, being daughter, being mother, being daughter. Back and forward in time. Being young then old then young again. Being. Being. Being.

Mother's Grandson drinks their cold water with some regret; it's 2:10 in the afternoon and this restaurant is cold. I am cold.

Halmoni looks at me concerned, then says something to me in Korean. I ask Mom what she said.

"Oh, she asked if you wanted to wear her jacket. She's worried because you look cold."

Something about this is funny to the three of us. Maybe it's the picture of me in Halmoni's flower covered jacket from the 70's. Or maybe it's the fact I sounded worried

myself when I asked Mom what Halmoni said. We all start to laugh and it's odd but we can't stop laughing.

"Maybe I should have gotten hot water too."

We all laugh again.

"Yes, we're all getting old."

SILAS KIM is a 2nd generation Korean American writer living in Southern California. Kim graduated from California State University Long Beach in 2022 with majors in English lit/creative writing and minors in philosophy/psychology, all fields which inform their writing. Kim's poem "Therapist in the Machine" and their short story "Hot Water" are their first two published works, both of which can be found in this issue of RipRap.



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