

A stylized human figure is composed of large, flat shapes in black and gold against a brown background. The head is a black shape with a gold outline of a face. The torso is a gold shape with a black outline of a chest. The arms are gold shapes extending from the shoulders. The legs are black shapes, with one leg bent and the foot visible. The overall style is minimalist and graphic.

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EMBODIED

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Content Warning:

Some works contain material that may be triggering, including mentions of self-harm, suicide/suicidal ideation, addiction, animal violence, abuse, and other difficult topics. Please read at your own discretion and take breaks as needed for your mental well-being.

Dear Readers,

There have been times—countless, maybe—when I’ve felt like there was no real home for what I needed to say. That my thoughts were too shapeless, my grief too messy, my body too much, or too marked. That if I couldn’t package my experiences in a clean arc or tidy metaphor, they might not be worth offering at all.

Mouthful of Salt was born out of that ache. Out of a desire to hold space for the things that live in our throats, and beneath our skin. The truths that burn on the way up. The parts of us we were told to trim down, translate, or tuck away for the comfort of others. And so, when we named our first issue *embodied*, we weren’t looking for a theme that just sounded poetic—we were reaching for something deeply personal. Something that makes a home in the hips, the memories, the scar tissue, the spiritual inheritance. The stuff that lingers.

The work in this issue speaks with bodies that have been praised and punished, sanctified and politicized, cracked open by pain and pieced back together with tenderness and hunger. They are unapologetically physical—each one a pulse, a bruise, a hand reaching forward or backward or inward. Together, they ask: What does it mean to stay true to yourself? To the people and places that made you, even when they hurt you? What does it mean to carry memory in the skin? To find softness in survival? To let your body be a site of joy, defiance, and worship all at once?

These poems don’t whisper and this issue is not tidy. It’s not here to resolve, but to hold. These are the things we’ve carried, and here, finally, they’re allowed to take up space.

Welcome home.

With love, and the muscle it takes,

Imani Cauthen-Robinson
Founding Editor

CONTENTS

POETRY

- 5.... *black slugs* – Madison McCaskey
- 6.... *To the Patient Intake Form* – Hunter Blackwell
- 7.... *i became a masochist sub when* – Hunter Blackwell
- 8.... *Jesus Poem* – Ezra Ipsum
- 9.... *Granola Girl* – Ezra Ipsum
- 10.... *Sharecropper* – Hachi Chuku
- 12.... *Full Volume Figure* – Jessi Farfan
- 14.... *Return from Paradise* – Kendra Whitfield
- 15.... *Armor* – Kendra Whitfield
- 16.... *Letter to My Ex-Husband* – Kendra Whitfield
- 18.... *fibromyalgia i & ii* – Noor Jaber
- 20.... *The Giant's Waist* – Noor Jaber
- 21.... *I Don't Want to Die* – Kaycee Painter
- 23.... *History Came and I Was In Bed* – Kaycee Painter
- 24.... *What is Love?* – Forhad Rahman

FICTION

- 25.... *Painters* – Erin Jamieson
- 26.... *Small Tokens* – M.E. Gamlem
- 28.... *Lilies & Formaldehyde* – Sarah Carolan
- 33.... *The Samosa Sauce* – Barlow Crassmont
- 37.... *The Ones I Lost While Growing Up* – Huina Zheng
- 38.... *Choice* – Margaux Williamson

NONFICTION

- 44.... *Blasé Fr* – S. Emily
- 45.... *In Cages* – Riley Ferver
- 47.... *case study: living autopsy* – Christa Lei

HYBRID

- 50.... *The Glock22's Speech during the Funeral after Another Black Person is Murdered* – Nala Washington
- 52.... *Unearth these Things at My High School* – Nala Washington

black slugs // Madison McCaskey

black windows
black tires, asphalt
black tread on new roads
black hair knotted, matted,
black body, sleeping clothes
black shoes,
who is wearing black shoes?
black girl, laugh

black boy alone, watching

black bears, i see you
black bears, creeping, black
bodies dipped
in coooooold water
black trail of
night, black
smoke rises,

black girl
sing, black
sing black

trail to
night

Black woman, rise

Black woman rise on a
morning sung

black slugs marching forward over water
black slugs clinging to black tides

To the Patient Intake Form // Hunter Blackwell

When you stand in front of that mirror,
what do you see? Fog streaked
by your palm and in jagged circles
your face is painted in the glass.

Sex: and there in the lobby
is the urge deep in your belly—or is it mine?— to
blacken every box,
press thumb into the plastic and snap.

Drip

drip-

-ping

onto the pages below—

how will they note you know when you hand
back wet paper. Your date of birth and patient consent
signature swim in the same sea as your sex.

i became a masochistic sub when // Hunter Blackwell

i laid witnessed to the Holy Ghost taking over a body

when that body fainted / face to carpet / arms stretching for the endless /
i wanted to leave mine too / i wanted someone else to drape / my body / in a blanket / whisper into
my ear / how sweet the reward of perseverance is /

Sundays passed in pretend prayers / all of mine were for the biting sting / to keep me from staring /
too long at brown speckled thighs / hiding under chiffon skirts

i was told Hell is where sinners go / the flesh of their bodies melted / blisters replace muscle / what
kind of sinner could i be

i watched people release / tears from behind closed eyes / with just a palm / just a prayer against forehead /
i wanted a palm to create a spark in me too

with holes still in his hands / blood dripping from thorns into his eyes / Jesus still uttered / he'd do
whatever his Father asked of him

Jesus Poem // Ezra Ipsum

Jesus is not a billionaire.
He is the man,
the boy, the
child
at the border

he talks to his children
through a phone, watches
them grow up through a pane
of glass

Jesus is the teenage Black
boy shot down on the
sidewalk

his neighbors are too eager to
deliver him
into the sadistic arms
of the police

and what if i told you
Jesus lays down in
st. patrick's cathedral
for a die-in

because the people he loves, God's
children,
have AIDS,
and their lives are
worth saving

Granola Girl // Ezra Ipsum

she's the kind of pretty that
screams
2018
ripped cuffed jeans and
tucked in graphic tees and
the necklace that her
boyfriend gave her last spring
she plays guitar
she writes things in her journal
that i'd like to read

Jesus,

i go to sleep
i ruminate
what it would mean
to be with her
i gaze at the stickers
on her hydroflask
and i wonder
what she would think
of a queer like me

Jesus,

she lets me sit by her
at small group on wednesdays
in the wide room
with the mural and the
ceiling fan
i carry her chair back
i let her teach me how to make a friendship bracelet
and play signs

Wash my sins away

it's too good to be true
i know i can't have her
i know i can't have her
But she's gorgeous and athletic
and she remembers my name
with a smile
Come and make me clean

Sharecropper // Hachi Chuku

"a wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go,"

-Thomas Jefferson

It becomes necessary for people to dissolve
the opinions of (this) mankind.

(a certain type of) Men become destructive of these ends; when a long train of abuses
provides the history of the present (to be)
a history of repeated injuries.

Be a candid world:

(a nightly morning, bones stretched in a bed too short. Wake up and tend to those ravenous
parasites)

He has refused the "public" good.

He has forbidden accommodation to (mistakes left to the sting of a switch)

He has dissolved repeatedly, to cause others
to be elected, (long red lines over which one prevails)

He has

made Officers to harass our people of the world, (when the chains were removed and at last our wrists could
breathe, there became other ways of making us choke.)

He has destroyed

the lives of our people:

the works of death

(poem continued on next page...)

(and) desolation. (a will slowly eroded

by labor. Work, breathe work)

In these Oppressions we have petitioned for a free people (Birthed, stood, recovered, cried, mourned, ate, shit, and died indentured.)

We have

reminded them of our circumstances of our emigration

and settlement here. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice.

We ought to be totally dissolved.

(I beg of you.)

The unanimous human(?)

FULL VOLUME FIGURE // Jessi Farfan

(for the ones who've been told they take up too much space)

they said softness would get me killed.
that if i wanted to be safe,
i had to shave myself down.
i was told to shrink my belly, thighs, and feelings.
that no one wants a girl
who cries during sappy commercials
and can't fit in a booth without adjusting her rolls.

but i have survived more than shame.
more than hands that tried to make me smaller.
more than every "you'd be so pretty if you lost weight"
that ever burrowed itself into my ears
like a curse disguised as kindness.

i am fat, and that is not an insult.
it is simply a descriptor.
*"the fat girl flirts with the barista at the coffee shop
even when her jeans dig into her stomach
and her t-shirt rides up when she laughs."*

i love like a body that knows
what it means to be made of yet denied softness.
i hold my lovers like the world might end
and still do the dishes after.
i kiss in public like no one ever told me

that they were too ashamed to be seen with me.
and when they stare,
i let them.

because this body is not a weakness.
this fat is not a reason for shame.
underneath it is muscle built from carrying
every version of myself they said no one could love.

and still, i choose softness.
not because it is easy,
but because it is mine.
because it is the part of me
they could never thin out.

so let me be
all belly and eyeliner,



Image by Taynee Tinsley

(poem continued on next page...)

crooked grin and double chin,
in a world that calls survival selfish
and softness disposable,
i choose to be both.

i choose to cry openly
so the next fat baby dyke
knows she's not too much.
i choose to love this body
loudly, publicly,
because they want me ashamed.

they want me starved,
silent, invisible.
they want all the soft things in the world
locked behind closed doors,
private, pretty, and most importantly, compliant.

but we have always known:
softness is not the opposite of resistance.
it *is* resistance.

and if softness is all i have left,
then let that be my revolution.
let that be enough
to make the next world gentler
than the one that tried to break us.

Return from Paradise // Kendra Whitfield

-after Diane Seuss

I cut my teeth on miracles:
transubstantiated bread
melting on my tongue like the first
snow after a scorching summer and water becomes wine becomes blood
in a mouth raised on Godfear.
Butterflies emerge from goo cocoons
to follow the siren song of milkweed.
Pansies bloom after frost
the prettiest birds gather at the winter feeder
Was it a miracle for Jesus?
Yanked from heaven to tread
again with the dusty hearts of unbelievers?
My heretic heart cannot
fathom Jesus' joy at returning
to the scenes of the crimes against him.
It's a little like Santa going to Boxing Day Sales
Or inviting the Great Pumpkin to a pie-eating contest.
Chasing after mourning doubters,
preaching love, still, always, to hearts
hardened against him.
Gaping wounds full of hands and
pleading eyes full of tears
I believe in miracles but I cannot believe He
thought His fate miraculous.

Armor // Kendra Whitfield

Blindfold,
shackles,
straight jacket.

Spider-ball gag
strapped
extra tight.

Nothing can
shield my heart,
sheathe my brain.

They cannot survive
this wilderness
you create.

Letter to My Ex-Husband // Kendra Whitfield

Which of all my important nothings shall I tell you first?
- Jane Austen

The cat is dying.
Slowly, but she's ill.
She still tucks me in at night,
can still keep time like Big Ben.
She's stopped going on the deck,
prefers a sheepskin mat in front of the electric fire.

I sold the couch,
our first grownup furniture purchase.
It was too long and too deep,
though still a great place to nap.
I sold it to friends you never met,
used the proceeds for a trip you'd have never taken.

I ripped the wallpaper off the bathroom ceiling,
painted all the walls startling white,
hung them with art you've never seen,
would never approve of.
I even put up a Christmas tree, now,
and hang bright memories on it every year.

I fill the fridge with Champagne,
eat dinner at the table,
set with wedding china and candles
because life is too short to
keep anything for good.
But you didn't believe that

Did you ever unpack the boxes
filled with everything you deemed
too precious to use? I packed them with
more care than you reserved for me.
Perhaps you didn't see me as precious,
certainly, I wasn't worth saving.

But I'm not bitter anymore.
Or angry. Whenever I think of you
I grieve the me I lost sight of

(poem continued on next page...)

while I tended to your faulty ego,
hope you found the peace you sought
when you abandoned everything you claimed to love.

I still sleep in the basement.
It's cool there. And dark.
But on a different bed,
with a different man.
One who knows how to treat
my heart.

fibromyalgia i & ii // Noor Jaber

pain flays itself and wraps me in its skin.
I pretend it's the surface of an ocean, though
I'd never be its moon. pain is a body

of water, I can't control—can't hold
in the cracked porcelain of these hands
how they ache today. pain's flare,

afterglow to anger's flames. pain slinks
behind heartbreak like a shadow
bounds after joy like a dog

who doesn't mean to bite, but does
in its excitement. I used to think
pain was feral

or wild, nothing to live with.
I used to treat it like a landmine
something to be ginger with

but pain doesn't explode.
it blooms fungal, waiting to be fed
what's dead. I offer it locks of my hair

pain becomes
cold rain from a cloudless sky.
onto my whole body, serpentine,

pain pelts itself
and washes away.

I'm grieving so many women
I may never think of you again.

I may become lost
in this deluge of remembered love,

grow gills and new lungs,
cease to surface.

I don't drown. my heart
moves slow

(poem continued on next page...)

but it beats. even if life is nothing
but this submersion, I want to live.

The Giant's Waist // Noor Jaber

You pinch and poke me like a silly granny
at a baby. Cinch me in corsets to create the ghost
of your birthing hips—that silhouette, arachnid.

This torso is an amalgam of decisions
and disappointments. Write me into
a stronger story. I want to be wide, a column

to hold you. Let me be a straight, thick line. Pinch
and poke me like dough—soft. I'll bust the bones
of this corset and we'll grind them to make our bread.

I Don't Want to Die // Kaycee Painter

I don't want to die,
but I don't want to keep living like this.
Somewhere between those two truths
is where I've pitched my tent:
half in shadow, half in sunrise.

My bones fold wrong.
My blood forgets how to climb.
I am a body that double-books its grief,
a calendar marked with maybes and maybe nots.
Each morning, I take attendance of what still works.
Some days, the only thing that answers is the ache.

What no one tells you about annihilation
is that it isn't always fire and fury.
Sometimes it's the silence after a doctor says
there is nothing else I can do for you,
and you still have to go and buy groceries.
Sometimes, it's fainting in the shower
and waking up with the taste of copper
and the shame of survival.

And still—
the light kisses my windowsill like it knows my name.
A feral cat curls beneath the oak,
and I think, what a beautiful way to survive.
The coffee cools too quickly but smells like childhood.
The breeze is tired, but it hums.
Even broken clocks catch sunsets twice a day.

I write poems on the steam of the mirror,
trace metaphors on the inside of my wrist.
I name each bruise like a planet,
find god in the way my chest still rises,
still dares.

No, I do not want to die,
but this life, this slow unspooling,
is a cruel kind of miracle.
And still, I gather its splinters,
press them into lines,
make mosaics out of the mornings I almost didn't reach.

(poem continued on next page...)

I do not want to keep living like this,
but I do want to live,
and sometimes,
that's enough.

History Came and I Was in Bed // Kaycee Painter

What no one tells you about the “next holocaust”
is that it may come
when you’re too sick to stand.

That your body could become
its own small prison—
aching, breathless,
cracking open beneath a sun
that doesn’t care who it kills.

Alligator Alcatraz¹ is happening
in my backyard.
Children vanish behind chain-link,
planes dissolve into the ocean,
bodies float home to no one.

There are protests in the streets,
voices rising like heat waves—
and I can’t even get out of bed
already fainting before I reach the door.

I want to scream.
I want to help.
But the heat could kill me
before the police get the chance.

¹ “Alligator Alcatraz” refers to a controversial immigrant detention facility in Florida that has faced lawsuits and widespread criticism for its treatment of detainees. The name, used both officially and in protest, evokes the facility’s harsh conditions and the growing concern over the criminalization of undocumented people in the U.S.

What is Love? // Forhad Rahman

Love is chicken curry and cauliflower after school
the lingering smell of spices on my jacket, in the seams of my pants,
and the repugnant cologne drowning in our crevices to hide from the shame of the stench.

Love is the sting of a hanger on the brown of my back
the melancholy razor that cuts soul-deep wounds,
and chopped up guava and strawberries at 5 p.m. in the afternoon.

Love is a slap when there's music in the car
the bass reverberating the old cushions and empty cassette tapes
and mouth-fed holy water when my anxieties cripple me.

Love is the fear of withdrawal and change
Love is tear-stained cheeks when notes of enamored confessions are found in my backpack.

Love is irrational
tumultuous like the bloodstained riots in the streets of my homeland
and the tapping on my forehead to wash away my djinns at night.

Love is *إله إلا الله محمد رسول الله*²
the *bismillahs* when I walk through the front door
and the gripping, sweat-inducing, short-breathed fear without.

Love is nighttime tales of punishment
illustrations of boisterous flames licking at the soles of our sinful feet
and daytime, crossed-legged reading of scripture.

Love is the boot when you've found unfamiliar intimacy.
Love is patience in the face of rejection of ancient traditions.
Love is kind in the face of ill temperament.
Love is anguish as the unknown approaches the horizon.

Love is chicken curry and cauliflower after work,
and mangled fingers so that you can never let go.

² Translation: "There is no god but Allah; Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah."

Painters // Erin Jamieson

Creamsicle orange.

We'd planned on something more mundane—but the beiges reminded me of my childhood home, and we couldn't agree on a sensible color.

What had once been the room where I recorded videos and he researched, transformed. A crib we put together from Ikea, watercolor paintings collected from garage sales, a changing table my mother found, all left on the curb for trash pickers.

It was a room that pushed beyond anything I'd ever picked. It was a room for a new life.

It was a room that frightened me.



When the time came, I knew something was wrong. While I was designing a thumbnail, my water broke. It was two months before my due date.

I was staring at those creamsicle walls when he found me and helped me to the car.

I could still see the orange hue when I closed my eyes, as I gripped the sides of the seat, as I prayed for everything to be okay.



The orange hue seeped into my dreams. It colored my morning oatmeal, painted over the bluest summer skies.

I went to the paint store alone. I asked for a can of any cheap, unwanted paint they had.

It turned out to be magenta.

I painted feverishly, painted as the front door swung open and he found me still working.

I waited for him to yell. Instead, he picked up the second roller.



A year and half later, that cheap paint began to peel, exposing the orange beneath. Instead of fighting it, I left part of that orange uncovered.

Duante placed a chubby finger on the spot, as if trying to reach the sister he'll never meet.

Small Tokens // M.E. Gamlem

Using garden clippers, Alejandro cut off his fingers. One every day for eight days. He contemplated taking the thumbs, but decided against it. Since he was not an artist, he figured these would be a sufficient offering to leave her. The first few were easy to take. But the last few he had to squeeze the shears between his elbow and ribs, struggling to hold them steady as he pressed the handles together.

After wrapping the wounds and howling while drowning them in rubbing alcohol, he placed a severed phalange on top of a small bed of thin cotton swabs nestled inside a pearlescent jewelry box. Using his teeth and the thumbs he had left, he tied eight ribbons—each a different color—around the eight small white boxes.

Betty had been retired for many years now. She hardly remembered what she used to do. She was happy to not have anything demanding to dedicate herself to anymore. It wasn't that she disliked working, she just couldn't stand having to be in the same place every day. There was no spontaneity in work, no fun. What was the point of being an adult if you didn't get to have fun? So, when she woke up on the morning that Alejandro left her his first gift, she beamed with joy.

"Now this, this does not happen every day," she said.

She grinned as she replaced the ribbon around the cardboard container. Betty carried the first box into her room, laying it on top of her bureau next to the other found gifts she received throughout her life. This one was special. No one had ever sacrificed for her so namelessly.

For the seven days that followed, Betty found the boxes containing Alejandro's tributes. Each day, she unwrapped them and bellowed with joy. She noticed that each new one seemed to carry more struggle—a truer sign of an offering, a truer sign of love.

On the ninth day, she awoke and went to the door. At the foot of her porch stood Alejandro. He was young and beautiful, dressed in a powder blue tuxedo. In his mangled hands, he pressed together a bundle of flowers. His face was sweaty and wore an unsure smile.

Betty began to cry tears of joy and Alejandro carefully took the steps up towards her. He offered Betty the flowers. She reached out to her beautiful suitor. He took her palm, the white gauze softly scratching her delicate skin. She led Alejandro inside her home and made love to him. Alejandro held Betty, the effort it took to do so only endearing her to him even more.

As their days passed, Alejandro and Betty lived a life of contentment. Every year on their anniversary he would offer her another small sacrifice from his body, place it in a jewelry box, and wrap it with a ribbon for her to find. The time they spent together was slow and calm.

The injuries forced Alejandro to move at Betty's speed. His motions were more delicate, more measured, to make up for what had been removed. Still, there was not a moment he felt hindered, finding a rhythm of dance to take them through their days and nights together.

For eight years Betty and Alejandro lived in communion while the world outside their bond enveloped without meaning. His own sacrifices of flesh—an ear, part of his nose, a chunk from his thigh—spirited their connection, but they could not hold back the inevitable death coming for Betty. He tended to her as best he could, but this was not enough to keep her from aging. Her own body was shrinking, a natural reduction forced by time and too great to be satisfied by the libations of another.

On her last day, Betty asked to sit on the porch with him. Alejandro carried her out and placed her weakened body to rest on the swing.

He made lemonade and helped her drink it. They spent the day sitting next to each other, Betty resting her head on his shoulder. She rubbed his hands, the hands that reminded her of Alejandro's devotion. Her fingers passed over the brutal scars and stumps that remained. She smiled at this. As the sun set, Betty became weaker. Alejandro sensed this and grew very sad. His breathing increased with fury as hers dissipated with resolve. She closed her eyes for a moment, her face settled and at peace. Alejandro began to cry.

"My love, I would give you anything—everything of mine—for even just one more day," he sobbed, his tears wetting her cheek.

"I wish you could too," she said.

They looked at each other for a moment, the last moment that Alejandro would spend in her service. Betty pushed out the final exhale from her lungs. Her eyes remained open and frozen, fixated on Alejandro. He did not disturb her body, matching her stillness for many hours as her head lay propped on his shoulder. No one who passed by and saw them could even tell she was dead.

Lilies and Formaldehyde // Sarah Carolan

John Nulty died of a heart attack, or something else that statistically menaced his age and lifestyle. A natural end, all things considered, but that didn't stop certain members of Brigid's family from pawing at details like raccoons rifling through trash. Most hadn't spoken to the man in years, and their sudden interest felt less grief-stricken and more an attempt to exhume a cleaner version of him. One less soaked in whiskey, one easier to forgive.

Brigid leaned against the nicotine-yellowed wallpaper of *Fitzgerald & Sons Funeral Home*, doing her best not to inhale too deeply or exist too loudly. She'd come alone, despite Maria's many well-intentioned offers to join. Refusing felt a bit cruel, but not as heartless as subjecting a six-month relationship to a near stranger's wake. Not to mention, Brigid expected Maria to cry and, for her mother's sake, didn't wish to invite talk about her inability to do the same.

As mourners trickled into the reception area, they found Brigid's corner like water to the lowest point. She met their condolences with the cool politeness of someone stamping wrists at a concert venue. *He was a good man*, they insisted without a whiff of sarcasm, and she could only nod, waving on the next in line. For a time, she endured the attention mildly, unsure of what felt worse: the perfunctory hugs, how at twenty-seven she could still have plans canceled by parents, or that she still preferred this fanfare over what was soon to come. Seeing him.

After a handful of pointed excuses, Brigid broke away. She rubbed at the tender spot of a headache while shuffling toward the display room. Large floral bouquets banked its doors. Big white blooms of ostentatious lilies, as grand as a pair of stone lions. Too flashy to be purchased by someone who knew John well. The sooner this was over, she told herself, the more likely her weekend could be salvaged,

though that was as probable as her shedding tears.

Inside the musty, windowless room, electric candelabras hummed faintly. Brigid took in the empty seats with sadistic approval. Only her aunt Nora and the woman's timid husband sat in attendance. Brigid edged down the aisle and considered saying hello, but it seemed an odd thing to do in front of a dead person. Besides, Nora had a knack for squeezing drama out of any innocuous interaction, and deserved nothing but a tight smile of acknowledgment.

The casket rested on a low stage. Fingerprints dulled the cherry finish and lace framed its half-open lid. Brigid hovered over the scene. She rested a hand on the casket's edge and plucked at the fabric absentmindedly. The mortician had dressed him in his flat cap, the one she once joked had grafted to his head. Without another thought, she reached inside and pushed the bridge of the hat back.

"What are you doing? Are you stealing something?"

Brigid snapped her hand away, but did not bother to turn around.

"Of course not. What would I steal from him? His disgusting old hat?"

"Awful," Nora replied. "How could you say that about your father?"

"Easily. Now, leave me alone."

Nora and her husband exchanged hushed words. Chairs squeaked, followed by muffled, receding footsteps.

Brigid waited for the doors to close before studying her father's pale, waxy face. Brushstrokes still streaked his white hair, and makeup hid his permanent red flush. The tops of his hands had been retouched too, disguising the liver spots. Here rested a gussied-up version of her father, outfitted for a nice dinner or special family occasion, neither of which he had prioritized in life. The restoration caught her

somewhere between amusement and horror. He didn't deserve to look so dignified or at peace.

"Nice wake," she whispered.

There was a time when Brigid had considered him a cool dad. As a child, others would compliment his looks, charisma, humor, and she accepted this with pride as if it were her own accomplishment. The cracks appeared in grade school. A classmate asked why her dad kissed her mom. Brigid couldn't look at him the same way, or maybe she finally saw him for the first time.

Heavy, loathsome memories swooped in like scavengers impatient to feed. A hundred stories vied to be told and then just as swiftly dissipated. His appearance might have had something to do with it, or Nora's interference. With no other parting words to say, she returned to the reception area.

There were fewer guests now, with most milling about the snack table. How anyone could eat with a casket in the other room did more to upset Brigid's stomach than the lies or embalming fluid smell. She filled a plastic cup with ginger ale and sipped while scanning the room. Her mother stepped away from a group of people, dabbing a handkerchief to the corner of her eye.

Brigid glowered at her approach. "Don't tell me you're sad."

"You'll find yourself crying too," her mother sniffed, looking her up and down. "Be as stoic as you'd like, but it's not much good to avoid the feelings. They come easier at a funeral."

"Guess I'll have to wait until tomorrow." Brigid stared from her mother to her cup when she did not receive an answer. "I told you I didn't want to come today. Although I'm surprised how many did come."

"Johnny's sister was always good for a funeral or wedding."

"Anything for a free drink."

"That... and to judge, to take home a bit of gossip." Her mother shut her eyes for a split second too long.

"Who are those guys over there?" Brigid gestured to a handful of men standing in a tight circle. Their dingy appearance worked as a deterrent from other guests approaching any closer.

"I imagine they're the men from your father's poker games."

"Want to bet how many of them are cursing him now? For dying before he settled?"

Brigid's mother whacked her on the arm. "Hush. It's nice that they came."

"It is." Brigid finished the last of her drink. "Well, I did it. I saw him. Can I go now?"

Her mother made a sound of acceptance. "See you tomorrow, Mitten. Did you need a ride to the church in the morning?"

"Maria is going to pick me up."

"Good. I'm glad she's coming with you."

Brigid sighed and stepped into her mother's outstretched arms. Perfume drifted from her neck, a scent that Brigid would never wear. It was a fragrance so undeniably her mother that she gulped away a bubble of sadness and squeezed her harder. They stared into each other's eyes before separating.

Outside, the city blared like any ordinary day. The sun seethed, buses whirled by, and Brigid walked a few steps behind some younger version of herself. She might've been the only one on the street who had seen their parent dead that day.



The following morning, Brigid hurried along the path that hugged her apartment building and dashed towards a double-parked car. The doors rattled to unlock. She flung herself inside and caught her breath before turning to Maria behind the wheel.

“Nice sunglasses,” Maria said.

“Thanks. I bought them for the music festival.”

“You look like Jackie O.” Maria switched gears, but slowed immediately for a pothole. “Are you still going to do it?”

Brigid nodded and sank into the seat. She thumbed a corner of the folded paper in her pocket, an assortment of lines cobbled together from the internet. The sentiment hit enough beats to ring authentically, or civilly, at first. But while she had prepared the eulogy to appease her mother and the congregation, for herself, that would be improvised. She refused to waste such a public opportunity. Maybe she’d mention when her father sold his parents’ wedding china – the set they had bequeathed to Brigid, a gift for her golden birthday. He claimed it would be wasted on her and used the money from its sale to enter a poker tournament. He didn’t win, but he also never kept money long enough to brag, which was just as well. She had countless other stories of him belligerently drunk, smashing every dish in the kitchen.

“I’ve been to one funeral,” Maria said.

“Oh. Is a funeral more sad if the person wasn’t an asshole?”

Brigid rolled down her window when Maria remained silent. A breeze lifted heat from her skin. People strolled along the streets wearing shorts and tank tops. They sipped caffeinated iced drinks from brightly colored straws or relaxed on lawn chairs. A gaggle of children, covered in chalk, cheered as a passerby attempted their sidewalk hopscotch.

At a red light, several people clustered near the corner. Maria flipped her turn signal as a city bus beeped and kneeled for a passenger in a wheelchair. A church spire poked over the flat rooftops. The car turned and turned again before coming to rest in the parking lot. Brigid released her seatbelt and adjusted the sunglasses over her eyes.

“Are you ready?” Maria asked.

“No. But the sooner this is over, the better.”

Blurry heat rose from the tacky asphalt. A small aircraft grumbled low overhead. The pair stepped onto the sidewalk and became one of many dressed in suffocating black. They entered the dark church as goosebumps rippled up Brigid’s arms. She headed to the last pew, but before she could sit, Maria gently touched her arm.

“Maybe we should move closer to the front.”

Brigid sagged. Sitting so close to the altar invited too much attention, but she agreed and followed Maria to the first pew.

The closed casket had been positioned at the base of the altar stairs, pointing longways down the aisle. A white sash replaced the white lilies on top. Brigid found it impressive that his body made it so far north, dead or alive. Once, her grandmother had threatened to kill him. She banished him from the neighborhood and said he’d be shot dead if he wandered above 290. This happened after she had found eight-year-old Brigid sleeping in the family car on the street. Punishment for accusing him of stealing from her piggy bank.

An archway loomed over Brigid’s left, leading into a narrow corridor. Beyond this, a glass door revealed a small courtyard with a bench under a statue of Saint Francis.

“How are you feeling?” Maria asked.

“Not great. I’d rather be sitting on that bench over there.”

Maria bent forward to see where Brigid pointed. Her mother joined then, wearing a black dress, one Brigid had never seen before. Perhaps the ugly thing was a practical choice so as not to imbue a favorite outfit with the memory of death.

“Mitten, you look like a bug in those sunglasses.”

“I was hoping I looked like the evil mistress. The one who may or may not have poisoned him.”

“Save your gallows humor for the luncheon. We’re at church now,” her mother answered.

Brigid made a show of folding her sunglasses and stared ahead.

Churchgoers filtered into the pews, thickening the congregation with lumbering feet and gospel books fumbling from hands. At least twice as many people assembled there as were present at the wake. While her father might have given God a run for his money in terms of threats of violence, only one could boast eternal damnation.

Organ music soared from the balcony. Brigid rose to her feet at the priest’s behest. She swayed, annoyed that she had no pew back to grasp and balance herself. Nora did the first reading, followed by her mother. The singer’s voice in between ceremonies wavered unpredictably, like a weak radio signal. Brigid slumped into the bench at every opportunity and eased to her feet with difficulty, audibly groaning with each summons to stand. Time stood still. An hour dragged like a day. Her back hurt.

The priest spoke once more and then opened the podium. Nora stood, now clutching her husband’s arm. She voiced chimeric praise, fanning John’s life into a flame of respectability. Brigid’s mother spoke next, reading one of his favorite poems. Supposedly, the next man came from the poker group, but Brigid could not recall him from the wake. A few more people she did not recognize came and went. Then it reached her turn, the last speaker of her father’s service.

Brigid chewed the inside of her cheek and shared a look with Maria and her mother. She removed the square of folded paper from her pocket, now damp with sweat. She smoothed it unsuccessfully. The congregation waited

patiently for her to stand. Her mother nodded encouragingly.

“I can’t,” Brigid held out the speech. “One of you do it.”

Her mother whispered her name, but not in a reprimanding way.

“I can’t,” she said again. “I hate public speaking, and—I can’t. Please.”

“I’ll do it.”

Maria plucked the paper from her hand and pushed from the pew. She padded up the two steps to the microphone and smiled solemnly. She informed the congregation that Brigid found it too difficult. She lied again as she began reading from the sheet of platitudes, devoid of tear stains and anecdotes. Maria’s voice emanated clearly and low, finding an unintentional rhythm that Brigid found unbearable. It moved people. The sniffing of her mother, the wails of Nora, and the hiccuped pauses of Maria grated like metal on ceramic. The words were a collage of strangers’ grief, deliberately empty of her own. Yet, somehow, this awful man could suffuse the drivel with brilliance. He could command a rapt audience, demand that others sob, and use his death to smother all of the still-living grudges and pain. Once again, her mother, family, and friends all succumbed to his manipulation.

Brigid sprang to her feet.

The cadence of the eulogy stumbled, but no one called out. Brigid bounded through the archway and slapped the glass door open.

Sunlight engulfed her, and grass cushioned each step. She hurried to the little cement bench in the courtyard, where she had wanted to be all along. The sandpaper seat ground against her thighs. She buried her face in her knees and finally cut the feelings loose. Each gasp for air heaved and emptied from her chest with revolting power as if this were the cry to rid all future cries. Then she cursed that stupid thought away. Tears crested with each inhale, ragged and choking, until she hardened into a

rigid statue of grief. Time amounted to the strained hope that it would end soon.

A hand rubbed her back, followed by the warmth of someone sitting beside her. Brigid pushed upright.

“Let it out,” Maria said gently.

“I’m not sad.” Brigid used both hands to wipe her eyes. “I’m frustrated. He didn’t touch me, or hit me, so what? That makes him a good person?”

Maria continued to rub her back, but did not say anything.

Organ music seeped into the courtyard. Pallbearers heaved the casket to their shoulders, bending their knees with the effort. They slipped out of sight as a robed procession trailed close behind. Attendees stood in the pews and slowly streamed to the church exit.

“Say it to me,” Maria said. “Whatever you had planned, say it to me.”

The offer danced like a dollar bill in the wind, the tears had wrung Brigid dry. “No. It’s not the same without an audience.”

“They know about your father.”

“But do they? Then why was everyone crying?”

Brigid choked something like a laugh and turned away. A thick curtain of leaves rustled above her. Frilly flower heads bobbed and knocked against one another. She listened to the low rumble of traffic, inhaling the welcoming earthy scent of the freshly watered garden. Her sinuses calmed as a tiny pressure released from her temples.

“I think they’re frustrated too,” Maria said. “I’m sure many people in there were waiting for him to be better. They waited a long time for nothing. That’s what makes them sad.”

“I’m done thinking about him.”

Maria licked her lips and nodded. She straightened, smacking gravel from the back of her pants, and bent over a lush garden bed. Speckled orange lilies waved at her. She picked one and tucked it behind Brigid’s ear.

“I hear you,” Maria said. “But my offer will always be there. Come on.”

On the sidewalk, a small crowd ambled about the church front, chatting with other guests and the priest. Some were still red-eyed and blotchy. Brigid kept her gaze low and Maria close as they hurried to the parking lot.

“Are we going to the luncheon?” Maria asked.

Brigid shook her head. “My mom got her tears. If we leave now, we could still make the last few sets of the festival.”



Image by Sarah Carolan.

The Samosa Sauce // Barlow Crassmont

Ritika moved through the thick crowd with the swiftness of a wild river.

She bumped against guests known and unfamiliar, barely excusing herself as numerous heads turned in her wake. Daydreaming was her favorite pastime - especially after sundown. Ritika could hear everyone's comments, despite pretending not to.

"There goes the younger one," the rumors whispered. "Her parents should pray to find a suitor like her sister's." The unkind echoes would follow her around turns and corners, like entities refusing to take a hint.

It was the third day of Veda's wedding, and the incense hung strong and potent in the humid atmosphere. The banquet walls were decorated with paper stars colored in red, gold, pink and orange. Tables were plentiful with biryani, samosas, palak paneer, chana masala, idlis and vadas. An abundance of jasmine and marigold flowers enriched the traditional garbs of family and friends of the bride and groom. To young Ritika, it all may as well have been the height of the annual monsoon: repetitive, burdensome, and tackier than the endless supply of curry in every dish.

She was born first, that's all. No need to be bitter. My day will come, as Brahman is my witness.

The escalating music continued to reverberate, and its loudness irritated Ritika's ears to the point of her venturing beyond the banquet's fence to escape the boisterousness. She would've reached it sooner, if not for her father's hand landing on her shoulder.

"Riti, we're running low on naan," Mr. Malhotra said. "Be a good girl and go get some from Pillai's Pastries." He handed her a fistful of coins, then added, "And red samosa sauce. We're nearly out." Her father turned and walked away before the girl could even respond.

I don't really want to go, but at least it'll give my ears a break. She smelled the coins, and found their collective musty, metallic odor repugnant. *Ugh. The sooner I exchange these for the bread, the better.*

The front gate was unlocked, and she opened it quietly, avoiding the typical clink and clank with little difficulty. Soon she welcomed the open street's reticence with a smile as big as the Ganges. Ritika skipped down the street, like a jubilant child suddenly freed from a two week mandatory detention. At the intersection of Malhipur and Ayyapa, she ran into a familiar face of Mr. Bissoon.

"Greetings, child. Do give my best to your sister and her husband," he said. "May they be blessed for decades, and bear many children. But say, when will the festivities come to a close? It's been four nights, and although I live several houses away, I haven't slept through the night since last Monday."

Ritika merely shrugged. "Baba said it'll last a week"

"A week?" Bissoon shook his head. "You know, not all of us are privileged. We work from sunup to sundown. It's hard to do one's job when your family's music keeps the entire neighborhood awake against their wishes."

Ritika shrugged again, smiled, and bid him adieu, before meandering towards Nashik's town center. She embraced the quiet atmosphere with ringing ears that remained unsettled still: every word, phrase, car engine noise she experienced as if underwater. Meanwhile, nearing the center, the populace increased in numbers. Locals walked in groups of three or four, and would generally blend together to the point of being indiscernible from one another. Young and old, tall and short, man or woman: to Ritika all Indians resembled one another.

I hope to marry a different man than Veda. When I'm of age, maybe our skin tones will have lightened somewhat.

But no sooner did she complete her thought than she saw four British officers exit her destination's front door. Two of them were gray haired, one was bearded (his face barely visible from the thick facial hair), while the fourth...well, Ritika's heart nearly stopped as he glanced at her.

He was blonde haired, clean shaven, his eye brows rich and fluffy. His eyes were two sockets of blueness more briny than the cleanest of oceans, and his smile made Ritika forget why she'd come to Pillai's Pastries. For a whole minute after the quartet disappeared into the night crowd, the girl stood stupefied, her mind enchanted by the face of the one that reminded her of the most exemplary Olympian gods.

The Greek mythology lesson from a year prior flashed before Ritika's eyes. The Island Syme, for one, and its king Nireus, known for his exceptional beauty. According to legend, he was second only to Achilles in natural looks. There was also Dionysius, whose appearance conquered every painting he appeared in. His elusive long hair hung over the cup of wine in his smooth skinned hand, festivities following the master of theater into immortality. Despite their angelic physical characteristics, the two aforementioned deities could hardly hold a candle to Adonis, the mortal who would eventually be reborn into God status by Zeus, at the request of Aphrodite. The God of rebirth, desire - but most of all - unequal beauty.

That's whom Ritika had just witnessed - albeit in human form. The soldier's appearance was drastically different from her own people's, and she found this element all the more alluring.

He's whiter than Himalayan snow, his hair as golden as the sun. With him next to me, I'd look like a goddess, too.

Like a forbidden fruit from Eden, there was something deliciously tempting about the

soldier's smile. She'd gladly take a fall from grace, if she could pluck him like an apple, despite all the foreboding warnings - tradition and religion be damned. Ritika began to envision her future with her fingers intertwined with his, even with the apparent difference in their age.

So what if he's considerably older? Many couples in our culture consist of an elder and a much younger bride. I wouldn't be the first to marry an older man, nor the last.

Ritika did not remember ordering two bags full of naan (and cutting in line in front of an elderly couple, who ignored her rudeness on the account of her age and size and dapper-looking dress), nor did she recall paying the baker with the handful of coins that reeked like stale blood (only upon smelling her empty hand later was she reminded of the exchange). Even after she'd exited and began her return journey home, she was consumed with her waking reveries, in which she was courted by the dashing blonde soldier, who - breaking the Indian custom and the nation's long held tradition, presented Ritika's father with quite a dowry (cash, jewelry, fancy suits and linens made of the finest fabrics and silk) just prior to asking for her hand.

But sir, what's the meaning of this? her father would tell Ritika's Adonis. We are supposed to present the dowry to your parents!

I know, private Adonis would reply, but they're back in England. As a result, this would have to suffice. Besides, my and Ritika's love is a unique one. Our union will break new barriers in your culture, and perhaps the entire world!

Their ensuing wedding would hold thousands of guests from each corner of India. It would last not one week, nor two or three, but over an entire month, making Veda's matrimonial celebration a minor event in comparison.

When the imagined newlyweds would venture out into the public, they'd be the envy of

every corner of India. Folks from the great mountain zone would resent them for their contrasting skin tones (*it's like the yin and the yang – but in flesh!*). Citizens from the plains of Ganga and the Indus would bow and nod excessively at their sight (*behold the most glorious couple, a convergence of East blending with West!*). People from the desert region would generously offer them hospitality in their cool mud huts and silken tents (*not even the Maharaja and his princess bride have been graced with softer bed sheets!*). The southern peninsula populace would worship the ground they walked on. If only the unique couple would share the secrets involving the details of their matrimonial bliss with the lowly commoners.

What can we say, Ritika would utter, blushing. *We were matched by Brahman's will.*

By the time a loud car horn jolted Ritika back to reality, she was at an unfamiliar intersection, unaware of her surroundings. The street was different — wider and more spacious. Those still outside stared at her with eyes more peculiar than admirable, and the few parked cars were not nearly in the same quantity as those lined up in front of her father's property. The hour was late, and Ritika gradually oriented herself homebound, reserving the continuation of her fantasy for later, when she was soundly at home, and listening to the ongoing celebration from the safety of her upstairs bedroom.

Although she lost track of time, Ritika rushed down sidewalks both smooth and cobbled, those half empty and those half full, until she found herself on Malhipur. The street's name was reassuring enough that her sighs morphed into smiles, until her family's front gate was in sight, and nearly within reach.

I hope Baba won't be mad that I took so long.

The front gate was quite ajar this time around, and the guests, instead of dancing and mingling about, were gathered, all as still as the statue of Thiruvalluvar. In lieu of familiar

boisterous music that chased Ritika upon her departure, the current cacophony consisted of shouts and indistinct heated arguments. They were mostly in English, which she was becoming quite fluent in.

With her minuscule, inferior height when compared to the adults that blocked her view, the girl could see little of what was taking place within the crowded circle. She tried to focus on the verbal exchanges that resonated from its center, but deciphered only random bits and pieces.

The community is united...enough is enough...people can't sleep...

But it's my eldest daughter's wedding...it's our long standing tradition...surely my fellow neighbors will understand...

It's not them...Mr. Chatterjee has voiced a complaint...his villa is down the street...he's a friend of the Crown...and an influential man...

He's bitter...for not being invited...too often he sides with the oppressors...such nationals will never grace my doorstep...

We won't ask you again... turn off the music... disperse the guests...and end this farce once and for all...

Farce...? How dare you compare my daughter's wedding to a farce? Why, I'll have you ...

That was the last of spoken words. What followed were several collective *oohs* and *ahhs*, disagreeing shouts, women shrieking in fright, and some indiscernible wailing that bordered on frantic orders, and even unkind commands. Many guests attempted to intervene, but were soon dissuaded, and retreated outwards from the circle. It took nearly a minute for Ritika to push her way inside, where many arms and elbows bumped against her head. For her persistence, she was rewarded with the sight of her father laying down on the tiled floor, blood oozing from his nose and lips.

“Baba!” Ritika cried. “Baba, what happened?”

Although several family members were tending to Mr. Malhotra – holding his head, gently slapping his cheek in their attempts to wake him – he remained unconscious. Ritika’s eyes nearly bulged out of her head, and her heartbeat escalated like a clock gone haywire amidst the awkward silence. She looked around, glancing every way, until the khaki uniforms caught her eye. They were walking away towards the gate, several in number. She couldn’t count how many exactly, but one in particular caught her eye. Again.

It was him, she was certain. His hand was bloodied, and using a handkerchief just given to him by his fellow officer, he wiped it clean, soiling the cloth red entirely. On his face was a smile, albeit unlike the one Ritika witnessed earlier at Pillai’s Pastries. This smirk bordered on conniving, nearly duplicitous. It was the last expression the girl expected to see on her revered immortal.

Her mother rushed over from the kitchen, then crouched just behind Ritika, wiping the recently spilt blood with a wet rag.

“Riti, help me with this,” she said.
“There’s more droplets than my old hands can reach.”

Ritika did as she was told. The presence of numerous fresh red stains reminded her of the samosa sauce she’d forgotten to bring from the store. The collective bitterness of the evening, the interruption of her sister’s marital celebration, her father’s injury, but especially the shattered fantasy of her God fallen from grace – it made the girl’s ensuing tears taste more bitter than all the Karam Saag in known creation.

The Ones I Lost While Growing Up // Huina Zheng

I kept a goldfish that traced quiet arcs through its tank as I studied late into the night. My father fed it once—while I was at school—and overfed it. It floated belly-up, still and snow-white. I raised a guinea pig in our cluttered attic. Whenever I called for feeding time, it would poke its fuzzy head from a cardboard maze. Then one morning, I found its mangled body in the wood shavings. A hind leg was missing. I couldn't bear to picture the pain as a rat tore it off. At twelve, I bought a budgerigar with two months' allowance. When we returned from the Spring Festival trip, it clung to the cage floor, claws like brittle twigs, feathers fluffed like a frozen cloud. Was it the cold or the loneliness that took it? The question pecked at my chest on sleepless nights for months.

These memories eventually fade like washed-out watercolor. Only Nina remains—like a rusted nail wedged deep into bone.

She trailed behind me as I biked to school, her black coat gleaming blue in the morning light. She stopped only when the gatekeeper waved her off, shrinking into a dark speck. But in the afternoons, when I called "Nina"—even from blocks away—that speck would burst into a spinning blur, racing toward me, ears flapping like two flags in the wind. She'd roll over and let me stroke her belly, eyes half-closed. She parted ferns with her wet nose as we explored the hill—once leaping into the grass to fight off a brown-banded snake, shielding me even as she was bitten. When my brother got the chicken leg again, she licked my wet cheek. When I curled up beneath my mother's broom, she whimpered low, as if crying for me. She smiled at me—with her eyes—after my mother's curses, making me feel loved in a way nothing else did. Again and again. The last time I saw her, she lay by the roadside watching me head to school. I turned just in time to see a swerving car crush all four of her legs. Her scream ripped the morning apart. Our final "meeting" came when a family friend delivered a pot of dog meat to our door. More than twenty years have passed. Still, on long, silent nights, I picture it—how they gave her away, how the man slaughtered her, cooked her, ate her.

Every time I pass a stray dog, that rusted nail Nina left behind still stabs through me. The last, unshakable piece of my childhood.

Choice // Margaux Williamson

Safi stared outside from her assigned window seat. It was a sight, the sky, that vast, blue body. She took a picture at peak altitude—a floating cyan sea—then, having no desire to post it online and no one to send it to, deleted it. She revisited notifications that preceded her departure just for something to do. Reddit, Libby, Substack. No missed calls. No texts.

She tried in vain to coax slumber and, perturbed at her inability to rest, abandoned the prospect of sleep to draft a text to Ivy in her Notes app. She read it and then backspaced, displeased with its desperation.

Safi considered her predicament. She retraced her steps by navigating to the message thread she shared with her wife, June; she scrolled back to their last normal exchange from two days prior, when June asked Safi to bring home ibuprofen. Safi had agreed but, distracted by her call with Ivy at the store, had bought the wrong item. That was the last straw for June. She felt, even before Ivy had captured and monopolized her wife's attention, that Safi did not prioritize her. Constantly coming second to Ivy of late had magnified that feeling into a cyclopean wall too tall to scale and too deeply rooted to tunnel beneath.

June left in an icy huff. She got the drugs herself and didn't speak to Safi all night. The next morning, Safi woke to see June in the doorway of their bedroom, clean and dressed at eight o'clock, clutching her overnight bag. She said, *I'm going to Luka's*. Safi's initial reaction was a great, thrashing ambivalence, followed by a flood of fatigue that deflated and flattened her. She hadn't the energy to fight—for June or against herself. Months of figurative swinging, bobbing, and weaving had drained her. She said, *Fine*. June left. Safi grunted into her pillow, then let deep, rhythmic breaths carry her into repose.

June believed, based on her perception of her wife's preoccupation, that Safi had had an affair with Ivy. She made that clear via the long-winded accusation she texted the day after arriving at Luka's, to which Safi replied:

There is nothing with Ivy.

Please come home so we can talk.

June said that if Safi wanted to talk, she'd have to come to her, to Luka's. That's when Safi understood she was being tested. June had fled to be chased—she wanted Safi to pursue. So, mechanically, as if following explicit instructions, Safi opened the Delta app, purchased a nonstop round-trip ticket, and then sent a screenshot of her flight details to June, who replied, *Text when you land*.

From the sky, flying toward June, she looked again at the message she'd sent.

There is nothing with Ivy.



From her seat in the bookstore, Safi balanced June's voice between her ear and shoulder, impatient to end the call. She planned to read while awaiting the author's arrival until June rang with a pressing financial question. Meanwhile, across the room, Ivy spotted Safi—good posture, low fade, plainly handsome—and the empty seat beside her. She approached and flashed Safi the pleasant expression of one respectfully entering another's personal space. Safi blinked back, instantly and perfectly distracted by her.

Freshly disconnected from June, she slid her phone into her pocket and prayed for the cover of subtlety as she took Ivy in. She faced an irrefutable truth: her neighbor was attractive beyond convention. Her frame was compact yet substantial; her brown skin glittered with a rich, warm sanguinity. She smelled of laundry and

incense. Safi felt compelled to speak but knew not what to say; in the end, which was also the beginning, she complimented Ivy's hair: full burnt brown locs sporadically adorned with winding sapphire thread. Ivy thanked her with a grin like she had a secret to share, and Safi, achingly curious, was struck.

Conversation commenced. They remarked on how well-attended the event was, how they should've arrived earlier for better seats. They talked about two of the author's books, both of which they'd read twice. Safi was impressed with Ivy's analysis of the author's debut; her perspective was clear and sensible, thorough without being obsessive. She nodded with understanding and found it easy to agree with Ivy's points, delivered with a deliberateness and passion that stressed her love and knowledge of the text. The talk stimulated Safi. Ivy's mind excited her.

The author entered to applause from the crowd. When it was time for questions, Ivy voiced a craft-specific inquiry that the author regarded as excellent. Ivy glimmered and blushed at the praise. Safi wanted to squeeze her hand.

They stood in line for twenty minutes to get their books signed afterward, talking all the time. An organizer prepping the line asked if they were together, and they both hesitated before saying they weren't. Autographed books secured, they left bright and brimming, giddy as kids, clutching their loot. Outside in silken mid-evening light, they agreed to drinks at a nearby restaurant. Neither could tell whose idea it had been.

Seated and settled, their conversation returned to the author's thematic proclivities, namely passion and free will. Safi noted the author's frequent framing of the latter as advantageous, a gift, despite the burden it could be.

Burden? Ivy asked, intrigued.

Yeah, Safi said. It's just—Free will means constant volition. Is it not brutal that the choice is always ours?

Ivy laughed and said, *Brutal seems harsh.*

Safi crushed ice between her molars, smiling at the lift of Ivy's laugh. She noted again her good looks, how the room's low light haloed her, washing her in gold. Her thoughts were unclear as she said, *Free will is harsh.*

Two drinks later, Safi insisted on paying their tab. Ivy allowed it, effectively crossing the threshold of an attraction she knew she shouldn't. She'd seen Safi's wedding band and the lockscreen of her phone, a goofy selfie beside an arresting woman with long hair and hazel eyes. But she'd also seen Safi's reaction to her at the event, and the eye contact they'd made when Safi held the door for her on the way into the restaurant. Ivy wondered where the hazel-eyed woman was. Would Safi be missed if they stayed out? If, together, they went elsewhere?

But Ivy's train of thought derailed when Safi pocketed her wallet and said, *I should get home. What are you doing after this?*

This—the implication that Ivy must enact her plans sans Safi—forced her to swallow fantasies of an extended evening like a bitter pill, using the last of her drink as a chaser. She set down her glass. The ice tinkled, then settled.

Ivy shared her new plan with a casualness that she hoped conveyed long-standing finality: to go home and pray the drinks wouldn't render her useless the next morning. Fresh into her thirties, she found she couldn't drink how she once did. Safi, nearing 40, understood. They exchanged numbers and lingered in the parking lot until Ivy's roommate texted to check on her—Ivy had been out much later than she'd indicated, an unusual occurrence for her. Then, reluctantly, they parted for the night.

Safi drove home feeling guilty yet galvanized by Ivy's effect on her. Ivy tried recounting the evening to her roommate without including the fact of her attraction, but her roommate was not fooled. She urged Ivy not to get carried away with someone else's wife, and Ivy insisted she wouldn't.

Later, Ivy texted, *We should link again soon*. Safi replied, *Yes, we should*.



From there, they pursued a platonic friendship while evading their mutual longing. That dance of opposites—movement toward and away from each other—lent their relationship an exciting texture; each day was a challenge, a battle of wills, them versus themselves. It felt like their own private risk, utterly unspoken and intimate.

They continued that way not for the mere thrill of their actions but because really, attraction aside, they liked each other as people. They didn't want to break up, so to speak, over something they perceived as minor. In fact, if asked, they'd have said that ignoring their physicality was simple, barely a sacrifice. They'd say everything was under control, especially since Ivy's first visit to Safi's house revealed the unlikelihood of any drastic shifts.

For Safi, presenting June and Ivy to each other solidified the futility of her suppressed fantasies the way reading aloud enhances comprehension. For Ivy, the fact anchored when, passing June en route from the kitchen to the living room with drinks, she saw Safi look at June with unmistakable lust; the incident was subtle but undeniable, and certainly not isolated.

First Ivy felt a strange sense of rejection, then an odd freedom and, finally, acceptance; she eased into the evening, feeling that she was with two friends instead of one. Safi also relaxed; she was comfortable with the decision

she'd barely had to make. The knots had undone themselves; things moved along swimmingly.

But after some weeks, a new tide ripped through Safi when Ivy confided over text her nerves about a date—her first since meeting Safi, her first with a man in years. Jealousy coursed through Safi, rampant and acidic. Her inner tantrum surprised her, but she felt powerless and frankly uninterested in stopping it. Rather, she acknowledged it and let it capsize her. She bitterly wished Ivy good luck and then didn't text her for three days, wherein she tried and failed to be present with June, as if Ivy didn't remain at the forefront of her thoughts.

Ivy sensed Safi's mood but resisted exploring it beyond initial recognition. Instead, she gave her space, trusting they'd move past things as before—silently, invisibly. She convinced herself that their reticence toward the matter rendered it a nonissue. How critical could the discussion be if it still had not occurred?

But despite Ivy's denial, Safi's jealousy was real and dimensional. And worse, it flattered Ivy. That's why, in time, she suggested that they double date. Ivy wanted to see up close the tangle of Safi's discomfort when confronted with the fact of her relationship. She harbored hope, so distant as to be subconscious, that exposure to her new coupledness might catapult Safi into some ardent, unbridled action. Externally, she played at nonchalance so well that even she believed it to be genuine. *It would be fun*, she said to Safi with a lukewarm shrug. *But no pressure*.

Aware of and troubled by her jealousy, Safi resisted the date and would have avoided it altogether were it not for June—pouting, pleading June—who claimed, rightfully, that they hadn't been out in weeks. Safi remained unmoved. But further into her resistance, June asked her squarely, irritatedly, somewhat sadly, *Why not?* Unwilling to respond with the truth, Safi grudgingly caved. She made the dinner reservations and sent calendar invites with a

remoteness that made her actions feel dreamlike. For June's sake, she feigned excitement.

The date was a success, highlighted by the confirmation of Safi's private suspicions—Ivy was much too good for the man; it wouldn't last. *And what if it didn't?* Safi wondered, sipping a postprandial coffee amid the table's lively chatter. *Then what?*

But she never dared to finish the thought with anything real or true; instead, when the idea rippled, Safi let it dissolve like salt on her tongue. She told herself *it* didn't matter, that *it* had been silly, but never went out of her way to name *it*. Instead, she disregarded *it* and stroked June's thigh under the table through dessert. She made love to her when they returned home.



The landing was rough. Safi feared they'd crash into the airport before they came to a rattling, skidding stop. She texted June once her bars reappeared—*Just landed*—then pocketed her phone. She left the plane with her carry-on and moved toward baggage claim where she awaited the Uber to Luka's. Safi was buckled in when June's response came: *Ok*. Safi rode toward her.

After exchanging pleasantries with the driver, she returned to the accusatory text from June. It included June's admission that she was without evidence to support her claim of Safi's infidelity, that all she had was an unignorable feeling that had set up shop in the back of her mind and elbowed its way forth with the grit and determination of certainty. She said she'd tried to dismiss it but could not. She felt that facing it head on would illuminate whether they—June and Safi—would stand or crumble. June felt this was the only way. She was sick of not knowing, of waiting.

Safi understood. She knew the grip a feeling could have, how insistent it could be. Feelings always found the surface. She knew they never drowned.



Work and personal schedules had separated them for weeks. Each attempt to connect was thwarted by something or another, so it was with no expectation of socialization that Safi went to Ivy's house to return her book. She texted Ivy a heads up, and it wasn't until Ivy replied—*Door's unlocked. I'll be in the shower!*—that her buried desire to stand before her, look into her eyes, and see her looking back, was unearthed.

Upon arrival, Safi announced herself, then stood quietly at the bottom of the stairs; she listened as the lone sound of water hitting porcelain reached her, confirming Ivy's shower was still in session. She locked the door behind her and perused Ivy's shelves while she waited.

She was a few pages into a tattered paperback when Ivy hurriedly descended the stairs in only a towel, apologizing for the wait. Safi, suddenly riddled with a hot and tingling focus at the sight of her, couldn't look away or speak. She hadn't prepared for the monsoon of heat; the overtaking was a shock. She felt rocked by her want, jolted by lust. This whirlpool, this force in terrycloth and toe rings, sucked her in whole; it seized her.

Safi returned the paperback to its place just to do something innocent with her hands and Ivy, inwardly amused at Safi's thinly veiled frenzy, said, *I made infused water. Come try.*

In the kitchen, Safi watched Ivy bend to retrieve the carafe from the fridge. The towel clung to her as if for its life, and Safi felt the not unfamiliar urge to place her hands between Ivy's skin and its covering so that she could feel her without barrier or interruption.

Ivy asked her opinion on the book and Safi, after a brief struggle to recall the book in question, shared her partially forgotten thoughts while Ivy poured cold water into twin vessels. She extended one to Safi and said, *Hope it's not too minty.* They clinked and drank. The mint

was inconspicuous, but Safi praised it. *That's good*, she said. *That's nice*.

Although two kitchen chairs sat open and waiting, they stood facing each other—Safi's back to the counter, Ivy's toweled body before her, calling her at such a volume that Safi barely heard her own voice, a notch lower than usual, say to Ivy as she set down her glass, *You're still wet*. Safi raised her hand with slowness, both gentle and excruciating. She wiped the lingering dew from Ivy's jawline. Ivy, lightheaded, leaned into her touch. The women breathed as one, immersed.

The temptation Safi felt for her then—the same roiling, undulous one as always—multiplied and soared at this closeness to her undressed body, the rise and fall of her chest, her dilated pupils. Safi stepped closer, expecting Ivy to step away, an action safe in its morality. But Ivy did not; instead, she closed her eyes and breathed a wordless answer to the question of Safi's head, tilting down toward hers, reaching, asking.



Safi tipped the driver as she exited the car. She knocked and Luka admitted her, eyeing her distrustfully, like there was no telling what she'd do. They hugged stiffly just as June appeared. She said to Safi, *Come out back*. Then to Luka, *We'll be fine*.

Outside, Safi sat across from June in a chair patterned with swirls like pond whorls. Tree leaves rustled with the breeze. Safi's mouth went dry.

How was the flight?

Good, thanks.

Good.

Safi couldn't stand the silent gulf between them, so she bridged it.
When are you coming home?
I don't know.

Unsure how to respond, Safi quieted and cast her eyes downward.

What happened when you last saw her?

Safi sank, weighted by immediate understanding. She listened to the fall of the bridge she had built.

I—We almost kissed.

Why didn't you?

Safi considered lying—*Because I love you*—but decided against it. She did love June, but that wasn't what stopped her lips from meeting Ivy's.

Her roommate came back.

June cut her eyes from Safi, pained and exhausted.

Somewhere beneath her guilt and shame, Safi wondered about their trajectory. She couldn't tell where June was headed or if she would bring Safi along. More critically, Safi couldn't tell if she wished to go. She leaned back and looked up toward the heavens, half expecting answers to appear. She was almost disappointed to find clear, blue skies. Not a cloud, not anything, in sight.

From Luka's couch that night, Safi replayed her last conversation with Ivy. She'd been dodging her since the kitchen incident, not because she didn't want to talk but because she didn't know what to say. She told herself this ad nauseam until the words blurred, stretched, and reformed into a different, more tolerable thought—*there was nothing to say*. They had almost done something dumb, and it wouldn't happen again.

Still, Safi had answered when Ivy called the day of the botched errand because her truth, despite June, despite herself, was that she wanted to. Ivy was owed a formal ending at the very least. Safi respected her too much to ghost her.

I've been worried, Ivy said, breathless with relief upon finally hearing Safi's voice. *We should talk about what we—What almost happened.*

Safi said there was no need, that she'd acted out of character, overstepped a boundary, and didn't trust herself to avoid future missteps. As a result, she didn't believe they could remain friends. She was sorry, so sorry, but this was for the best. Her voice broke as she apologized.

Ivy was quiet until she said, *Are you sure?*

Safi swallowed. *I'm sure. I'm sorry.*

Ivy said, *Me too*, before ending the call.

Safi struggled to regain herself in the feminine care aisle and, misremembering the point of her trip—June's ibuprofen—grabbed a box of tampons. She left the store in a dazed numbness she'd never felt, already hoping she could somehow undo what she'd done.



The next morning, Safi sat on the steps of Luka's front porch listening to the birds and distant traffic. She and June had reached no conclusion the previous day and planned to talk again before Safi's flight that morning. June was still unsure about her return home. *My ticket was one-way*, she'd said, meeting Safi's eyes.

It was nearly six o'clock and sunlight, eager in its youth, spread all over. Safi absorbed its drenching reach; she observed all that it touched, letting it touch her. Once she achieved a sense of calm, the blue thread from Ivy's locs floated forth in her mind. She remembered what Ivy said when she'd asked about its installation: *It's not difficult. Choosing a color's the hardest part.*

Safi sought sense. She wondered what it meant that she'd come here to mend her union with June, only to continually fight thoughts of Ivy. Her bottomless brown eyes and sweet smile. Her laugh and kind disposition. Mostly, the way she soundlessly answered Safi in the kitchen that day. And then how she'd questioned Safi's severance—*Are you sure?*—because she knew that no, Safi was not sure.

She drafted another Notes app text saying that she'd been premature in ending their friendship. She missed her. Could they talk? Then, as she'd done on the plane, deleted it. Ultimately, she sent a lone *Hey* to Ivy's iPhone and felt the urge to fold in on herself when the message appeared in a halting green. She'd been blocked.

Now, too late, she craved dialogue, decisiveness. She flinched at the memory of her manufactured confidence, the lie she told when Ivy pressed. No. She had not been sure. She'd never been sure. So what had her choices, any of them, meant?

Safi deleted her messages with Ivy and then removed her contact information. She returned to the still silence of the house and lay across the couch; she shut her eyes and saw June's tears, blue skies, and blue thread. She stayed in the dark but remained sleepless through the morning, waiting for her wife to awaken.



"Full Bleed" by Margaux Williamson

Blasé Fr // S. Emily

Caring is basically allowing opinions other than your own to hurt you. It's 11am, I feel the sky might burst—I've been feeling the threats. It's monsoon season in mid-May and the air is as dirty as a repressed childhood memory. The tuk tuk driver didn't take long at all, but as I caught a glimpse of his hands—the eerily long, yellowing nails on just three of his fingers, I wished he had taken a bit longer. I prefer waiting rather than feeling rotten with puke-worthy emotions. Let me off this fucking ride, but also never exist in human capacity. The dust doesn't bother me anymore. I made a mistake in the summer of 2024, when I peeked in Sam's attic and found ants, jellied in brown honey, just randomly rolling in a glass jar on the floor. I think it's easy to pinpoint those intrusive moments when caring abruptly dies. Forever, like it's literally no joke. I can show you my phone with countless unended conversations, left midway as ick entered the chat.

I've stolen poultry before. To be more precise, it was just one hen, chicken, whatever sounds more literary and GED-approved. I was in the midst of a full blown manic episode, in the center of Phnom Penh. I had woken up that morning to a familiar realization—the earthly-sourced, metal in pill form that I was used to swallowing on the daily, was on backorder. *I'm not crazy enough.* Every clinically unstable person is rolling on their wired bed at this point. So, here I was, just walking in the middle of the road when I was greeted by this plump hen, with breasts that every surgeon on the West LA strip could only conjure in midday snorts. The live chicken was a premonition from godly Gods, they're only like the most elusive, judgy nongenders imaginable. I was blessed. This bird waddled towards me and took the most attractive stance right before my two feet. Clumsy girl. I see you. I care. My arms seemed to lose all weight. I was now her—sprouting feathers, soft and large, and I scoop her up, my girl, gently crashing in my limbs. Clucky. As I turned away with this fleshy, soft bird nesting between my elbows, I did hear faint shouts—yells from someone a few, or maybe hundred, feet behind me, but I digress. No one dies in this story, especially not the bird, and my mental unwellness is an excuse for any situation. A party trick before the oncoming chest break, pain, inside like lungs collapsing metaphorically. I usually leave because I can't be bothered to finish anything, and I lose the motivation to care. Like now.

I bought really cheap earrings at Miniso and my ears turned green, so now I'm waiting for another tuk tuk to go buy clear nail varnish because Google is mother, but I don't care enough so I just cancel on the driver when he's a minute and a half away. My only win on this trip was the bestie bird with firm, perky full breasts. I actually cared for a hot minute and we would have slayed the streets, but the café staff asked us to leave. No hens allowed—unless doused in virgin olive oil, fine peppercorn flakes, and pink salt. Hold the bread—because carbs.

In Cages // Riley Ferver

We lived in a hotel for five days before moving into the house my parents had inhabited for the past eleven years. There were six of us crammed into the room: my grandmother slept on the pullout loveseat, my parents took one of the beds, and I slept with my two siblings in the other. Each night I spent loudly moaning about my brother's newfound love for tangling his arms into a knot around my elbow, hanging onto my extremities all day, and the way he repeated my sentences awed, as if each were a commandment. Upon our arrival to the new house I spent the entire first day staring out the window waiting for kids to spill onto the street. When evening hit and children swarmed like mosquitoes, I sprinted out and met a group riding bikes. Ten minutes later my brother came to join me, dragging his feet down the driveway on my old pink and white training wheel bike and shouting my name. I was suddenly embarrassed and, fed up with him from the days prior, I told my new acquaintances, "That's just Colin, let's ride somewhere else." We left him standing on the edge of a stranger's lawn, staring with his blue eyes widened like an animal. I never made any effort to exclude my brother again, but kids' minds work in funny ways and, despite Colin living there too, the house was cemented as "Riley's house." Nobody was ever mean, but retrospectively we may not have been nice either, and in my mind that might be worse.

When Colin turned six, the only thing he wanted for his birthday was a Betta fish for each of us. I remember thinking it was so odd that he'd waste gifts on his sisters, but I didn't tell him because I liked the idea of a fish and—deep down—I knew this was probably the last birthday he would be so innocently generous. There was a certain grievable beauty in the fact that my little brother loved to share. So we walked around the whole Petco just because we could, stopping at each animal and talking about the farms we'd own someday. The last animals we saw before the fish in the back were these lop-eared rabbits, perfectly still against the metal bars of their enclosures. I've never known how to react to animals in cages. I was ten, freshly aware of how severe my emotions could run— and intensely scared of its depths; I got this sinking excitement from the rabbits that I still cannot place. So, instead of confronting them, I watched Colin stare into the cage. He's always looked more like me than my sister does, and I look like my father, and every man in my family has the same blue eyes I wish I could have inherited; light enough to look watery. I stare at him staring into the eyes of the closest rabbit when I realize he's making the same face I do when I look at myself in the mirror.

At college, I talk about my beautiful baby siblings— no longer babies, but still completely made of magic; every idea they've ever spoken is like watching someone pluck stars out of a summer night sky, the luck they find in the world cracks them like glow sticks and spills onto everything they touch. I've spent the past several years attempting to preach this to any of my friends unfortunately close enough to listen. Sometimes I remember the way my brother looked at me during those days in the hotel, where we were cramped at each other's side, and I realize that's the way I look at him now. I wonder if he still ever feels the same. All he did during those five days was love me, but I couldn't handle it. I wonder if that changed anything.

There was a weekend in early May where we both ended up planless at my parents' house. He beat me at Mario three times in a row and grinned like the Joker, wider every time. He doesn't talk very much, but he told me that night he thought he may be an extrovert. I looked at him and said, "You're lying."

"No I'm not," he replied, "I just don't have a lot of friends."

I couldn't help but feel the most intense pang of guilt; my inner monologue screaming into my soul that this could have been avoided. It was completely my fault. I don't know if that's true. All the neighbor kids have either grown up or moved away. Colin does activities and sports now where he has every opportunity. He's made friends and lost them for one reason or another, but I can't help but believe that my love for my brother is boundless, and yet, my cruelty was binding. It should have been Colin's house, or at least ours.

For a few months—some of the last I ever felt young enough to still play on the street—the boy who lived two doors down would knock every night and ask for me. Whenever my dad answered, he would tell my friend he'd let me know to come out, and then yell into the street that Colin would be coming too. One evening when this happened, we were sitting in the kitchen waiting for water to boil. Colin heard the whole thing. As my dad entered triumphantly, my baby brother looked at him, then me, and then out the window onto the street. And with caged rabbit eyes wide open, he said “I don't really want to anymore.”



“Soulmates” by Riley Ferver.

case study: living autopsy // Christa Lei

PROFESSIONAL ASSESSMENT

PATIENT: Self

DATE: Ongoing

EXAMINER: The unreliable narrator living inside

CHIEF COMPLAINT: Chronic existence in a body coded female

I. PRESENTING SYMPTOMS

Subject reports chronic fatigue, abdominal pain, pelvic pressure, grief, dissociation, and complete disidentification with corporeal form. Symptoms began in early childhood and persist into adulthood.

Subject describes pain as: fog, fire, forgetting. The examiner notes symptoms leak into mornings, interrupt kisses, cancel plans, dismantle certainty.

When asked to rate it on a scale of 1 to 10, the subject replies, "What number do you give a scream underwater?"

II. HISTORY OF PRESENT ILLNESS

Patient history reveals repeated visits to the nurse's office throughout elementary and middle school. This examiner notes that subject learned early that pain could be both truth and tool. They faked it, yes, but the ache underneath remained. An ache that shapeshifted and outlasted.

When the school nurse called subject's mother for pick-up, it resulted in frequent doctor's visits in that old dingy office in Kalihi Valley. Corny posters with outdated NIH guidelines lining the walls. Ice-cold stethoscopes. The sharp smell of lysol and latex before the comfort of a strawberry lollipop.

Early symptoms include nausea, syncope, pelvic cramping, bloating, and the eerie sense of betrayal from within. Former medical records suggest psychosomatic dismissal, misdiagnosis, and medical neglect as recurring conditions. Each doctor visit archived as dismissal: "It's probably stress." "You're just fat." "Have you tried Ibuprofen?"

Medical interventions initiated at seventeen: combination birth control prescribed for regulation. Later, hypertension necessitated switching to progestin-only formulation. Subject reports this didn't last long. IUD placement followed—and with it, the vomiting. Then, the pain.

This examiner notes years of hormonal suppression may have compounded symptoms. Medical fatigue saturates everything now. The subject burns out faster, misses events, loses friendships.

No diagnostic clarity until adulthood.

Subject remarks, "Funny that an abolitionist's body is more like a prison than home. The bars are made of tissue and disbelief."

III. GENDER DYSPHORIA IN MEDICAL SETTINGS

Subject does not identify with the gendered assumptions of their anatomy. Pain centralized in uterus, ovaries, vulva—body parts coded female, painted pussy pink, therefore neglected, feminized, diminished. Their organs became both battleground and betrayal.

Forms ask for F or M. Nurses say "ma'am" with practiced ease. No one asks for pronouns. Subject adapts: lowers voice, avoids correction, dissociates.

Notable encounter: gynecologist's office. Doctor presented with standard clipboard and—

No. A pastel clipboard and smile sharpened like a scalpel. When subject mentioned pelvic pain, it was dismissed with: "Pelvic pain is normal. You'd know if it were serious."

Instead, she performed procedures. First, the speculum. Then metal scraping. Cervical cells scraped and taken, no warning, no pause. "Just a pinch," she said. Subject bit tongue and floated away. More hole punches in a body full of absences.

She called it normal. "Everything looks fine."

Subject left with cramps, discharge, and grief that has no name.

Subject notes: "It is strange to suffer in a body they call female when I am not. I want to unzip my skin and walk away, but it follows. I am perpetually haunted."

IV. OCCUPATIONAL HAZARDS

Subject works as a death doula. Holds hands of the dying while ignoring their own descent into Hades.

Midway through one vigil, the subject doubled over in pain and free-bled into a gusset of cotton underwear. Said nothing. Cleaned hands with sanitizer. Continued vigil. Patient died at 4:12 a.m. Subject left before sunrise, alone and cramping, a ghost among ghosts.

Care as choreography: Bend. Hold. Witness. Swallow. Boundary collapse between devotion and self-erasure noted.

Subject remarks: "I know how to midwife death. But I do not know how to mourn myself."

V. LOSS INVENTORY

Missed: Birthdays from bed, orgasms blunted mid-sensation—the pleasure real but the deep ache after, the days in bed that followed, the contradiction of wanting what hurts, dance floors abandoned, road trips canceled, concerts watched sitting, mornings swallowed by nausea, evenings dimmed by fog.

Deferred: Nursing school after laparoscopic surgery, the realization that nursing requires physical presence in real time, body unable to sustain bedside demands, backpacking trip, sparring in boxing, spontaneity, saying yes.

Lost: Friends who stopped inviting—one in particular, younger, who compiled a list of resentments: subject's pain made them miserable to be around, subject was victimizing themselves, didn't deserve love because couldn't reciprocate, required people to come to their apartment instead of meeting

out—accommodations reframed as selfishness, lovers who didn't understand, intimacy without translation, words forgotten, dreams shelved, trust in the medical system, trust in one's own body.

VI. CURRENT CONDITION

Subject appears functional but haunted. They memorized the choreography of looking fine: responding to emails, refilling prescriptions, folding laundry. They display quiet bursts of strength. Sometimes, they laugh. They make plans and proceed to cancel them.

The body remains in use, but not in ease.

Subject still bleeds. Still dissociates during exams. Still forgets to eat.

Their grief metabolizes through motion: walking the dog in rhythmic steps, writing at 2 a.m. with one hand on keyboard and the other on their belly, holding space for strangers while swallowing their own scream.

Even rest comes negotiated. They wake up tired but keep going. Persistence is not the same as peace, but some days, it's close enough.

The only way to confirm adenomyosis is through removal of the uterus. No biopsy. No imaging. No other tests. Just more waiting, and more pain.

The patient continues to request a hysterectomy. They refer to it as "the final extraction."

"Take it out. Yeet the uterus."

VII. PROGNOSIS

This serves as a living autopsy with no time of death.

Subject is undead and unfinished, a bed-rotting corpse in progress. No heroic measures taken. No DNR needed.

Condition: Stable within unpredictable margins. Symptoms variable. Flare-ups present without warning. Side effects include rage, resignation, keen sensitivity to fluorescent lighting, and the desire to vanish without explanation.

Treatment plan: Soft blankets, peer support, grief rituals, medical providers who don't assume. Regular doses of saying no. Pelvic rest. Creative expression as analgesic. Laughter in small, controlled bursts.

Subject remains medically noncompliant with societal expectations. Demonstrates poor tolerance for misogyny and pathologizing language. Exhibits strong resistance to productivity metrics.

No cause of death. Just a heart that keeps beating, even when I don't want it to.

Signed,

The patient who refuses to die quietly

The Glock22's Speech during the Funeral after Another Black Person is Murdered // Nala Washington

so y'all are aware,
I did not come here
to console or pay some irretrievable
amount of respects but let me
question: did y'all know? that Me
and the deceased serve the same God
that no discharge leaves this body
without the higher ups giving Me
the aye, okay ?

if by accident or what you
might call inhumane purpose,
I watch them be buried alive,
way before the wake
takes place, last time
I saw them, my bullets
traveled through entry points
of opportunity, hear bone breaking
lead marrying blood, the figure
shaping into cadaver, *I*
give them back to the earth
when the hour comes,
I inspect the blending and binding

with concrete just like when
their mother held them for the first time
in her bosom, *the ground*, converts
into her arms catching last breaths,
lips kissing goodbye, eyes
flowing shell-casing-shaped
tears sowing seeds in soil,
they are replanted

I have a body count,
higher than any serial killer,
I am #1

I'd like to think we perform

this act together, ain't it magic,
how black bodies, backs, *brains* devour
the ammunition that turn
them phantom, that turn them into
the martyr for the cause?
I create lifelong hymns
through the air that was trapped
in the now collapsed lungs,

I send they hoop dreams
to the stars with special telephone
circuit laces, I design roman
numeral dates on their families flesh
and skin, I scatter skeletons
through the ridges of this planet,
I introduce street corners

as their permanent graveyards,
be grateful, I got movements
named after y'all
I keep your ghosts relevant

I have a need to feed,
I crave kills, morphing
loved ones into corpses

I have the duty that all
black beings are bound

~~to die~~ by *My* bullets.

Unearth these Things at My High School // Nala Washington

For J and K

chinese courses and *zǎoshang hǎo* (早上好),
good morning, being the only phrase
most students remember. sweaty jerseys never
washed in the gym locker room. the echoing
of boys asking “*where my hug at ?*”
threats. the emergency lockdown we all thought
was fake. blood. inside jokes that you took
with you to your grave after acting
as your own judge, jury, and ~~executioner~~. t o r n
up report cards. trailers for history classes,
there weren’t enough classrooms for the influx
of students. the ap english teacher on camera bashing
a student’s mother head in. the bathroom covered
in spit and juices in between the stroking penis
and thighs from regrettable first times including
my own. torched journal entries detailing mistreat
ment to some of the worst extents imaginable.
fights. snapped trombone case straps. uneasy gray
rubber walked every day to the annex,
escaping in our artforms. giggling from wrong
notes and musical fuck-ups. powder
from killer clowns roaming the schoolyard.
roaches hopscotching in the corridors. the night
mare of a trusted teacher grooming a girl, prey
ing on another inquiring “*do you have snapchat
premium?*” and “*can you read this graphic sex
scene i wrote?*” dented lockers that caught blows
from petty altercations and domestic violence
disputes. more blood. shredded poems. un
finished blunts and used condoms with their
vacant wrappers. crumpled sticky notes to
teachers, counselors, administration, begging
to be seen, thrown out along with any sense of
hope. old braids r i p p e d out of heads. empty
chick-fil-a breakfast bags from down the street.
the announcement to the creative students

senior year we will never forget:
“*sending your artistic students
to college would be a waste of time,
save money, let them perfect their craft
on google.*” dusty unused library books craving
to be read. bullet fragments that ricocheted off
of the outside bleachers and ~~teen bodies~~. the smell
of weed seeping through the cracks in the walls.
graffiti engraved in the stalls including consent
withdrawals. the choir teacher chucking a chair
into a sea of students. teeth buried in the soil
like seeds. wet kisses shared in between secrets
that prayerfully didn’t leave moist mouths.
crushed goldfish crackers solidifying long term
friendships. SAT tests that never made it.
the laughter from pre-calc, the memory
of the hickey the size of a softball on my neck,
terrible at hiding, your hoodie playing savior
for a week and a half, always my guardian angel,
~~were, are,~~ now actually *are* (i *hate* gun
violence and i *hate* that it took you from me).
the floor of the band room covered in dna
from emptying brass valves. the local 7/11
stocked with hot cheetos and mountain dew
for 8am classes that was robbed by the same
students that shopped there. makeshift uniform shirts to
seem more fashionable. recorded tapes of admin
and their closest students. pocket knives used
to s l i t wrists in closed corners that hid from the
cameras. balloons tangled in the trees near the
school grounds let go for too many vigils, too
many in memoriams, too many of us *gone*.
flasks that were never fully deserted leaking
booze. printed out nudes girls sent in
confidence and were exploited for. tears that water
the grass. torn concert dresses with paper
clips that couldn’t fix them or the irretrievable damage
that caused the tear in the first place. *more blood*.
cheers ringing from the musical ensemble
after receiving the news that our instructor was having

his first band baby. cheap lighters from giant. notes
written with regret, warning, angst in screaming
block pencil letters to prospective students:

D O N ' T C O M E H E R E !

the not knowing if you'll make it back to your
family in a casket or alive. khaki stained uniform
pants. resignation letters from the only faculty
that were decent to actually teach us something, any
thing, do their job even if it was half-assed.
demolished basketballs with pen shaped holes.
broken dreams at the core of shattered hearts.
college admission letters we never thought we'd
see because nobody believed in us here. plastic
wrappers littering the ground after driving by
to pick up cap and gowns, the relief in several
parents' eyes, including my own, leaving this
place and never returning. oh, *zài jiàn* (再见),
goodbye.

Contributors



Madison McCaskey is a writer and multimedia artist born and raised in Birmingham, Alabama. After graduating from Spelman College, she moved to New York City to pursue a career as a writer. She is currently in the MFA Creative Writing Program at the City College of New York. In her free time, she enjoys live music, yoga, and reading Ntozake Shange. Her work explores vulnerability, relationships, family, and self-determination. Though she is currently focused on completing her first novel, she hopes to continue to share her short stories, poetry, and photography. She is the recipient of the Go On Girl Book Club Unpublished Writer Award, and her work has been published by Spelman College's *Aunt Chloe Literary Magazine*. You can find her on Substack, where she writes about self-discovery, grief, and New York City.

Hunter Blackwell is a Black and Native queer poet and author. They received their MFA in Creative Writing from Northern Arizona University. They are the recipient of the 2020 Diana Gabaldon Award and the 2018 Goronwy-Owen Prize for Group of Poems. Their previous works have appeared in *wildscape. lit*, *Parentheses Journal*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *Barren Magazine*, and others. When not writing, they are attempting box mix bakes and cosplays. Find them on Instagram @hun.t.blackwell or online hunter-blackwell.com.

Ezra Ipsum is a Haitian-American undergraduate student in Atlanta. They primarily write queer fiction. When they aren't writing, they enjoy crossword puzzles, cooking, baking, and making zines. You can find them on Instagram (@bluespringwrites), Twitter (@bluespringwrite), and Bluesky (@bluespringwrites.bsky.social).



Hachi Chuku is a Managing Editor for *Nimrod International Journal*. Their writing explores family, nature, and mental health within the realms of fiction and poetry. They have work forthcoming in *The Shallot*, *Knee Brace Press*, and *The Amazine* and more. They can be found on Instagram @curio.odes and substack @curioodes. When they are not writing, they love to crochet.



Jessi Farfan is a queer Choctaw writer and educator currently based in Texas. Her work centers lived experience and resistance. Her work can be found in *MORIA* journal.



Kendra Whitfield lives and writes on the southern edge of the northern boreal forest. When not writing, she can be found basking in sunbeams on the back deck or swimming laps at the local pool. Her poetry has been anthologized by Beyond the Veil Press and Community Building Art Works.



Noor (Ditee) is the Black, queer, mad main character of a rom com. A formalist, she sees poetic language as a fluid medium. Her workshops create horizontal spaces to write poetry in a rigorous, anti-elitist space. An abolitionist, Noor writes the future she wants for her people into existence. She loves double meanings, creative grammar, and “exquisite mouthfeel.” Noor is the author of *Praise to Lesser Gods of Love*, published by Glass poetry. Enjoy her work in *The Massachusetts Review*, *Pleiades*, *DIAGRAM*, and other print/digital publications. To learn more, try Instagram [@noheroes_inlovepoems](#).



Kaycee Painter is a queer, disabled poet from Dalton, Georgia. Her work lives at the intersection of chronic illness, generational trauma, and survival. She writes from the body, its memory, its limitations, its quiet defiance, and often explores what it means to endure in a world that was not built for you. Her poems have appeared in queer anthologies and community zines, and she is currently working on a chapbook about disability, exploring the politics of pain, access, and the quiet rituals of staying alive.



Forhad Rahman is a Communications professional based out of the Bronx. When he’s not busy making PowerPoint slides and writing emails, Forhad enjoys diving into books, video games, photography, and spending time with family and friends. He is particularly fond of Young Adult, fantasy, and flash-fiction literature. Forhad earned his bachelor’s degree in English at the University at Albany. He has been published in journals such as *Cherry Tree*, *The Bronx Magazine*, and *Bronx Narratives*.



Erin Jamieson's writing has been published in over eighty literary magazines, including two Pushcart Prize nominations. Her poetry chapbook, *Fairytales*, was published by Bottlecap Press. Her debut novel (*Sky of Ashes, Land of Dreams*) was published by Type Eighteen Books.

m.e. gamlem is a non-binary queer anarchist and writer from New Mexico. They are a MFA Fiction candidate in the Low Residency MFA program at the University of Nevada, Reno at Lake Tahoe. Their work most recently appears at *Hello America Stereo Cassette*, *new words {press}*, and is forthcoming in the *Potomac Review*.

Sarah Carolan is a Chicago-based writer and artist. She graduated from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her publications include *oranges journal*, *The Raven Review*, and *Ignatian Literary Magazine*. She is currently at work on several short stories.



Armand Diab (pen name: Barlow Crassmont) has lived in the USA, Eastern Europe, Middle East and China. When not teaching or writing, he dabbles in juggling, solving the Rubik's Cube, and learning other languages. He has been published by British Science Fiction Association, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, and in the upcoming 41st anthology of *Writers of the Future*.

Huina Zheng is a college essay coach and an editor. Her stories appear in *Baltimore Review*, *Variant Literature*, and more. Nominated three times for both the Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net, she lives in Guangzhou, China with her family.



Margaux Williamson (she/they) is a lifelong reader and writer. Her work has appeared in *Paloma Magazine*, *Stone of Madness Press*, *EDGE CITY*, and elsewhere. She lives in the Midwest with her wife and cat. Presently, she is at work on her debut novel, *Risk*. You can keep up with her on Instagram @margauxreadit.



S.Emily is an Inuit writer from Canada. She exists on tiktok but is sometimes on X s_emilyanon.

Riley Ferver is a writer and painter. She lives all over the place but currently goes to school in Annapolis, MD. Catch her work in See You Next Tuesday Media, *JAKE*, and her personal substack, "4 good fate."



Christa Lei (they/them) is a queer, disabled Filipino-American writer based in New York. Their work explores mythology, chronic illness, intimacy, and inheritance through speculative and hybrid forms. Christa's writing has appeared or is forthcoming in *Vast Chasm*, *Breadfruit Magazine*, *HerStry*, and *Beyond Queer Words*, and has been nominated for Best American Essays. They were selected to attend the 2025 Disquiet Literary Program in Lisbon. Christa lives with their spouse and two dogs, Mayo and Kaia Papaya. More at christalei.me and isthiswhatyouwant.org.



Nala Washington (she/her) is an MFA Poetry Student at Texas State University. You can find her words currently/forthcoming in *Midnight & Indigo Lit*, *The Santa Clara Review*, *Livina Press*, and more. Nala was a featured performer at the Kennedy Center in 2020 for the Arts Across America Series and was the 2023 BIPOC Scholarship winner for the Fine Arts Work Center. Her notes app is where you can find most of her poems.