WINDMILL

[THE HOFSTRA JOURNAL OF LITERATURE & ART]

CREATIVE NONFICTION | FICTION | ART | CONVERSATIONS

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A Literary Journal by Hofstra University's
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We strive to showcase emerging voices alongside established authors. Submissions are assumed to be original and unpublished, unless otherwise noted. To submit, visit hofstrawindmill.submittable.com.

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Dr. Barry Nass

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Table of Contents

Editor's Note

Welcome to the fifth issue of Windmill.

While each of our past volumes have taken their own types of Herculean effort to build, none compares to this one: a powerful collection of stories and essays and interviews and art that our team has come to call our "pandemic edition."

Like the pandemic itself, the lifecycle of this issue felt never-ending. Windmill is an annual journal, but it took two years to push this book across the finish-line. The logistical struggles included the now well-worn catalog of cancelled classes, frozen budgets, a shuttered MFA program, and students unceremoniously scattered across time zones, tucked into childhood bedrooms and family basements. These, of course, turned out to be minor hurdles compared to the unscalable mountains of trauma, fear, isolation, and illness that enveloped our team and extended across the entire world.

The creativity of our contributors and the comforts of collaborating were surprisingly sweet and necessary balms. Although it was one of our last decisions, the cover art for this journal is deeply emblematic of this capsule of time. Ann Marie Sekeres's arresting image of a figure lost in never-ending waves is at once lulling and dangerous, muted and magical, enticing and foreboding. Our editors felt this image of the artist's son engulfed in waves, uncannily titled "Summer 2020," reflected the way it felt to be submerged in the tidal pool of uncertainty. Rounding out our art section, Michael Thompson's acerbic take on the headless Marie Antoinette and the photographs of Willy Conley and Yaara Rozner Laizé spoke to the closed-off feeling of previously open landscapes and the melancholic absurdity of the American dream.

Hofstra's Great Writers, Great Readings series continued to deliver intimate discussions with powerhouse writers including essayist and author Jia Tolentino and Hofstra's own Martha McPhee. These conversations are recreated in this issue alongside a section called The Grind, highlighting the ways in which books and reading function in the creative lives of artists.

Our writers for this issue are our most eclectic bunch yet, hailing from locations as close as Brooklyn and Philadelphia and as far-flung as Australia, India, Southern Africa, and the United Kingdom. Voices range from emerging to established, and we are thrilled to once again publish West Virginian poet and fiction writer Ace Boggess in our pages.

The Creative Nonfiction section flexes intellect and heart. Helen Park considers the tradition of talk-story against the iconic film "To All the Boys I've Loved Before" alongside Mercia Kandukira's unflinching account of rape, silence, and memory in Namibia. Cassie Premo Steele finds connection between motherhood and sainthood while Irish comedian Marise Gaughan offers a welcome burst of humor and humility in her essay on chronic illness. Our Fiction section, meanwhile, tracks disaster in multiple forms, from Kristina Garvin's wild take on the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion to Shivani Deshmukh's chilling tale of a childhood visit to a crocodile pit. Chloe Hogan-Weihmann's pair of flash fiction pieces are sensuous snapshots, while Ace Boggess takes us to Boone County Correctional in order to reframe the definition of hero. We return to the watery depths first introduced on our cover in Alyssa Osieki's luminous story "Whale Woman," about a widow who discovers a new way forward.

Together, these works represent what we hope is now Windmill's trademark: attention to the lyric, celebration of the uneasy, and commitment to emerging and under-represented voices. While this issue was unusual in its historic moment, the care and devotion of our unwavering supporters, indispensable interns, and the Publishing Studies capstone class (even via our Zoom room screens) remains steadfast as ever. In her novel The Waves, Virginia Woolf wrote, "Alone, I often fall down into nothingness." Our hope is that this pandemic issue serves as a reminder that we can—and should—depend on the words of others to see us through.

Kelly McMasters
Editor

Interview: Jia Tolentino in conversation with Kelly McMasters

Transcribed by Antonella Colon

Jia Tolentino is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of the essay collection *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*. She grew up in Texas, received her undergraduate degree at the University of Virginia, and got her MFA in fiction from the University of Michigan. In 2020, she received a Whiting Award as well as the Jeannette Haien Ballard Prize. Her work has also appeared in *The New York Times Magazine* and *Pitchfork*, among other places. She lives in Brooklyn. In February 2021 Hofstra's Great Writers, Great Readings hosted Tolentino in conversation with Prof. Kelly McMasters, Director of the Publishing Studies program, from which the following interview is adapted.

Kelly McMasters: You have written on so many topics, from Thomas the Tank Engine to weddings to reality television. How do you know when a topic is worth digging your teeth into?

Jia Tolentino: You know, I wonder if my answer to this is now changing. I mean, I've had an enormous amount of trouble with this in the pandemic to be perfectly honest. My metric for this was always really simple: is this something that I would corner a friend at a party and talk to them about, you know? Is this something that I would make someone listen to me figure something out over dinner, is it something that would make your voice speed up, that you felt some sort of chemistry with, whether it's a negative chemistry, whether it's frustration, whether it's attraction; in my case it's usually the combination of those things.

I think the things that I'm most interested in are things that I feel strong opposing sentiments towards. I think that conflict is interesting. […] I rely so much on real

life to generate and to test these questions, you know, to see if they're actually interesting. […] Like the Houston essay, … technically it's about southern evangelicalism but there are parts of that essay that tap into things that almost everybody has experienced. […] I got to talk to people about it, to send up little trial balloons and now in the pandemic I can't do that at all and I'm like, "What is interesting?" You know, the only things that I found interesting, truly interesting, outside of pop culture, outside of some books and some movies, is the question of the non-existent American safety net. It's all I can think about, it's the only thing I find interesting and that's not great as a writer! So I need to find another metric for how I choose my topics if we're going to be in this pandemic for much longer.

KM: Can you walk me through your process in terms of what your first draft looks like and at what point you know this is worth a second or third draft? I'm sure it's different with every essay, but is there some kind of alchemy?

JT: It's different for every essay. I preload with a huge amount of research. I always do that. I read until I feel like I understand something, which often takes a long time. As you know, these essays [in *Trick Mirror*] are much longer than essays technically really should be. Which is for a reason; I've been writing so much on the Internet that I wanted the kind of thing that would be kind of unbearable to read on your phone, that you would need the sort of privacy of a book to be able to stand the length of them because I like writing like that, but all of these were different.

The optimization essay, the first section, I tried to get the tone—I don't know if I got it right, but I tried to get the tone satisfactory for, I would say 75 percent of the time that it took me to write that essay and I just rewrote and rewrote and rewrote that first page. And then, finally, it was like the steering wheel was on and then I just went very straight to the end because I had been thinking about all of these things for so long. So much of that essay was just me walking around very busy downtown New York

and feeling like I was going insane. There were all these storefronts that would just make me shimmer with dread, you know? They were just about move faster, be healthier, work harder. All of this, all of this all at once, and I was like, isn't it also self-evident that the things that are inefficient are the only good things in life?

The Houston essay I wrote a really bad draft straight through and then just very gradually made the entire draft better and better through seven or eight or ten drafts or whatever it was. And every time I'm in the middle of trying to write a long thing for the first time in a while I'm like, "Huh, how does this work?" Every time, I think it's not going to work. It's not. It's definitely not going to work. And sometimes it's not going to work and you have to learn that, but yeah, it's an adventure every time.

KM: That's another good question: how do you know when it's not working? Do you feel it on the page or does someone have to tell you?

JT: I had worked as an editor for a long time and I loved that work and I would think: Would I assign this as an editor, do I want to read this, would I ask someone else to write about this and am I interested in the topic itself enough? The second thing would be: Do I want to read this as a reader? I would think about it as an editor and a reader, and then I would think: Do I feel like I would have some sort of tangible pleasure or some sort of uniqueness in writing it? Could I bring anything myself, or is this just something I want to read? If all of those three things were true, then I would write it.

My metric for what I'm interested in is really off. I used to read absolutely everything that got published everywhere and I was interested in it no matter what, but there's something about the lack of real-world fluidity, the lack of real-world contact with other people that's throwing off all my senses. Everything feels so important and then everything feels so trivial at the same time. Then I compulsively speak to my friends about this and I feel that many of us are having similar kinds of off feelings sometimes.

KM: Do you keep a journal? I know you came from blogging, then to fiction, then blogging again, so when a story approaches you do you sort of say, this is an essay?

JT: I never kept a notebook. For so long I was writing at such a high volume that anything I thought was interesting would just come right out. That's kind of how I liked approaching writing, it was a way to clear your head. The things in this book were things that I felt I had some sort of issue with, something I needed to work out and was complicated enough that I wanted unlimited space to do so, which is the appeal of a book. I wanted to do them for myself, I wanted to not have any sort of specific audience in mind, which was something I'd never done before. I'd always kind of known where something was going to run and so with the book I was like, "You're going to figure these things out just for yourself." They were personal things that I wanted to put to bed and that I wanted to get on my mental hamster wheel about them and then not really think about them again because I would have figured them out to the extent that I possibly could. And for the most part that's what happened.

I started keeping a journal again in the fall after I published the book, when I was six months into this existential spiral about how much of my life I had oriented towards capitalist production. That all of the knowledge in my brain was being put to use—and put to a very specific financial use—started to freak me out. For so long it felt like I was just writing [the book] for me and then it came out and I was like: This is actually the most commodified thing I've ever done! I started keeping a notebook again and it has been really rewarding to keep just notes about the weather, but when it comes to something that I'll actually write about, I either email my editor or think about it slowly after six months and then write about it.

KM: And how do you measure where you have that bar of what is too much and what's safe? I guess another question would also be: did that change after the book?

JT: I am, I think, an extremely self-conscious person in that the mechanism of self-consciousness is kind of very central to what I write, but in my temperament I'm not self-conscious at all. That's been really important to me and I try to write the way I live, which is openly: Not thinking about my presentation too much, and I try to be honest and a decent person. The question of knowing how much to put in, knowing where it's too much: It was always whatever is necessary for the piece. There are some subjects where my introduction to the subject matter was personal and to hide that would be to conceal something important. I subscribed to the idea that one of the ways to be most fair and transparent in writing is to show your bias and to show your point of view and also to establish your authority.

There are a few essays, like the scam and the heroines essays, that were kind of really intense taxonomies and then I ended up putting myself in it so that people would keep reading so that there would be something to follow, otherwise those chapters would have been really dense. In that case it was just a craft thing. I was newly aware of it after the book came out especially with women and younger women. There's always a question of *do we like her* or *do we think she's good* and people will continue to get interested enough in that question that they will follow you a long way. After the book came out, I realized the extent to which that had been a part of it all without me really knowing it, and I got a little self-conscious about that. I think self-consciousness is really corrosive to living and writing well and I have tried to really shake that off in the sense of being known and being investigated.

It was always just: What does the essay need in order to establish the point of my interest, my personal authority or to keep people interested in what otherwise might be dense? I wanted to see if I could write a mainstream book, a kind of Trojan horse, some real density into something that would be extremely mainstream, I think.

My other secret goal for the book was I wanted to write a book that was almost entirely about women that would be seen as a book about culture.

CREATIVE NONFICTION

In Defense of *To All The Boys I've Loved Before*'s Non-Asian Boys

Helen Park

In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, Brave Orchid, Kingston's mother, is a brutally intelligent and unforgiving workhorse raising soft Americanized children. Brave Orchid recounts how Kingston's paternal aunt killed herself and her baby in love: "Carrying the baby to the well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys." While the aunt's new husband worked in America, she'd quietly grown in waist-size from seed by an unknown sower back in China. The village tries to find and punish her because they are convinced her sins are causing misfortune after misfortune to befall the households.

I read this and assure myself that because of her and her baby's intertwined, cast-iron fates, her feet did not falter walking to the lip of the well and her heartbeat did not quicken as she leapt with the little piglet on her breast. I forget as I'm reading that this is the first of many *talk-stories*, a sticky, prickly suspension of what actually happened. Maxine never finds out her aunt's real fate. To Brave Orchid, truth in *talk-story* is not the point. *Talk-story* is a forked tongue, a hand of adventitious, meandering roots. *Talk-story* is disguise, masquerade: "The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curse, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse their offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways—always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable." *Talk-story* has a purpose other than easing the audience into a clearer understanding.

In a 2018 IndieWire article, Jenny Han, the author of *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* (*TATBILB*) on which the popular Netflix film was based, was asked to comment on the lack of Asian love interests in her story. She responded, "For this, all I can say is this is the story that I wrote."

Let me tell you a story that is mine. My best friend in elementary school was a wealthy white girl. She gave me a mouse as a birthday present one year. That first night, the mouse remained in the corner of its glass cage breathing heavily, in and out, in and out, in painful accordion-bellows fashion. I watched this mouse die as I sat with my legs crossed on the floor. My tongue was cut off, but I held my breath at the same pace as this tiny, pitiful animal. My mom had flushed the brown husk down the toilet by the time I stepped onto the school bus the next morning.

When I told my friend, she flew into an unrestrained fury, wielding her blade of a finger at me. This girl and I were so very close, exchanging letters every day, playing hopscotch, and exploring backyard creeks with our bare feet. When we entered middle school, an unknown switch flipped. With the silent and unrelenting imperative of puberty, this trigger compelled me to sit with a group of Korean girls in the cafeteria for the first time. We became the new congregation, the new border. In an instant, my best childhood friend became just another white face. I ignored her greetings in class and when she sat next to me at the lunch table. I deleted all her emails. I was indifferent to the wind of her hand trying to reach for me in the hallway. She drifted soon enough to be with her own, as I now had my own.

My own looked, smelled, dressed, ate, and talked like me. A flock of garlic cloves with straight black hair and hooded, monolid looks. Without them, I would have turned into Maxine's aunt: "a bright dot in blackness, without home, without a companion, in eternal cold and silence." White kids, I was learning through unconscious and conscious cues, occupied and consumed the world with the ease and obliviousness only money and whiteness could purchase. They indulged in the foreign practice of "being themselves," laughing with their mouths wide open, raising

their hands straight up in class, participating in every space without fear. I resented them and I envied them; I looked down on their doughy character and desired their toothy facility.

Lara Jean, the protagonist in *TATBILB*, is a half-Korean, half-white girl who lives in a large, immaculate house with her two sisters and white doctor father. Although she is somewhat of a loner, she does have black and white friends and acquaintances. Her love interests include one black boy and a handful of white boys. At this I simply shrug: the depiction of Lara Jean's circles was pretty reflective of the plane the Lara Jean types inhabited at my school, anyway. More than my hatred for white kids was my scorn for the Lara Jeans I knew. Their mixed phenomes and parents' six-figure incomes afforded implicit membership into the white-verse. The Lara Jeans dressed, spoke, and smelled white; their beauty was from both a Western-enough and Western-transcendent origin (in my teenhood, a fraction of Asian was alluring while full Asian was not). They were not truly Korean; they were all inherent traitors. All the while, I was taping my eyelids in secret, blinking back tears and praying; my facial moles were burned off by acid in the backroom of a Korean hair salon; I squeezed into bell-bottoms and block-heeled Steve Maddens. To my disappointment and shame, no matter what I tried, I failed to alchemize in the bucket of Optic White.

When Brave Orchid talks-story about warrior women like Fa Mu Lan, Kingston decides to journey into the mountains to be trained under the guidance of an old man and woman. After she is able to dilate her pupils at will, run alongside the swiftest deer and leap peak to peak, the old couple teaches her in dragon ways. Because of the sheer, immeasurable size of dragons, she has to learn to "make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes. Pearls are bone marrow; pearls come from oysters.... Sometimes the dragon is one, sometimes many."

My Korean girlfriends and I, born with skin like parchment, straight hair full of our mother's jjigae, pan-flat faces and half-moon eyes, serrated intelligence and molar-strong will, underwent our own warrior journeys. We had white, brown, and Latinx friends; we played tennis, ran

track, performed in band and choir, and hung up photos and oil still-life paintings. We went underage clubbing and drank gin and rum, listened to Kpop, Britney, and Nas, got tattoos on our backs and highlights in our hair. Brown and white boys kept their distance in school; brown and white men followed us in their cars. We went to Sunday school, loved God, fell from God, had sex, and got raped. We attended Korean school in the evening and Space Camp down in Florida. Our parents kicked us out of the house.

There were terrible, terrible fights with my mom, living in my car for weeks, but the sacrifices my parents made for my brother and me were seared into my flesh, and the eternal, lingering smell of burnt skin always led me back to them. When my mom told me a cop pulled her over, screaming and threatening her because she didn't immediately understand a detour sign at a busy intersection, I stopped hearing her words and saw red: the viscous blood of that cop pouring like paint over my hands.

You may read Lara Jean as Korean, whether part or full, but: Lara Jean never got her hair cut in the living room with a sharpened pair of school scissors or received a jacket every winter that was hand-sewn with discounted Joann Fabric fleece. Lara Jean never slept in the van on family vacation and brushed her teeth in McDonald's bathrooms. When she did stay in a hotel, she never slurped ramen heated in a rice cooker that was lugged around. Lara Jean's parents were not told to take the back entrance and didn't wait to be served until they took the hint and left. People didn't mock-slow their words when talking to her dad at the store. Co-workers didn't take credit for her mom's work, exploiting her weak English and getting promoted instead. Kids didn't wrinkle their noses at Lara Jean's fermented food or mimic her slit eyes by pulling on their own. Lara Jean never fantasized about pulling all these racists' heads back by their hair and pressing down on their eyeballs until they gurgled out an apology. Lara Jean never just watched all this happening and assured herself that she would always be a coward.

Kingston's aunt Moon Orchid spirals out of sanity after coming to the United States. Brave Orchid finally says, "The difference between mad people and sane people… is that

sane people have variety when they talk story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over." Reader, let me tell you another story. I fell for a white boy in high school, surprise, surprise. He was soft-spoken, short and scrawny with a beakish nose. I didn't know too much about him, although we had attended the same schools since first grade. His father would visit us in elementary school to read from *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. His burly arms would cradle the small, green hardcover book and he would push up his glasses before narrating in a gravelly baritone. I loved when he read to us. I imagined my crush to be humble, kind, and smart—I extended such grace to this white boy I barely knew. I did understand he was white and therefore unattainable. During our brief, awkward exchanges in Spanish class, this white boy—from his eyes to his toes—would face me squarely and patiently listen as I stammered out some words. This act alone inundated me with love. The only other male to gift me this degree of attention was my dad. You may be suspicious of the race of Lara Jean's love interests, but the more fantastical and jarring quality in my mind as I watched the *TATBILB* film was how the boys listened to her. And when I mean listened, I mean something different from just hearing the words come out of her mouth. In the movie, the male love interests maintain eye contact, keep quiet in both hands and speech, reflect on what Lara Jean says, and respectfully probe into her story to better understand how she feels. Instead of keeping themselves front and center, they keep her emotional struggle front and center. The boys' whiteness and blackness I can accommodate—I was instead fascinated watching their conversational deference to both her introspective monologues and insecure sputtering. I was baffled by the delicacy of their physical and auditory presence.

I grew up in a Korean evangelical church with Korean boys who were either Kkangpae posers, with baggy jeans, souped-up Civics, and oversized Tommy Hilfiger or Calvin Klein tees, who smoked and failed school, or were reclusive, childish holy boys spoon-fed by their ummas, squealing about fantasy football and who was gayer than whom. The Korean boys called me "femi-nazi" and "man-hater" because of my outspokenness and asked me why

I wore Timberland sweatpants instead of tight jeans that showed my ass. It was expected that whites would bully—spitting on us, throwing food at us, calling us chink and geisha and sushi roll and chicken fried rice—but to receive such misogynistic cruelty from the brothers of my own blood? Not much has changed my perspective two decades later. They interrupt and yell over women; they lounge and talk on the couch while their female counterparts stand over the stove or over the sink. Their ideal wife has dewy skin, submits to God and husband, gives birth, and happily unlearns her last name.

There are an infinite number of ways that authors will fail the expectations of their readership, let alone the political expectations of their time. If you criticize the lack of racial representation and parity from stories like Jenny's, then you aren't really listening. Lara Jean was a privileged half-Korean and half-white girl played by a full-blooded Vietnamese actress in the *TATBILB* film. Her love interests were able-bodied and rich and meant to read as cis-gendered male. Where is the lashing for Jenny's stance on these aspects? Why selectively target race when you can gut the whole tale? Having female, trans, queer, disabled, brown, working-class love interests (let alone protagonists and villains) is a beautiful and necessary goal. However, you do not make it there by dictating the rules of her story. I don't care how well-intentioned you are—you are removing power from her hands and placing it into your ivory, moralizing ones. *Le grand K* is not to write stories of what should be, but rather to have so many stories by so many diverse artists that the world drowns in the sheer volume. So what if none of Jenny's boys were Asian? What about the agency of her voice? Whose creed must the storyteller kowtow to for approval among the unending and infinitesimal litter of benchmarks? Accusing an Asian woman writer of Orientalist concessions is a shallow and conceited drill that used to anger me, but now just bores me. Don't tell her what or what not to write, don't tell her what or what not to mean. Put us in a room and most likely Jenny, Kingston, and I would not see eye-to-eye on anything except the universality of a mother's broken back. Resist the temptation of naively going under the knife like

Korematsu did. You don't carve out her tongue because you believe it will heighten her sense of sight.

Kingston recounts, "Long ago in China, knot-makers tied string into buttons and frogs, and rope into bell pulls. There was one knot so complicated that it blinded the knot-maker. Finally an emperor outlawed this cruel knot, and the nobles could not order it anymore." The adult in me loves Lara Jean for her vulnerability and sweetness, her firmness and self-assuredness. The girl in me hates Lara Jean for her white access and money, her non-sleepy eyes, and delicate scent. Listen, Lara Jean would never have fallen for a full-blooded Korean boy, let alone cross paths with one due to their differing planes of existence. If anything, in future rom-coms, cast some Korean boys not as love interests but as the asshole classmates who laugh about how easy she must be. Listen, I love my Korean brothers; I would fight bare-knuckled and blind for them. We met in each other's cribs, played tag between the pews and cut up together. I see them wrestle with a world that tends to pity, patronize, and fear them. Their talk-stories would undoubtedly conflict with mine. Theirs would sweep away my sandcastles without a thought.

Whatever Jenny's reasoning in putting out her story with these particular characters, I rest simply in the fact that she decided to tell it. Representation is a manacle parading as a crown, and talking-story doesn't need to prove itself. The point of the knot is not to untie it.

Helen Park's *creative nonfiction and poetry appear in* Sleet Magazine*,* Inertia Magazine*,* Cleaver Magazine*,* Eclectica Magazine*,* Visitant Lit*,* and Yellow as Turmeric, Fragrant as Cloves: A Contemporary Anthology of Asian American Women's Poetry*, and others. She is working on her first novel.*

Trauma Mama

Cassie Premo Steele

I don't think, if I hadn't had training in how to be a mother from my stepdaughter, that I would have been a very good mother at all. I had too much trauma, too much emotional baggage that I'd carried through many midnight flights in sketchy airports, too many automatic urges to scream and yell and cajole and blame and hit.

I couldn't do that. She wasn't mine. I hadn't given birth to her or brought her into the world. I had a responsibility to take care of what wasn't mine the same way a person is extra careful at a friend's dinner party to be polite and offer to help clean up and compliment the food.

One Christmas when she was around six, we were trying to put up the Christmas tree. Her dad was using a steak knife to trim the lower branches and I'd gotten out the broom because needles were falling all over the carpet. She picked up the broom, in the way that children do when there is tension. She started wielding it all over the room and it whacked into the glass front of the combination TV/stereo holder.

"Stop!" I cried. "Do I have to scream at you every minute?!" I yelled.

She stopped. Held the broom still. Looked straight into my eyes and smiled.

"Yes," she said. "I guess you do."

We laughed.

I never yelled at her again.

She'd taught me my lesson.

At some point between the Christmas broom incident and the birth of her sister, she started putting "To St. Mom" on the pictures she drew for me.

She called me St. Mom. Short for step.

It wasn't always this way. At first, she called me Cassie, and her dad let her sit in the front seat of the car in her booster seat while I sat in the back when we went out to dinner. My Icelandic roommate was horrified when she and her son joined us one night.

"It's disrespectful," she whispered to me in the back seat as he drove. "You're his partner. You're an adult. A person doesn't put their children first like this."

I nodded. I knew it. I just felt I couldn't do anything about it. I didn't want to come between a parent and their child. I was all messed up.

To be a stepparent, or a good one anyway, is in many ways to be a saint.

To sacrifice yourself for the good of the family. To keep the peace. To let the birth parents take the lead. To communicate your needs clearly and calmly. To compromise regularly. To make the well-being of the child your top priority.

I did all that. Like a boss. Because she loved me. And I was not about to mess up a child's life, no matter what it cost me.

Later, when my stepdaughter learned that my birth name was Mary, she started calling me by this name. She is the only one who has ever done this.

I guess I was called Mary when I was a baby, but I don't remember it. I do remember walking into my mother's bedroom when I was a toddler and saying, *Call me Cassie*.

I didn't want to be Mary. There were too many Marys in our family. The mother of Jesus. My Aunt Mary Ann. My mom's Aunt Mary. Sister Marie Denis. My babysitter, Mary Nikolai.

My mom was wearing a long orange dress, sitting at her dressing table and attaching a clip-on earring to her ear. She paused, looked at me, and nodded. It was the late sixties. She was in graduate school at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. We lived in an upstairs flat. My dad got sick a lot. She was going out for the night. What was she going to do in that moment, argue with me about my new name? She nodded. And so I changed my name from Mary to Cassie.

But my stepdaughter reclaimed my name Mary like a coat I'd left in the lost and found and gave it back to me.

"Here," she said. "Wear this when you need it. It will keep you warm."

When she started calling me Mary, I knew she loved me.

That's why I was able to stop yelling.

That's why I felt ready to have a baby.

When I became pregnant with my daughter, the doctor discovered that I have a heart-shaped uterus.

In most cases, the uterus starts out in the fetus as a heart-shaped organ and widens into an oval. Mine didn't. So my daughter, from 20 weeks of gestation, had her head stuck in the upper right curve of my heart-shaped uterus.

What this meant, according to the laws of my state, was that I couldn't have a natural birth with a midwife but had to schedule a C-section.

It strikes me, now that my daughter is twenty, that the legal hyper-regulation over women's bodies has only increased since then. And how easily we as women are controlled in these ways.

I tried everything I could to turn the baby—acupuncture, moxibustion, massage, visualization, hand stands in a pool, legs up the wall—but I decided not to have a doctor try to move her manually. This could have resulted in a sudden onset of labor or damage to the baby or me.

I was, once again, having to accept my belly.

The surgeon used an old laparoscopy scar to open me and take out the baby; a wide-mouthed, vernix-laden, beautiful, 21-inch and 8-pound, 10-ounce daughter.

So now my scar was a little wider. A little deeper. And once again, it hurt.

Becoming a mother, then, was the entry point my body used to wake me to the pain I had been feeling most

of my life. And this was how I would come to healing.

The first time my stepdaughter met her sister, she came to the hospital with her mother and brought presents.

Her mother gave me a beautiful book of art and poetry about motherhood. She inscribed it, saying that we are both mothers now. I still have that book; it sits on a shelf on the side table next to me where I keep my tea while I write.

My stepdaughter, who was eleven and wore corduroy pants and a green t-shirt, brought a stuffed black cat. She had a cat at our house named Kali and she wanted the baby to have a cat, too.

And she played violin for us. Right there in the hospital room where her entire family had gathered in one place in peace, her father and mother and baby sister and me, she serenaded us.

There is a photo of her holding the baby in a wooden rocking chair in the hospital room, and her arm is crooked up and her head is tilted down as if she is listening, as if she is saying to her sister, "I'm here. I'm listening. I'll always be here. I'll always be listening."

I taught one class at the local university when my daughter was a newborn, a small, women's studies class on Motherhood that I designed myself, a mix of poetry, memoir, feminist theory, history, philosophy, and cultural studies.

I left her one night a week with my husband and drove downtown. My body was unencumbered and free. My mind lit up at the readings we discussed and the faces of the eight young women in a circle in the classroom with me.

And when I got home, my husband was asleep, mouth open, exhausted, with Lily, sweaty from crying herself to sleep, in his arms. She refused to take a bottle until she was five months old, and when she was with me, she nursed almost constantly, so these few hours once a week were torture for both of them.

I didn't feel guilty.

Somehow in becoming a mother, I had let go of my desire to save everyone from pain, including myself. Once I let pain in, I could no longer try to do everything myself. I began learning to allow myself and my needs to be painted into the picture.

I first heard the saying, "One child, one tooth," when I was pregnant. An old wives' tale: you lose the equivalent of the calcium of one tooth in order to produce a baby.

Ha, I thought at the time. Not me. I am eating so healthily. So much milk. So little chocolate. No caffeine, which robs the body of calcium. I had never eaten healthier. I will keep my teeth.

I should have known better.

In ancient mythology, the mouth is an "upper womb," the birthplace of breath and the word. This is why the entrance to the "lower womb" is said to have "lips." Lips are feminine symbols, what we kiss with, what is soft, what connects us to ourselves and to each other.

The teeth, though, are destructive. They belong to a Terrible Mother, a womb armed with teeth.

The first real trial of mothering, after the initial shock, comes with teething. Four, five months into the experience, just when the baby is cute and chubby, the skin is clear and glowing, and everyone in the house is more or less sleeping until dawn, the first tooth announces its arrival.

Screams in the black of night.

You wait for this moment like people at war wait for news of enemy fire. *Have you been through it?* you ask other mothers with older babies. *What was it like? How did you survive?*

The terrible part about it, for me, I would say to other mothers, when we were through it, was the lack of language. I couldn't tell her why this was happening. She just looked at me, eyes saucers of tears, and I had no words she would understand.

But the worst part, the part I wouldn't tell other mothers once it was over, the part that secretly made me believe I was a terrible mother, was how I learned to ignore her cries. Just let the baby put herself back to sleep, the books said. You don't want to set up a pattern. So I did. And she learned. And soon, we were all sleeping through the night again.

You have to just wait for the tooth to poke through. Then the pain recedes.

I waited for my stepdaughter's period like I waited for that first tooth. But this time, I was armed. I had my book. I had words. Stories. Myth and ritual. I was ready.

When it came, she was at her mother's house. As it should be. She told us over the phone. She said she didn't want to make a big deal out of it.

That weekend when she was at our house, we invited her best friend, Rachel, out to dinner. To announce the period. To celebrate. But quietly.

Laura whispered the news to Rachel under the noise of silverware and never-ending pasta bowls. I gave Rachel a signed copy of my book. And that was that.

That night, brushing her teeth, Laura's last baby tooth came out. She put it under her pillow for the tooth fairy. Girlhood and womanhood spent the night in the same bed.

One child, one tooth.

I taught a course on third world women's writing when my daughter was nine months old.

It wasn't originally listed with this theme. Some full professor had been named the Endowed Chair of Jesus Christ and Privilege and he'd been scheduled to teach a class on Poststructuralism.

So I'd been given his class. And instead of teaching three months of white men from Europe, I taught this.

We were in a big ovular circle, doing a "check-in," saying what we've learned from the unit. On borders.

The pain of history. Being an "other" in America.

"I like how Teresa Cha took her mother's history and extracted it from silence," said one woman student who reminded me of a large, regal, and sedated horse, and who, early in the semester, announced she had a social anxiety disorder and was on medication "as if anybody couldn't notice."

"That's an interesting word you use," I said. "Extraction." I poke my own chipped tooth with my tongue, quickly. "Like with a tooth. As Cha says, the pain of not speaking is greater than the pain to say. It hurts to have a tooth taken out, but it is not as great as leaving a rotten tooth in."

"It's got to come out," the dentist said, the day after that class when I waxed poetic about extraction.

The tooth I'd chipped on popcorn two days earlier has become painful, and I'd come in to get it repaired, and she poked around in there, spelunking, exclaiming.

"What is going on in here?" she said and asked for an X-ray. Later, she came back and declared, "It's got to come out. The only way to save this tooth is to have a root canal and two crowns and even then it could decay further."

"Okay," I said, accepting my punishment. She started to take it out and it crumbled. I heard the crunch as a piece popped onto my tongue.

"Nope. I'm going to let the oral surgeon do this," she said, and gave me an address. I stood up. Dismissed.

Later that afternoon, in the oral surgeon's chair, I felt the air where my tooth has been, and I began to taste compassion and carefully roll it around in my mouth.

I used my tongue and placed the word over the empty space inside, beginning to sense what was I'd lost since becoming a stepmother and then a mother.

The pain that was gone.

As a result of caring.

Carefully.

Learning.

How to care.

For myself.

The thing is that when the pain is extracted, the anger has space to arise.

I had joined a gym when Lily was six months old, and four months later, after attending classes five days a week, I approached the aerobics instructor shyly.

The surgeon at Lily's birth had cut the muscles of my abdomen so I had a little C-section pouch that hung over my pubic area, and despite months of sit-ups and crunches, it wouldn't go away.

The aerobics instructor was a perky southern blonde who weighed about 95 pounds. But I knew she had children. So I whispered to her about my floppy pubic belly, asked her advice on what exercises would tighten it.

"Oh, honey," she said. "Do what I did. Get a tummy tuck."

I walked away and went to pick up my daughter from the childcare room, blinking back tears, remembering the words of the surgeon during my post C-section appointment when I had tried to complain about the way the belly flopped down.

"Your baby has a cute, floppy belly," he said. "Now you do, too."

I was pissed. I felt like the patriarchy had come in and knifed me in the belly and here I was, trying to get rid of the belly, but resentful that the solution I was being offered was another knife and another surgeon.

I went home and ate a pint of ice cream on the kitchen floor with my daughter.

What does it mean to be a mother of a toddler? Time slows. An hour is a century. The fatigue is heavy. Making roads out of blocks, each colored piece across the carpet another tick of the clock. Holding on until night when your body can take a break.

One Sunday night after my daughter had gone to bed in her new big girl bed, I went to the pantry to get a treat. There was a bag of Dove chocolate hearts in there that I'd been saving and craving all day.

I opened the door. They were not there.

Anger ignited in me like a pilot light. I grabbed the phone, called my stepdaughter who'd gone back to her mother's house that afternoon, and demanded to know where she'd put them. I was full of rage and blame.

"I didn't take them, Mary," she said. "I swear. I didn't even know they were there."

"Okay," I said, taking a deep breath and telling her I was sorry.

And then I went searching until I found them underneath my toddler daughter's bed.

Well, not the chocolate bars themselves, but the empty bag and all the wrappers.

I laughed hysterically, shaking my head, amazed at my own stupidity for thinking I could hide something from my daughter or blame my stepdaughter for what I should have done better myself as a mother.

I called my stepdaughter back. Apologized. We laughed.

That mixture of anger and sorrow – that, too, is what it is to be a mother.

The anger never really completely went away, though. It was as if a small child in me had had her chocolate stolen and she was still mad.

I consoled myself with sweets.

Sometime around the time my daughter entered middle school, I trained myself not to say that my puffy belly was still baby weight.

More than a decade had passed, and I was ready to stop blaming.

Maybe my belly was mine and was beautiful.

Maybe the ectopic pregnancy was an experience that held deep lessons for me in learning to say what I wanted sexually.

Maybe the pain after was a way for me not to see my body as the enemy, but to work with it and turn the feelings into words.

Maybe the heart-shaped uterus was beautiful, a symbol of how caring and compassionate I am.

Maybe my daughter wanted her head up near my heart and sternum so she could hear my heartbeat and voice better as she turned her neck up toward me.

Maybe the C-section was a way of saving my body from the pain of a natural birth that may have been difficult for me as a survivor of childhood sexual trauma.

Maybe the extra weight around the belly was a way of signaling, "I am a mother. I haven't starved myself or let a knife cut me and take the memory away. This is my belly. This is my scar. These are the words of my body."

We were at a little women's party, Lily and I, a going-away party for a woman with whom I had taught writing and yoga workshops.

We were eating bread and cheese and carob-covered strawberries on blankets in a backyard, and talking as women do, about food and our families, travel and our bodies, when suddenly from down the street we heard a horrendous noise: a neighbor started up his chainsaw and was cutting wood.

We could barely hear each other anymore over the roaring. And then I turned and saw Lily at the fence. She was bobbing up and down to the rhythm of the motor. Smiling. She heard the beat in everything.

There is an ancient Egyptian term for what our mothers give us in the womb: "ab." It means "heart-soul," and it is a gift from the heart of one's mother.

As a verb, the word means "to dance."

Mid-week, early evening, we looked at the clock. Dinner was done and Lily wouldn't be sleepy for over an hour. Sometimes parenting is a matter of killing time. Meili decides to put on a record, a nice, slow, piano sonata. Something we hadn't played since Lily's birth.

When the music started, Lily got up from her pile of books and walked over to the stereo. She stared at it, then slowly moved toward the middle of the room.

She raised one arm in the air, put the other over her heart, and began to turn. Her left foot stayed in place while her right leg pivoted around and around.

She had never danced this way before.

We looked at each other, amazed, as she spun, completing revolution after revolution.

Preparing for a lecture on Assia Djebar's *Fantasia*, a story of the relation between love and rape and colonialism in Algeria, I was reading a history of Islam. And there, I found a description of the whirling dervish, with one arm outstretched, one arm to the heart or the earth, as the dancer spun faster and faster into ecstasy.

This ecstasy led to the realization that there is no reality but God. We are all, then, potentially divine, as the self joyously unites with the universe.

My daughter's presence opened my eyes to my own past, to the pain that had blinded me for so long from seeing real joy.

One summer when my daughter was a toddler, I taught an eight-week workshop on writing and healing.

I had asked the class to pair up and to take turns leading each other around a small courtyard on campus. The one who is being led has her eyes closed.

As I watched them being led, I saw them suddenly as babies. I saw how vulnerable they were in their human bodies—in need of guidance, a hand to hold, comfort in moving forward.

I saw, too, which of them had mothers who took joy in

them—who healed themselves, their own spirits, enough to be able to be present to their baby's needs, to laugh with the first laughs, to respond with compassion to the first falls.

And I thought of my daughter, not a baby anymore, but beginning to see *me*. To see that there are many mamas in the world and to call me "Me me Mama." To claim me as hers. To call herself mine.

I thought of how she found a shell in my room one day, the shell I'd received as a symbol of my healing at the end of an eight-week group with sexual abuse survivors, and came to find me.

"Me me Mama?" she called until she found me in the kitchen, then handed me the shell.

"Thank you," I said to her, "Yes, that's mine."

"Me me Mama?"

"Yeah, me, yeah," I said, picking her up and looking at the shell with her. "I'm your Mama. And you're my baby. No matter how big you get, you'll always be my baby."

"Me me Mama," she said as she hugged me.

"Yeah, me, yeah. I'm yours," I say, holding her strong toddler body in my arms. "And you're mine."

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Molding Clay Faces

Mercia Kandukira

This essay interweaves the narrator's personal experience growing up in Namibia with her exploration of the traumatic cultural and emotional consequences of rape, silence, and memory.

I get off the blue Binghamton University bus on Leroy Street, thank the bus driver, and hop onto the sidewalk. Rusty maple leaves crack under my chucks. My mind is an endless chatter. I must call Vetjituavi today, no more excuses. My hands are snug in my pockets. I squeeze the warm keys that I keep on a black string as I get to the porch. The year is 2019 and I just turned thirty-one but the four-year-old me needs comforting, and Vetjituavi will know how. Vetjituavi and I have comforted each other inside a gutted old truck that lay abandoned in the sands of the Omaruru riverbed where a serpent once held us hostage. I recall this incident as my first ever brush with death. We'd fought and were bawling snot and tears when the boomslang popped its head out of one of the crevices, its beady side eyes staring us down and compelling us to hug like twins in the womb.

A few nights ago, I had one of those dreams again. I cried out loud in my sleep and scared the shit out of some guy I had just fucked. In the morning I told him I dreamt someone was trying to rape me, but I do not tell him it was him in the dream. I cried after I let him penetrate me and he couldn't understand why. I told him it was guilt, another lie.

I check the mailbox, get into my apartment and turn up the heat. The floor starts breathing. After I drop my backpack on the couch, I call Vetjituavi on WhatsApp. The network in Namibia is shitty, but we talk until MTC cuts the call. Today, I am determined to excavate the past. Vetjituavi must tell me what I made her and the other kids on the reservation do before I tell her about the elusive strange man that lives in my head.

"So, what was it I made you do?" I ask staring at my iPhone screen. Vetjituavi has just stepped in from work. She's wearing a navy-blue uniform.

"I never told you?" she asks. Her cheeks are plump, not quite like I remember her back in Omutiuanduko. She was a skinny kid with pus oozing out her ears and I was the strong one who carried a gallon of milk like it was nothing. She tells me this and I picture us as three- and four-year-old toddlers in that semi-desert we call home. When she tilts her phone, I see a little girl napping on the couch covered in a quilt.

"No, you never told me," I say as I balance my phone against some books stacked on top of each other on my study desk. I am worried she blames me for something terrible I do not remember.

"Oh?" She adjusts herself in her seat. The light is dim in her apartment.

"Yeah," I nod at the image on my phone, "and I have been wondering for years what exactly it was I made you do."

"Oh, well it was nothing major," she assures me. "I don't know if you were curious or if you were just trying to experiment, but you made us drink your pee."

I laugh, relieved. I didn't make them do anything kinky. I don't remember if I apologize. She continues talking.

"If anyone ever asks me whether I have tasted pee in my life, I will say yes. I still remember the warmth of it as I swallowed." I scrunch my face.

"Oh, that's terrible," I react and get to the point of the call. "I called to ask you details of our childhood, you know, about the rapes and stuff?"

"Oh, yeah, you mentioned something about rape when we spoke earlier. Tell me more." I see her lean closer. I can see her whole face; her lower eyelids look dark. I know that haggard look, I've seen it in my reflection so many times. Among the rapes we have in common, there is one exclusive to me. I mention the man who'd come to our

house on the reservation for sweet milk tea, or tombo, with the adults.

"That man raped me too," I tell her.

Vetjituavi starts to sniffle before she wipes her eyes.

"Are you crying?" I ask.

She cannot speak and we take a moment.

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to make you cry."

I lean back into my chair and glance at my sticky note-plastered wall. The top sticky note has the words whore, slut, bitch, prostitute written in all caps under each other like a list. Women who have a lot of sex are assigned these titles. Next to the sticky note, a pink-nailed, female hand sticker gives me the finger.

"You know," I start, "last year I wrote poems about the rapes and read them to my classmates. I broke down in tears. It was embarrassing."

She sniffles but is composed.

"Don't say," she responds. We haven't spoken in years but when we speak, we are no strangers.

"Yeah, I don't know what's happening to me. I never cry in front of people." I don't remember what she says in response, but I ask her again, if she remembers the man who was not related to us but who used to come to the house. She mentions a name, but it refuses to stick. She says that the man is dead.

"He was a serial rapist in Omutiuanduko," she informs me.

"Oh, really?" I ask, realizing that I was not the only one, that there are other girls who were raped by this man. "When did he die?" I ask her.

"About five years ago, I think." Vetjituavi visits Omutiuanduko every other year in December and is up to date with the deaths and births on the reservation.

The man I wished dead for a portion of my life is finally dead, but it hurts that he's dead. Death is too easy. He lived a long, happy life raping children with no consequence, and then he just rested in peace. He's now

all jawbone and sand when once he was a tangible man under whose weight I strained for breath. Now for all I know he's a phantom, a product of my imagination. If I am to regain my sanity, I need to know the man was real. I need a mental picture of the man I last saw twenty-seven years ago.

After the call, I hold my breath and feel my body tingle, like when you're dizzy, cold and hot at the same time. I'd imagined myself going back to Omutiuanduko to find that man and have him pay for his crime, but like soft soil, he's slipped through my fingers. All I have are memories, muffled sounds, and sadness. I ask Google how much a six-foot-tall African man would weigh, and I am given a range. He would weigh 136.4 to 183.9 pounds if he really was six feet tall. He was a giant to me. I was a frail barefoot thing with a bulging tummy running around naked on a reservation. Thankfully, I broke my arm at around age six or seven and was rushed to the children's ward at Windhoek Central Hospital. I lived with Papa from then on.

One of the Bible stories Papa read me as a child was David and Goliath. Papa always bought me illustrated Bible stories. We'd lay across his bed when he returned from work and he'd read me those beautifully illustrated stories. I remember the oil painting of a Jewish boy with a slingshot around his neck and a pouch filled with pebbles strapped to a leather belt at his waist. He stands by a brook, one foot on a dead giant's chest. In his hands, the Jewish boy holds the giant's severed head over his own, blood dripples to the soil. Papa says David is triumphant. When I ask him what a triumph is, Papa says, "as iemand wen."

I do not picture myself triumphant in the wake of this man's death. In an alternate universe, I would hold his heavy head up high and I'd savor the feeling of blood trickling down my biceps laughing in relief that the threat is over, but since *this* is the realm in which I exist, the threat is not over. I have to hold something else over my head, like a torch to shed light on the ills around us. I ponder on this man's life and on those like him still on the prowl. I am troubled by the vagueness of his existence and the quietness of his passing. Bleached by the lapsing

of time, his image has faded to the point of oblivion. My mind recalls no name, no voice, no story, only the sensations for which I battle to find words.

Ranked number one on an internet list as one of the best for rape survivors is a book by Bessel van der Kolk, titled *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. I read the part where van der Kolk says:

> *"In the case of rape victims and people who were trapped in traumatic situations, unlike those who could run away from the source of danger when adrenaline kicked in, the brain continued to send signals to the body to escape a danger that no longer existed, long after the actual event was over."*

Van der Kolk's statement triggers a memory in which I am a teenager taking a nap on the couch at Papa's house in Windhoek. A jolt wakes me up. There's a veiny hand on my shoulder and when I look up two faces, one male and one female, contorted by a strange wonder, look down at me. They call attention to the strange manner in which I sleep. They advise me to always wash my hands when I wake up. I look for my hands. One hand is snug in my underwear, it has formed a crescent holding tightly onto my lady bits. I was in no danger at Papa's house, neither am I now but I often catch myself holding onto my lady parts when I fall asleep.

I want to heal and be over this rape. Van der Kolk suggests that to heal I should articulate in concrete details the emotions triggered by my traumatic experience. It's difficult to recall my emotions without recalling images.

After my shower, I tie my bushy hair up in a high bun, moisturize my face, and throw on an oversized white T-shirt with the words "Everything is Cooler in Namibia" printed on it. I sit in the center of my bed like the Buddha and keep reading *The Body Keeps the Score* on my Kobo. I feel like I am reading a letter addressed to me. Someone somewhere took time to understand the minds of traumatized women.

Scattered fragments of images exist in my mind and this, I learned, is the case with traumatic memory. Van der Kolk assures me that it's okay if I do not remember everything logically and cohesively. I'm starting to feel less crazy now as I start to remember another image.

This time, I am four and I am at the reservation. I see my hand enclosed in the strange man's hand, like when you squeeze a latex stress ball and the liquid inside gives way. There's a lone, concrete step that leads to the pantry near the fireplace where we just had sweet tea with goatmilk. It is daylight and I follow him like a doomed child-bride into a matrimonial chamber. Cornmeal is spilled onto the rough floor like confetti. I sense the dark coolness of the pantry and the overwhelming sense of solitude. I hear voices fading into the distance. The pantry's sonorous door clanks shut, blocks out the light. It is quiet in the pantry, save for the *slush-slush* of the man's sandals against cornmeal on the floor. The floor is rough like concrete slabs on a Binghamton sidewalk. I recall this cool roughness against my bare back, the light seeping in through the cracks under the door and through the tiny holes in the roof.

I remember how the old people bought us grape-flavored Chappies bubblegum, which we chewed until the sweetness was over. We spat the still purple gum onto our palms and reluctantly handed them over to big, adult hands. The adult hands combined the mass into big balls that the agile males used as putty to block the tiny holes in the corrugated iron roofing sheets. I remember my hole stuffed, my breath escaping me as I waited like a log for the fire to burn out so that I could escape with my remains.

I have envisioned a different reality for myself countless times and have told different variations of the narrative concerning the invasion of my body. I love the story where I am a virgin till age twenty-one, and I have sex for the first time with a guy called Alvin, and I do not cry when he does me. However, the story of a twenty-one-year-old virgin is not mine. My story is of a four-year-old who lost her virginity before she knew what it was. I remember and misremember my past, but that's how memory is. Memory is as the dunes of the Namib Desert, an ever-changing sculpture, molded and remolded by the seasonal winds.

*

The day a boyfriend I was seeing coaxed me into telling him my body count, I wrote a numbered list on a paper:

1. Uncle 1 (rape)

2. Uncle 2 (rape)

3. Strange man (rape)

4. Alvin 1st boyfriend etc.

Previous lists had excluded rapes and flings. The strange man on my list has no face. He resembles the deformed, faceless clay people I molded in Mrs. Dolly's first grade art class. An image of the strange man's toes appears like a projection on a whitewashed wall. The man's toes are big, flat, ashy and in homemade tire sandals. The straps are fastened to the sole with wires. The wires in my head are touching. Memories I had repressed are coming back to me.

There's a young man van der Kolk refers to in his book who had repressed a memory from when he was a boy in a parish where a priest had molested him. The young man doesn't remember the story. Like me, he remembered images. He remembered how the priest never wore his cassock, the strip poker they played in a room he describes in detail. He remembers bending over in front of a mirror, the priest's finger up his butt. The young man had repressed these images but certain sexual inuendo like "you give good head" from his girlfriend triggered the memories that resulted in seizures. The young man is described as having curled up into a fetal position tormented by those memories.

The idea of fetal positions reminds me of an incident with the boyfriend for whom I wrote a list. I had shown him a Pinterest quote: "Fuck me like you hate me." Told him to fuck me hard. Halfway through the panting and moaning I could not handle any more thrusting.

"It's very painful," I cried, curling up as I applied pressure onto my lower abdomen. The lower half of my body was limp in pain immeasurable. I got off the bed and lay on the cold ceramic tiles of my one-bedroom apartment in Walvis Bay, hysterical, sweating, and dizzy.

The boyfriend was dazed. His hand hovered over me, like when you suspect the stove surface is hot, but you want to know for certain, so you bring your hand closer and then pull it back.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked concerned, and I just bawled like a woman in labor, squeezing my lower abdomen with my forearms. Once the cramps were gone, I rushed to the bathroom. My body was chilled and covered in bumps like a freshly plucked chicken. For a while after that incident, I approached sex with caution, like a chameleon walking on a branch, measuring each step. We decided to lay off the sex while I figured out the reason for the pain.

In 2016, some months after the incident, I came across an article in the *American Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology*. I'd been trying to understand why I had started experiencing pain during sex. The article concluded: "sexual abuse that occurs during childhood and again as an adult is strongly associated with pelvic pain." I am convinced that the pain I do not remember my body feeling at age four in the pantry, I was feeling as an adult.

Sometimes when I close my eyes, I still see the strange man's fat dick, the smegma under his foreskin, white. Other times, I see his eyebrows pointing at my vulva as I am squatted, exposed by the fireplace next to the pantry. If he has been dead five years, it means he's nothing but bones. I imagine holding his skull in my hand as an archeologist wondering what my specimen's face looked like. As I try to mold this faceless, strange man, I look forward to the peace of mind that will follow. Gone will be the nights where I wake up from a dream shaky like a wet kitten in the autumn breeze.

The incident in the pantry happened in Omutiuanduko and it is where I should start digging. I hope to find one bone fragment to use as a base to mold the strange man's face. In the search engine, I type Omutiuanduko, and what pops up is Ben Kandukira, also known as Big Ben, born in Omutiuanduko. Big Ben is Vetjituavi's elder brother and he's one of Namibia's beloved musicians. I decide to read up on him. The article says that Big Ben learned how

to play the guitar from a traditional four-string guitar that was given to him by a San man who lived at their homestead. The word San has a hyperlink over which I slide my mouse cursor and images of San children pop up. *A San man?* I remember there being a San man in Omutiuanduko.

"That San man is the man who raped me!" I shout out hushed at my iPhone screen, smiling alone in the privacy of my bedroom. "It's him, it's him," I say, removing my spectacles. I move to my desk, and my bed squeaks, happy for me.

"Yes, now I can write!" I knew he was of another ethnicity by the way my Herero relatives called him either Omukuruha or Omutakume. My spherical, clay head starts to transform and get a distinct ethnical physiognomy. One by one the tightly-curled hair strands, characteristic of San people, emerge and form a hairline. The whole head of hair pops up like the seedlings on a Chia pet.

Archeologists in documentaries excavate sarcophagi buried by the sands of time. They recover centuries-old bodies, and with the help of artists, historians, and "magic" as one curator once joked, reconstruct a face using the three-dimensional print-outs of skulls modelled after the discovered artifact as a base for facial reconstruction.

I type "San man" and search on YouTube. I click on an excerpt from a documentary titled "The Journey of Man" in which the geneticist, Dr. Spencer, declares the San as "an ancient tribe of people whose distant relatives left Africa and set in motion the family tree of mankind from which," he says, "stemmed every color, creed and nationality alive today." I follow Dr. Spencer as he remarks on the "high cheekbones that resemble those of Mongolians, the eye-shape of East Asians, and the mid-brown skin which can turn brighter or darker." I am ecstatic because I no longer have a blank blob of clay. I have facial features. Sure, it's not the strange man's true likeness, but I have an image with which to work. As I write I wonder how the San man ended up in Omutiuanduko.

In the week following my discovery of the San man, I reach out to Big Ben. He is my strongest source and I feel

certain he can tell me something about the San man who gave him the gift of music. But Big Ben doesn't respond when I reach out, so I call Vetjituavi again.

"What's the name of that man you said died?"

"What man?" she asks. "You mean Tjirondero?" I remember this name from a previous conversation, and she'd described him as a kind Zemba man.

"No, I mean the man you said was a serial rapist."

"That's Kahaira," she says.

"So, this man was a San man, right?"

"No. He was a Herero," she corrects me.

"What?" I ask. "He was a Herero?" I am confused. All this while, I was under the impression that the strange man who died was the same man from the pantry. Alas, I am mistaken. Was the Herero man my rapist? It cannot be. I shake my head. Vetjituavi tries to bring me back from my bewilderment.

"I guess maybe, because the man had rough hair, you thought he was a Bushman, but he was in fact a Herero."

I do not agree with Vetjituavi. I know the man who took my innocence was a bushman. I remember him at the fireplace, his skin color was brown compared to everyone else's. Everyone called him by his ethnicity like he didn't have a name. I never heard anyone refer to the San Man by name. My family called him the Bushman. Vetjituavi, upon hearing my sentiment promises to investigate the San man.

"I will ask around to see if anyone else remembers a little bushman who used to play the guitar." She uses the diminutive "okakuruha" to refer to the man I remember as a giant. The image in my mind is now distorted.

I picture a flimsy San child playing a whiny, out of tune, homemade guitar made of a cuboid oil can half the size of a high school desk. A round hole is cut into the can's belly and a stump of wood shoved through its top to create the iconic guitar shape. I picture the loose copper wires on the guitar cradled between the legs of a medium-brown San child seated on the pantry's lone step in Omutiuanduko.

Was the San man brought to the reservation as a boy years before I was born? I will never know and the thought that an innocent boy child could grow up to be a rapist startles me. What astounds me more is not knowing if the San man is dead or alive. If he is alive, I can think of two possibilities. First, he is in a jail cell for countless rapes. Second, he is a free-roaming rapist following in the footsteps of the dead man I thought was him. I'm empowered to keep searching for this man and to put a face and a name to the source of my nightmares.

As I search for the San Man, I will keep listening to my fight song, Big Ben's "Hitono Mutima." The lyrics of the song loosely translate to, "I am strong, I have no fear. Embarrass me and say what you will. I do not blink. I have cried enough and there's nothing more you can rob me of. My heart does not beat, I am strong."

I feel invincible when I listen to these lyrics: *Hitono mutima mbakukuta.* I read this song's story out loud and I feel liberated. Triumphant. Instead of David and Goliath on the oil portrait I see myself and the San man, but the San man is not a giant, he's not scary, he's a regular man and he lies prostrate under my foot. I feel the rise and fall of his breathing lungs. I do not walk away after turning him in to the authorities. I find others like him, yanking at little girls, luring them into dark corners. I hold up a torch in the night. I rip off the roofs and bulldoze the walls.

Mercia Kandukira *studies creative writing at Binghamton University. In her memoir-in-progress, Kandukira interweaves personal and cultural history, using the Ovaherero/Nama genocide from 1904-1908 as a backdrop to explore the traumatic repercussions of racial violence in Namibia.*

I Feel It In My Bones

Marise Gaughan

Sometimes I lose things and they show up exactly where I searched, ten seconds later. Is that magic, or mental fatigue? Were they always there, and I just didn't see them for a moment, or did they disappear, and then reappear, dropping off to some secret place before coming right back to me?

When I wake up in the morning, whether I've slept for four hours or thirteen, I am exhausted. It's truly a struggle to even open my eyes. *No*, I scream at my boyfriend as he leaves a plate of scrambled eggs on my dresser. He stands by the bed wearing shorts, because he's one of those dickheads who runs before the sun has even come up. I think. I'm not sure when the sun comes up, it could be 4 a.m. or 9 a.m., either way I've never seen it happen. I throw a pillow at him, and it bounces right off his muscular legs. *No, I'm not ready to be awake*, I beg, *please, please, just another five minutes*. When I wake again, I see the cold soggy eggs on my dresser, and shut my eyes once more. (Yes, I have a boyfriend who brings me breakfast in bed every morning, and yes, I am lucky, but sometimes I am so tired I forget to say thanks. Either I am a bitch, or I have a serious medical condition, and I *know* I'm not a bitch, okay?).

During the week, I have to be on a Zoom call at 10:30, so I set my alarm for 10:28. I pat down my frizz and sit up in my bed, angling my laptop screen so my pillows aren't visible. I answer the call and say as little as I'm allowed to, hoping my coworkers don't notice the sleep around my eyes, crusting over. *I will…circle…back*, I mutter out, and I watch a sea of heads nod. Saying the words "circle back" sends everyone into a trance, which buys me some time to get out of mine.

It takes me four hours to properly wake up every day. In that time, I have a Kong Strong, Lidl's brand of Red Bull, and two cold brews, which I make myself. You have to steep

the coffee in water for 48 hours, but it's supposed to be twice as strong as an espresso. I take a B12 vitamin, and three poos, because all the caffeine runs right through me. My body can't even be bothered to absorb it.

By lunchtime, I am a little bit more awake. I type at least two emails, but never more than three, and write the blog my boss has asked for—a blog that is always at least a week behind schedule. After lunch, I get sleepy, and lie down in my bed. My most tired time is between 3 p.m. and 5 p.m. I can't even imagine what it would feel like to form a thought during those hours.

I am just so tired all the damn time. I know it isn't normal. But it's normal for me. I've been this way since I was twelve years old. When I went from primary school to secondary school—and that extra hour of class, plus the other two to get to school and back—well, my body just never adjusted.

Being chronically tired is like a lucid dream. Where you realize you're dreaming, but can't do anything to change it. And you pinch yourself, to prove you are dreaming, but the pinch feels like being under anesthetic after getting a tooth out. Everything is there, but not close enough to really feel there. It's like watching one of the first episodes of the Simpsons. Still a show, but the animation is just a bit off. It's like waking up at 5 a.m. every day to catch a flight, and walking through security, one step at a time, unloading your liquids then putting them back in your bag. You're on automatic, but the slowest automatic that exists.

When I go to my doctor, five different doctors in fifteen years, I always hear the same thing. *It's because of your depression.* And yes I'm depressed, but this is different. Depression attacks my mind, but this tiredness is in my bones. I make one doctor do bloods. She calls me three weeks later. *They all came back normal. You're as healthy as an ox.* I get another to check my thyroid. *Everything looks good*, I get in an email. I order Alpha BRAIN from the internet. Pills that make me shit eleven times a day, but don't make me more alert to the world I'm living in. I go vegan, I quit alcohol, I start keto. I do intensive weight work outs, then switch to yoga every day. Nothing works.

Chronic fatigue is a type of laziness—one where your body gets in on the act too. I have been tired most of my life, but I've been lazy for even longer. Being lazy is a state of being, not an action. I can work a job and do stand up and write a book, but still, I am lazy. It's an essence. It is who I am. I wish people understood it wasn't a choice. I don't want to be this this way, but here I am, being this way.

My favorite thing to do, as a lazy, tired person, is sleep. It takes me hours from deciding to sleep before actually sleeping, but I love that in-between. When I have taken off my contacts and cleansed, exfoliated, serumed, serumed, and oiled my face. Brushed my teeth with my $200 toothbrush. Most nights I don't turn it on, making it just a $2 toothbrush. I love that extravagance. I put on my eye mask and lie down on my silk pillow and expensive cotton sheets. The three hours it takes to get to sleep are my dream state. My actual dreams are nightmares. I am having sex with my dad, or I'm doing a maths exams, or my boyfriend is cheating on me, or, worse, I have cheated on him, and have to live with that before and after.

In my dreams, there's no rest. But right before I go to sleep, there it is. I am not supposed to be anywhere else, not supposed to be doing anything else. My laziness is the status quo. I smell my pillowcase and feel the cold sheet against my feet. Every day, I wake up, and look forward to this end.

My doctor prescribed me sleeping pills, in Amsterdam. Even though my problem wasn't getting to sleep, not really. It was getting up. If someone said to me, *I'm feeling really sad today*, I wouldn't say, *well then you should watch Sophie's Choice*. But then again, I'm not a doctor.

I abused the sleeping pills when I overdosed on them, so she cut me off. She gave melatonin instead. I liked melatonin because it wasn't a drug, but kind of was. It got me to sleep straight away, but then it was extra hard to wake up the next day. *Pilots take them*, I told myself, pressing snooze for the 13th time. *Melatonin is for go-getters, and I am a go-get-zzzzzzzzz.*

Maybe Adderall? I asked the same doctor, after I had tried it in America. It made me alert and awake, and also not hungry.

It was like coke, but approved by medical professionals. It reminded me of those cigarette ads from the fifties. "Three out of every four doctors recommend Camel Lights." Sure, it will kill you, eventually, but in the meantime your doctor can add a swimming pool to his house!

Unfortunately, requesting a medication is the surest way to not get it. I've watched enough episodes of *Grey's Anatomy* to know at least that. But I really wanted it, so I made a pitch. *Studies show*, I began, but she cut me off. *No, no, not with your depression.* I cried, and threatened to kill myself, because I really fucking wanted it. *Definitely not, if you're suicidal.* Checkmate. If she really knew me, she'd have known I was too tired to really try to kill myself. The furthest I got was opening three tabs on euthanasia clinics, then had to take a nap because my eyes got heavy.

My only respite in my tiredness is when I drink. It doesn't make sense, but a lot of things don't make sense. When I open a bottle of wine, I come alive. I get stuff done. I am at my most productive from 9 to midnight, when I am slurping away. So, I do it most nights. I know it isn't good for me, to drink this much, but I also know I will do nothing without it. If it makes me an alcoholic, so be it. I'd rather be a productive alcoholic than a do-nothing bitch. At least it's something, even if it's not nearly enough.

I do believe some disease will be invented, or maybe it already exists, that will explain why I am so tired and lethargic all the time. Why I need to take a nap after bringing out the bin, why twelve hours of sleep never feel like enough. And they'll have a little pill to cure it, and it will be like magic. The fog that I've been engulfed in will fade away, and I'll become everything I'm not.

But until then, I get to be just a lazy person, who is tired all the time. A walking zombie, but at least zombies got to live before they were dead forever. I was born here. Not actually born here, because I had energy as a child, but I've been born here since I was twelve years old, which is long enough that it's all I can remember. Maybe I am an inverted zombie. Maybe when I die, I'll finally feel awake.

Marise Gaughan *is an Irish stand-up comedian living in London.*

ART

Willy Conley, *Rockburn Park*, 2012,
black-and-white digital photograph

Ann Marie Sekeres, *Garden*, 2020, digital print

Yaara Ronzner Laizé, *The American Dream*, 2020, photograph

Michael Thompson, *Marie Antoinette*, 2012, inkjet print

INTERVIEW

THE GRIND: QUESTIONS ON CREATIVE PROCESS

Elisa Salasin is a writer/poet and educator living in Berkeley, California. Her writing and photography have appeared in a range of online publications including *AMP/Always Electric*, *CounterPunch*, *sPARKLE & bLINK*, and *Digital Paper*, the online magazine for the Bay Area Writing Project.

1. What inspires you?

In an interview several years ago, Brother David Steindl-Rast, a Benedictine monk and teacher, talked about "joy being happiness that doesn't depend on what happens" and this has been an inspiration and guiding principle. I mine for the exquisite, in spite of the inevitable. I am inspired by the process, whether I am trying to compose a poem, out making photographs, or piecing together a quilt (all are aspects of my creative work). I immerse myself in the flow of creating in a continual excavation of the exquisite through movement out in the natural world, through color and light, language, and relationship. The exquisite often grows from the flaws and contradictions, the mistakes, and so I love trying to get below the surface, to what lurks in the depths and shadows, finding/creating strange and surprising resonances between disparate and seemingly unpredictable combinations.

2. What advice would you give your younger self about creativity?

I've struggled with my understanding of creativity, and it has taken me into my fifties to be able to fully embrace and live into my creative self. My parents did little to nurture creativity, and I had too many teachers that actively discouraged any expression that didn't fit into a normative paradigm. So, from an early age I was fully indoctrinated into the idea that I was simply not a creative person, or that it was too late for me to develop my creativity. But, what I think I didn't understand is that creativity isn't a fixed entity that one has or doesn't have. It is always present, either foregrounded or running more

covertly under the surface. I now recognize many times in my life when that underground river seeped out, overran its banks, and I either tried to push it back in, or I let myself follow where it leads. I've learned not to sit back and wait for those "flashes" of creativity, but to actively work to be open and receptive, and to establish conditions in my life that will allow that river to run more freely. I suppose I'd want the younger me to understand this, and to give myself over to the flow rather than build dams to keep it back. That, and to trust my intuition, and not to listen to the messages I received early on that one needed to have a certain disposition, or a certain kind of training/ education, to be an artist, a writer, to live a creative life.

3. What book impacted you most as a child?

It may be cliche for my generation, but *Where the Wild Things Are* was the first book that I remember having a profound influence on me. I was fascinated by the alternate universe that Max enters when he is sent to his room without supper. As a young child I couldn't quite figure out how he was able to sail in and out of weeks, and still get back to his room to find the supper waiting for him, and still hot. I remember lying in my bed as a young girl and coming to a realization about imagination as I puzzled over this book. As an adult I can now also recognize all of the symbolism in Max's alternate universe that comes out of his real world. This is the work of poets and artists - we use symbols to reflect back on our real worlds, as filtered through the imagination. *Where the Wild Things Are* was in many ways my first epiphany, my first understanding of metaphor, my first glimpse into myself.

4. Is there a book you think everyone should read? Why?

When I was in high school an English teacher made an awful comment to me when I dared ask a question in his class about *Moby Dick*. His demeaning comment not only made me walk out of the class and never return, but it also influenced my perception of my own abilities. Rather than brushing him off as arrogant and wrong, I

internalized his negative opinion of my capabilities to such an extent that I not only never read *Moby Dick*, but I also steered clear of literature, poetry, and creative writing for too many years. Given this, I'd say that the book everyone should read is the one that someone made them feel they could never read because they weren't good enough, smart enough, educated enough, whatever. Go and read it now, as I'm currently doing with *Moby Dick*!

5. What effect does isolation have on your creative process?

In spite of all of the difficulties that the pandemic and isolation has created, I have to admit that this past year has been a profound turning point for me. Social isolation has given me the space to pursue writing goals and dreams that I've had for almost twenty years. As someone that has worked full-time all my life in a demanding job, and raised two children, it has been at best challenging, and often seemingly impossible to develop myself as a poet, one of my deepest longings. This year changed that, as I was able to engage in online poetry workshops with folks across the country, and have been able to spend significant amounts of time reading and writing poetry. I've become part of a larger community of poets and writers, many that I've never met in person because of the pandemic. While I'm excited to get back out into the world, this past year brought me back to poetry, and that has been life changing. I've engaged in my own autodidact, self-created and defined MFA program.

6. What are you reading right now? What's your current reading line-up?

I'm reading a ton of poetry, and also works about poets. Currently I'm immersed in the life of Margaret Randall ("poet, feminist, revolutionary"), both through her autobiography, *I Never Left Home*, and *My Life in 100 Objects*, where she combines images of meaningful possessions and places with prose and poetry to illustrate her life.

7. Who are some of your favorite literary or fictional characters?

I was surprised that I had a hard time answering this question, but I think part of the reason is that there were many years of my life when I just didn't read a great deal of fiction, again a result of negative messages from people that should have never called themselves teachers. I did, however, read a great deal of nonfiction, and have always been drawn to women who don't fit within stereotypical expectations. Mary Wollstonecraft, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Etty Hillesum (Jewish mystic), June Jordan, are a few of the real-world characters that have inspired me. As a child I adored Ramona the Pest and Nancy Drew, so strong, independent women have influenced me from an early age.

8. What are some of your guilty *reading* pleasures?

I'll happily read any People magazine that happens to land in my hands, usually at the dentist's office. And I often read the Style section of the New York Times before anything else, and specifically the marriage announcements. I'm fascinated by people, by relationship, and the arc that lives take from beginning to end. I especially like to read about the matches that are more atypical, late in life, or otherwise out of the heteronormative paradigm. I enjoy a good obituary for similar reasons.

9. Do you have any advice for young, up-and-coming creators?

As someone that struggled with seeing herself as a creator until somewhat late in life, my advice may be more suitable for older up-and-coming creators: It is never too late to begin.

Willy Conley is a featured artist in *Windmill*'s issue 5. His photo, "Rockburn Park," is from a series titled Human Sign Language. Conley explains in his artist statement, "Being profoundly Deaf, I need to use American Sign Language (ASL) to communicate in my daily life. ASL is a three-dimensional, mobile, visual language, which cannot be written or spoken." A former biomedical photographer, Conley has photos featured in the books *Listening Through the Bone*, *The Deaf Heart*, *No Walls of Stone*, and *Deaf World*. Other publications: *American Photographer*, *Arkansas Review*, *Baltimore Sun*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Big Muddy*, *Folio*, and *34th Parallel*. Conley is a retired professor of theatre arts at Gallaudet University, the world's only liberal arts university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. To learn more about his work, please visit: www.willyconley.com.

1. What inspires you?

Inspiration comes to me in a lot of different ways: the smell of cinnamon rolls coming from a bakery, walking on the sandy deck of a rusting scallop trawler half-buried on the beach, the way a late afternoon light falls on a small, abandoned used car shack on the edge of a Texas highway, watching a well-made film or looking at a brilliant piece of artwork, the feel of a warm breeze while sitting on a back porch. Or, it can be the juxtaposition or contradiction of light, colors, words, and/or lines.

2. What advice would you give your younger self about creativity?

My father told me a story about how I once brought home from elementary school some coloring homework. It was a line drawing of a pumpkin man that the teacher handed out to be colored. I colored it purple but was not quite finished. The teacher wrote a note on the drawing: "A purple pumpkin man??" My father expressed his anger at the teacher over this bit of criticism. My advice: Ignore whatever negative comments people may tell you about your artistic creations.

3. What book impacted you most as a child?

There aren't any specific books I can remember that stuck with me as a child. My parents didn't find out I was profoundly deaf until I was three years old. Language didn't come to me until much later in life, so my world while growing up was about observing life from a nonverbal point of view. I remember being fascinated by slick, colorful photographs of exotic lands and people in National Geographic magazines. It blew my mind that there was a whole other world outside of my suburban neighborhood. Then, I recall later getting hooked on reading via *The Hardy Boys* mystery books.

4. Is there a book you think everyone should read? Why?

Writing Down the Bones by Natalie Goldberg. It has wonderful, down-to-earth tips about demystifying the process of writing while encouraging one to notice and appreciate the small details in one's surroundings. I met Natalie once after a talk she gave at a bookstore. There were about fifty people crowded in a small space in the back of the store. She asked the audience: "How many of you have written to me?" About half the crowd raised their hands, me included. "How many of you did I write back to?" The same hands stayed up in the air, including mine. Natalie just has a special way of connecting to the reader that is quite admirable.

5. What effect does isolation have on your creative process?

As a deaf person growing up in the hearing world, isolation was a very common experience for me; I was the only deaf student during my twelve years of public-school education. I learned to appreciate solitude, and I believe that comes through in my work as a writer and photographer. I am haunted by empty, desolate, or abandoned landscapes and settings.

6. What are you reading right now? What's your current reading line-up?

I am reading Jerry Seinfeld's newest book, *Is This Anything?* He is an incredible observer and recorder of human behavior and life's quirks. The books-to-read pile on my daybed are:

- *The Survival Artist: A Memoir of the Holocaust* by Eugene Bergman
- *The Lobotomist* by Jack El-Hai
- *If You Love Baltimore, It Will Love You Back* by Ron Cassie
- *A Cambodian Odyssey* by Haing Ngor
- *The Complete Western Stories of Elmore Leonard*
- *Mortification: Writers' Stories of Their Public Shame*, Robin Robertson, ed.

7. Who are some of your favorite literary or fictional characters?

Augustus McCrae and Woodrow Call in *Lonesome Dove* (R.I.P. Larry McMurtry). These two aging Texas Rangers, on a journey through a changing American West culture, have a unique male bond that intrigued me.

Travis, the protagonist in the Wim Wender/Sam Shepard film, *Paris, Texas*. From the very beginning of the film, we follow this haggard, amnesiac man wearing a bedraggled suit, tie, and red baseball cap walking with purpose through a desert landscape. As the film progresses, the revelation of complex layers to his character and discovery of who he is very captivating.

Clarice Starling in *The Silence of the Lambs*. She fascinates me because of her status as a rookie FBI agent who managed to break through many levels of toxic masculinity and rise above it all with her smarts, flawed upbringing, and common sense.

8. What are some of your guilty *reading* pleasures?

Comic strips in the newspaper, especially F Minus and Speed Bump. I have so much respect for cartoonists who can create great humor in a single panel. My go-to reading source in waiting rooms is *People* magazine.

9. Do you have any advice for young, up-and-coming creators?

Keep a notepad and pen (or pencil, crayon, marker, etc.) near your nightstand, sofa, car, in your backpack, or in other places that you tend to hang out frequently. Ideas will fly by all the time – it's a matter of catching them and jotting them down somewhere so that you can recall and experiment with them creatively at some point when you are ready.

Dan Blank is the founder of WeGrowMedia, where he helps writers develop a human-centered approach to marketing and reaching their audience. He is the author of the book *Be the Gateway: A Practical Guide to Sharing Your Creative Work and Engaging an Audience*. He has worked with thousands of writers and amazing organizations who support creative people such as Penguin Random House, Hachette Book Group, Workman Publishing, Abrams Books, Writers House, The Kenyon Review, Writer's Digest, Library Journal, and many others. You can find Dan on his blog or on Twitter and Instagram: @DanBlank

1. What inspires you?

What inspires me is *trying*. This has been something I have been surprised to learn about myself in the past decade. I'm drawn to people who try. To those who pick themselves back up from failure, to try again. I'm drawn to stories of persistence. I'm hesitant to replace the word "trying" with "work" because I think it is more than that. What inspires me is having a creative vision of some sort, and pursuing it. Even if the idea is unusual, or unlikely.

2. What advice would you give your younger self about creativity?

Growing up, I was the art kid. I always had creative ideas and little projects I did in my spare time. My parents were very supportive and sent me to a local art school starting at age five. Throughout elementary and high school, my teachers and friends were supportive as well. I think the advice I would give myself looking back on my first two decades would be to create lower expectations on my projects, and finish and share them more frequently. Often, my creative vision was expansive. Because it was so big, and I wanted its impact to match, it meant most of my projects never saw the light of day. They were never shared. I would tell my younger self that sharing my work, creating conversations and experiences around it with others, will make the process richer, and open up new opportunities to create.

3. What book impacted you most as a child?

I think it may have been *Wacky Wednesday* by Dr. Seuss. I can remember how every movement I made in library class was with the intention of situating myself closer to *Wacky Wednesday* on the shelf. I just loved the interactive nature of the book, of discovering what was out of place, and realizing that there are no rules when it comes to what a book can portray.

4. Is there a book you think everyone should read? Why?

Besides my own book?! (*Be the Gateway*, on sale now!) :) It's hard to give a clear recommendation because people resonate with the voice of certain authors. But I will make two types of recommendations. The first is biographies of creators who inspire you. This always demystifies them in ways that are instructive. You realize that while your hero may have legendary talent, they also likely got really lucky at key moments. You can see their early "failures" that were a necessary part to their success. Don't be afraid to read the biographies of those outside of your own creative field. I am inspired by musicians, even though I'm a writer. On my stack of books to read: *My Love Story* by Tina Turner, and *This Thing Called Life*, about Prince.

I can make more clear recommendations when it comes to a book about the creative process. Everyone should read… *My Friend Fear* by Meera Lee Patel, *Creative Quest* by Questlove, *Creativity, Inc.* by Ed Catmull, and *The Creative Habit* by Twyla Tharp.

In conclusion, that is the ONE BOOK everyone should read.

5. What effect does isolation have on your creative process?

Isolation gives my creativity room to breathe and become reality. I am an early riser, and when the world is quiet, when I am alone in a room with no chance of someone interrupting me, my ideas can not only be born, but grow. The dangerous flip side of that is that the same space created by isolation can allow my anxiety and impostor's syndrome to flourish as well.

6. What are you reading right now? What's your current reading line-up?

My to-read pile is getting ridiculous. Working mostly from home with two kids around, I've had less quiet time to read. I think the next book on my list is *My Love Story* by Tina Turner.

7. Who are some of your favorite literary or fictional characters?

My mind immediately went to Mr. Spock from Star Trek. He is so intriguing to me because he is someone who has a set of guiding principles, but he is also in a constant state of discovery of who he is, and reconciling the nature of his identity. These are the characters I tend to think about most, not just because of internal conflict a character must overcome, but because it reminds me of the artist's journey: to create a work that is fixed (such as a book), yet discover more about who we are in the process. What we each create is a small step to better understanding ourselves, but also the world around us.

8. What are some of your guilty *reading* pleasures?

I have to say, I have zero guilty reading pleasures. But that is mostly because our culture has come to embrace niche interests and genres as being worthy of having an audience. When I grew up, there seemed to be things that were "cool" and things that were "uncool." But now, you can find readers celebrating their love of nearly anything online. That has opened up my world creatively as well, where I can explore the biography of someone who may fall well outside of my profession, and share their work with my readers without worry.

9. Do you have any advice for young, up-and-coming creators?

Connect with other creators. With those who love the kind of work you do. Create professional relationships, and tend to them over the years. Support others in the process. These are not just people who will share your work and lead to opportunities. They will also provide emotional

support and great advice when you are wrestling with a big decision, or simply feeling overwhelmed. Having a network of people you can reach out to is game changing, because suddenly, you don't feel alone in your profession. You feel you have resources. Those who can help, and perhaps even care about you and your career. No course, no program, no app is going to replace that. Oh, and followers don't count. Develop professional relationships with those you could text or call at 11pm or 7am and get an answer.

FICTION

How to Remember the Next Major Disaster

Kristina Garvin

It was Jean's idea to follow me home, but she didn't plan to fall asleep on my porch. That evening, as light drained from the sky and shadows darkened the houses across the street, Jean sat against the wooden frame of the porch and drifted off. Then, later, she stretched out on her side, tucked an arm beneath her head, and slept. Her bare knees protruded from her gray uniform jumper, and they looked cold and blue in the fading light. When my mother came home from work and saw us on the porch, she said, Who's this girl? Is she drunk?

I said nothing.

My brother stood on the other side of the screen door. He held the door for my mother as she stepped over Jean and walked into the house. Then he closed it. Behind the mesh, he looked undefined, like a stagehand who moves scenery between acts of a play. Don't come in until you get rid of her, he said, whoever she is. With his thumb, he locked the screen door with a click.

This was once a nice neighborhood, my mother told me that evening, after Jean left. One of the nicest in Columbus. Not the sort of neighborhood where girls got drunk during the day. We used to have block parties.

I knew the story: our street used to run all the way through to Clintonville, with its bakeries and better schools. Then the highway administration laid down I-71, bisected the city, cut up the streets, and left North Linden to fend for itself. Now there were strip malls, a bowling

alley, check cashing places, and an L&K motel that the police swept every so often, cuffing johns and loading them into cruisers.

Jean Killian wasn't a drunk—she was just a tired girl with the mind of a sponge. And she didn't seem to mind the neighborhood when she came over, not the motel prostitution ring or the chain-link fences or the way the tackiest of us left rusted-out cars in the driveway and ridiculous ornaments on the lawn, like little gnomes and prairie dogs. Because the election was coming up, everyone had signs in their front yards. They remind me of little gravestones if you look really quick, Jean said. Like everyone's got a personal graveyard.

I met her at the beginning of sophomore year—or she met me—and claimed me as her friend. After school one day she wove her arm through mine, and said, We're going to Rally's, Danny. Remember?

I didn't. I had difficulties retaining new information—the result of an accident I'd had at the beginning of freshman year. I was walking to school when someone backed out of their driveway and knocked me onto the pavement. While I was in the hospital, the school had a prayer drive for me. Apparently the principal got on the loudspeaker every day, but once I was "out of the woods," he stopped updating everyone on my condition. When I returned to school a month later, people didn't know me—partly because I'd missed the chunk of the year when everyone got acquainted, and partly because they'd prayed so hard. They hadn't expected to pray me back into existence—it rarely worked that way.

If they'd forgotten me, then I certainly didn't remember them. Even now it took me several seconds to recognize Jean. Or to remember why we were going to Rally's. I'm tutoring you in Spanish, remember? she said.

My worst subject. If I couldn't remember Jean's face, I certainly couldn't tell the difference between *pueblo* and *puedo*. Jean grouped word families together and made up tricks to help me pass. None of it helped very much.

Because that isn't really the way to remember things,

Jean explained. The best way to remember things is to experience a disaster. You never forget what you were doing during a disaster. Old people love to talk about where they were when Kennedy died. We remember the Challenger. All these years later, you still remember what you were doing when it exploded, right?

I remembered running in circles. First grade. The school had wheeled huge TVs into every classroom and made a big deal about it, first teacher in space, all that. The launch kept getting delayed, so by the time the shuttle was ready to lift off, I was in gym class. There was *also* a TV in the gym's corner, but my gym teacher was an asshole—she said she wasn't going to let a shuttle launch get in the way of exercise. So we had class as usual. The shuttle was blasting off and we were doing jumping jacks. The shuttle was leaving earth and we were running laps. The shuttle was blowing up and we were catching our breath. From the corner of my eye I saw the zigzagging smoke.

When we returned to the classroom, the principal came over the loudspeaker to tell the entire school that the astronauts were dead.

There you go, Jean said. That's a goddamn detailed memory.

When Jean was small, her parents enrolled in a long-term study at Ohio State, where her mother was a full-time professor and her father taught journalism classes. The study tracked Challenger kids to assess the effects of trauma on childhood memory. Every few years they interviewed the kids in a private observation room. They compared notes. They discovered that kids' memories of what they were doing during the disaster—where they sat, how much they saw, which kid they sat next to, what they ate for lunch that day, what the teacher said—changed very little, regardless of how much time went by. Jean was still part of the study. They were going to track her to adulthood.

You know, it took them two minutes and forty-five seconds to fall into the ocean, she said. And they were conscious the whole time.

And then she said: The way to remember things is to live through a disaster every day of your life.

We both saw the school therapist once a week for our various issues. We went during religion class, which was a class we shared, because it was a subject you could skip for days without missing any new information. Jesus loves you, Jesus is forgiving, Jesus is the Light of the World. Hate the sin, love the sinner. Don't judge. Don't use a Ouija board. No one noticed we were gone, except maybe the teacher, and she didn't care.

The therapist's name was Dr. Grim. A bad name, he joked, considering what I do. He had a full beard and smiled a lot and used his hands when he talked and then folded them on his stomach when I talked. His room was warm and comfortable.

Jean got the first half hour with Grim and I took the second. When Jean came out, she always looked bruised and blank, the way she looked when she awoke on my porch that one evening. Her falling asleep everywhere was a problem. She didn't have narcolepsy—she just tended to sleep when she didn't want to think anymore. I should have been more aware of the events of her life, but all I knew was that her father was dead. He'd been a speechwriter for a Democratic senator, and he'd killed himself. How? If she'd told me, I'd forgotten.

My problem was my memory. Since the accident, I was considered LD. I wasn't a hundred percent impaired or anything—I could remember certain things but not others. I did my homework but misinterpreted directions, like I thought I had to do pages one through forty rather than numbers one through forty (so I gave up entirely), or I read through a textbook without stopping after the assigned section. And retained little of what I read.

You could try drawing pictures, Grim said. That will help you remember. I think you remember more than you give yourself credit for.

Grim had this icon hanging on his office wall: a small painting of a girl with dark red hair and a green headscarf. She held a lily between her palm and a book. Jean had told me it was a picture of a seventh-century Irish saint. (Jean knew this kind of shit. She had the ears of an elephant and the memory of a geode.) The saint was a princess, Jean said, and when her mother died, her father went apeshit

and tried to have sex with her. When she said no, he cut her head off. So she's the patron saint of wackjobs and child molesters. Fuck-nuts. So that's what Grim hangs in his office. It's not even subliminal. He's not even trying.

But what if you live through too many disasters? If you see a disaster every day, it's normal. No longer a disaster.

Au contraire, Jean said. A disaster is a disaster, and you remember them all. Think about the people in Rwanda. Or Vietnam vets who have flashbacks. They can't *not* remember everything. All the napalm and booby-trapped children.

This I knew—my father was a vet. We had paraphernalia around the house—faded green army bags, pictures of guys in uniforms standing next to my dad. There were medals hidden away—only my brother had seen them. I saw the bronze star for a second, he said. The way he acts, you'd think he wouldn't want this shit around at all. *The way he acts*—slammed doors, days spent on the couch. Weeks shut out of my mother's room. One time, a crowbar thrown through a window. It shattered the glass and landed in the front yard.

That night it snowed six inches. No one went to get the crowbar. When the snow finally melted weeks later, we found that it had left an indentation on the lawn, an off-color patch of grass where it had lain.

One day, I forgot to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. Or I didn't hear the announcement to do so. I remember the incident like it was a comic strip, like I'm disembodied, floating somewhere above the vicinity, watching myself get in trouble. Or watching Jean watch me. Frame one: Mr. Blake, our homeroom teacher, standing over me, waving his hand to get me to my feet. Frame two: Mr. Blake's mouth open, his teeth jagged. Frame three: fire coming from his mouth. *My father fought in World War II. My brother died in Vietnam. If you won't stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, I won't stand for you.* Frame four: pulling me from my chair, clutching in his fist the loose fabric of my shirt. Frame five: pushing me into the hallway, telling me I have detention.

Jean found me between classes. We'll have to get you a new shirt, she said. Only then did I realize that the seam on my shoulder had come apart.

I wondered out loud if that had been a disaster.

It was just Blake, Jean said. Don't waste your time thinking about it.

Then I came to school without shoes.

This wasn't because I forgot. (Even I didn't forget a thing like shoes.) I got robbed on the city bus. I was wearing my Herrick uniform dark pants, oxford shirt, and a tie—which in my neighborhood was like wearing a sign that said *I would like to be fucked with*. Four kids approached me and demanded my sneakers, and I surrendered them, no questions asked. They laughed. One kid carried my sneakers over his head as they exited the bus through the rear.

I got off the bus and stood at the corner of High and Henderson. There was a payphone there—I guess I could have called the cops about the robbery—but instead I walked to the school building in my stockinged feet.

Inside, I found Jean crouched near the floor, getting her stuff from the bottom of her locker. Homeroom hadn't begun yet. Jesus, she said, looking at my feet and then glancing up at me, and then looking at my feet again. She stood. You forgot your shoes? Danny.

I got mugged.

By who?

I shrugged.

Did you at least go to the office and tell them about it?

Should I?

Your problem, she said, closing her locker, isn't your memory. It's that you lack executive functioning skills. She shrugged into her shoulder bag. You can't go to homeroom without shoes. Not after that thing with Blake last week. He'll shit a brick.

She led me down to the office, where the secretary directed me to the dean's office. Jean waited outside. When I emerged, I was wearing a pair of high-tops three sizes too big. Christ, Jean said.

This was the best he could find. They were in the lost-and-found.

Jean kept marveling at them. Those haven't been in circulation since the Bush Administration, she said. We'll have to get you a new pair. Shoes are super important. Indeed they were. At Herrick, where everyone wore a uniform, shoes marked your identity—or the identity you aspired to have, anyway. I was wearing yellowing Reebok high tops with fraying shoelaces, which said I was a cave-dweller from a previous generation who spent a lot of time sweating.

For now, you'll live, Jean said. She sounded so certain that I believed her. Later that morning we had mass. It was a holy day—All Saints Day—and Bishop Herrick didn't have a chapel big enough to contain all 986 of us, so we piled into the gym and sat in the high-rise bleachers, each section of the bleachers designated by grade. The priest and deacon and servers marched across the gym floor below us, the altar near the south wall underneath the basketball hoop. The choir occupied a couple rows near the senior section. The lectors—kids I could never understand because they volunteered to stand in front of the entire school, reading scripture with unpronounceable names—sat in a row of chairs near the door. Mass was always boring as fuck, but everyone appreciated it because it shaved minutes off each class period, and there was something festive about getting the whole school together in one place. If you got lucky enough to sit out of a teacher's sightline, you could cram for a test or read a magazine (Jean sometimes smuggled in a random folded-up article she'd torn from *Time*). The truly daring managed to listen to music, rigging super-light headphones to their walkmans— risky, because if a teacher caught you, you'd lose the walkman plus your end-of-year dress-down privileges.

Today Jean didn't have an article to share, but she led me to our usual spot at the very top of the bleachers. My too-big shoes kept flopping as we made our way up; a couple times I had to stop because they almost fell off. When we reached the top, she scooted over to make room for me and I sat.

Don't worry about the shoes, she said. I've had more embarrassing things happen to me.

Like what?

I'll tell you later. She tucked her arm in mine. And wove her fingers through mine. When we stood for the opening hymns and prayers, she withdrew her hand. But once we sat for the readings, she held my hand again.

And then: the homily. She leaned her head against my shoulder. I felt sweaty and incoherent. All I could do was wonder: what were we to each other? Had something between us changed without my noticing? Or had we always been this close and I'd forgotten?

The priest was talking about All Saints Day, how it was basically the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier for Catholic saints, honoring all the saints that had been lost to history. That's some bullshit, Jean said to me. (She often made these types of comments during mass.) If I'm going to go through all the work of being a saint, I sure as shit want to be known as one.

I couldn't respond. I couldn't process what she was saying because I was wondering what we were to one another, and if I'd always struggle to recognize the collection of lines that made up her face, or the texture of her hair. Or remember that *Killian* was either an Irish name or an Armenian one, but in her case it was Irish and it meant either "little church" or "strife." These details, I knew, would slip from me sooner rather than later.

At some point during the homily, Jean fell asleep against me. Then it was time to stand for the Nicene Creed, which I didn't want to do with her leaning against me, but I realized that both of us sitting there would get some teacher's attention. So I slowly detached myself from Jean and stood. She didn't wake up—not really. She was sitting upright but

still mostly asleep. And we went on like that for the rest of mass—me standing through all the prayers, her sleeping in a sitting position. Me standing in a certain position to keep a teacher from seeing.

Soon it was time for communion, and Jean was super passed-out by then, sleeping with her head in her hand, elbow on her knee. Kids descended the bleachers one row at a time to get the wafer from the teacher and, if they so desired, the wine from a student Eucharist minister. (Almost no one took the wine, except weirdos and future priests, because it was a communal cup, which was too disgusting to think about.) Miss Sfreddo was the teacher passing out wafers for our class. She taught home-ec and was fat and unpleasant and wore huge, shapeless dresses as if to conceal that home-ec was a ruinous way of life.

I decided not to wake Jean. Truthfully, her not taking communion wasn't odd: a quarter of the kids at Herrick weren't Catholic—their parents sent them to a Catholic school so they wouldn't have to go to a city public—and during communion they sat while the rest of us stepped around them to go down the bleachers toward the Eucharistic ministers. When it was our row's turn, people stepped around the sleeping Jean like they would any other non-Catholic, and I went with them.

So I'm clunking down the bleacher steps in my ridiculous-ass shoes, and I'm thinking about Jean—her hand in mine, her head on my shoulder. I'm searching my brain to remember us, how we got here, aware of nothing around me, except the sensation of the shoes sliding off my heels with every step. I tried to remember Jean's father—did I meet him? My mind wandered to my own father, to our grubby house in North Linden with its too-bright coat of blue paint and the cracked awning over our front window; my brother holding vigil from the living room couch, surreptitiously watching our parents as they ate dinner so he could intervene if he needed to; my mother flinching, almost imperceptibly, when my father reached for the butter or spoke, or tipped his face to the light.

Eighteen and I'm out, my brother once told me. I'm joining the military. Getting the fuck out of this place. It

seemed lost on him, I think, that our father must have once thought the same thing.

What had Jean's dad been like?

A sliver of memory, like a knife of light. She told me he had a record collection that she coveted. *Anticipation* and *Secret Treaties* and *Station to Station*. A few months after he died, she came home from school to discover her mother had gotten rid of them all. Where were they? Her mother wouldn't say. They'd either been donated or sold or thrown away, and Jean said that if she had the time and transportation and money, she'd hit up every used record store in the city to find them.

As I reached the bottom of the bleachers, my mind was spinning loose. That's when I tripped, the frayed laces getting caught under the sole of one of those ginormous high-tops. My left shoe came off and I stumbled forward into the girl in front of me, and she pushed forward into Mary Skeehan, the wine-dispensing Eucharistic minister who had the cheap chalice and the good sense to step back. But when she did, she knocked into Miss Sfreddo. Sfreddo dropped the plate of wafers.

Sfreddo bent over immediately and then kneeled on the floor. While she scrambled for the wafers—I think she might have been crying as she gathered them together, they were tainted now, and for fuck's sake you couldn't just scrape Jesus's body off the floor and throw it away, someone was going to have to eat those wafers right then and there, off the floor, and it wasn't going to be me—I reached over to retrieve my left shoe from where it lay. As I did that, my right shoe fell off as well. I skidded on the hardwood. For a second I lost my balance and almost did a split. But I recovered. Slowly brought my legs back to vertical. Gathered both shoes and held them against my chest and turned to face the bleachers. The entire class watched as I ascended the steps in my socks. Heart thudding, I finished my walk of shame and returned to Jean's side. She'd slept through the whole thing.

This I learned: After the shuttle exploded, the force of the blast shook loose the cabin from the rest of the

wreckage, and it continued its upward trajectory for several more seconds until it pitched downward toward the ocean. No one saw this. Because everyone's eyes were drawn to the fireball—the zigzag I'd seen in gym class—we missed the arc the cabin took as it slid out of the frame and into history.

That night—the night after the unfortunate mass, when Jean fell asleep on my porch—we went to my neighborhood by taking the bus halfway and walking the rest. While we were on the bus, Jean said, I'll tell you what's really embarrassing. She leaned her forehead against the bus window and didn't look at me. When I was a kid, like eight or nine or something, my dad took me on a business trip. He was always working in Puerto Rico and stuff. He knew Spanish fluently. We were staying in a hotel and there was a pool. I wanted to go to the bathroom at one point, so I got up and went to the locker room on the other side of the pool. I did what I usually did at home—I bent over to see if anyone was in the stalls, like if there were feet under the door. There were feet in one stall. So I used the other.

She leaned back, still looking out the window. When I came out of the stall, she said, there were a bunch of girls there, whispering and staring at me. I was so nervous I didn't dry my hands. When I got back to the side of the pool, where my dad was, I turned to see they'd followed me. They'd started calling me names in Spanish. I couldn't understand. When they left, my father said, What was that about? Why would they call you a pervert? And he was super pissed, too. *At me.* It's like, I could see he regretted bringing me.

Jean glanced at me. And like, I didn't even know what that meant. In English or in Spanish. He had to explain it to me a dozen times. So imagine it—he's explaining what a fucking pervert is, and I'm explaining about looking for feet under the door. I don't think he believed me.

I think he seriously thought that I went into the locker room to look at other girls' privates. We went home and he told my mom everything.

She shrugged once, and I never thought I'd seen her look more tired or resigned. He started teaching me Spanish after that, she said. So maybe that's why I'm good at it. Losing your shoes at mass is more embarrassing, I said.

Maybe. It's still not major malfunction level, though. I guess my thing isn't either. Like, so my dad thought I was a tiny pedo, so what. At least he taught me a foreign language. I guess it's not the worst thing in the world.

I wanted her to take my hand again, but she didn't. And I didn't dare touch hers. Already I wondered if we were spinning away from each other—me forgetting, her remembering always and everything.

Once we got off the bus, we made our way to the North Broadway bridge. Halfway across, Jean stopped and looked southbound, her fingers hooking the chain-link fence. I love your neighborhood. It reminds me of my grandparents' in Cleveland. And the freeway from this angle makes me fucking nostalgic. It's the route the bus would always take when we went to COSI.

Going to COSI was something all Columbus kids had in common, a once-a-year fieldtrip you didn't fucking miss. No matter what school you went to or where you lived or how much money your parents made, you'd been there. There was the old caboose. The coalmine exhibit. John Glenn's capsule. Foucault's pendulum. Science made easy.

She lingered on the bridge for a long time, watching the cars zooming by underneath us. It got cold.

When we got to my house, we decided not to go inside—inside was where my father sat, where he watched TV. The porch was neutral territory.

I wanted to ask her how her dad had died, but I worried she'd already said. So I opted, once again, for neutral territory and brought up the astronauts. I asked her how she'd known about the two minutes and forty-five seconds thing.

She scratched her bare leg. When I was in fourth grade I read this article in *he New York Times*. My dad needed to get the *Times* for his work, so it was always lying around the house. My parents liked me to read it. I think they thought I was gonna be as smart as them someday. But one day I saw an article about the astronauts. It explained how they died. They were conscious until they hit the ocean, you know. The

cabin never lost pressure. Everyone thought they died when it blew up, but everyone was wrong.

She summarized it: the deployed oxygen packs, the descent into nothing. The Atlantic coming closer with each second—visible first as a curve, then as a plane, and then as a shining surface, intractable and blank.

I shouldn't have read the article, she said. I probably contaminated the study by thinking too much about it.

I didn't understand what she meant.

In any case, she said. And then she said nothing. I waited for her to finish her sentence, and when she didn't I thought that maybe she trailed off intentionally, wanting us to sit there, still, for two minutes and forty-five seconds. Just to know what it felt like. But when I looked up again, I saw she'd fallen asleep.

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Crocodile Park

Shivani Deshmukh

High summer in Chennai was usually spent driving along the East Coast Road, stopping at whatever minor tourist attraction we found on the way. That particular afternoon, it was Crocodile Park. My mother slathered aloe vera on my bare arms and face.

The park smelled of dead animals and of the sharpness of fresh blood. The crocodiles lazed in deep trenches, some barely visible from under the murky green water. At some point, several buckets of monkey meat were fed to the crocodiles. Here, they emerged from their inertia and ran with their stout limbs, racing for the first bite, their long snouts shredding the meat seamlessly. In a second, the crocodiles went from being harmless, lazy creatures, to rabid flesh-hungry monsters with, I assumed, an appetite for human meat. I felt the fangs tearing into the monkey flesh as they would into my own; relentless, ravenous, and without a moment's hesitation.

I watched the scene unfold in uncontrollable tears. My father held me down and forced me to watch. Hands pushing down on my shoulders, he said, "That's exactly how life is. You can't hide from it forever." Bucket after bucket of monkey meat was poured into the trench, each viciously devoured by crocodiles. By the end of it, there were stray pieces of monkey flesh everywhere, and I could see them up close. The asphalt where the murky green water met land was stained dark red, with blood flowing into the water. In another minute, this treachery was hosed down. There were no traces of dead monkeys, clawed through by crocodiles.

Over the years, everything and everyone was either a Monkey or a Crocodile. It was a simple ideology, really.

Sometimes the lines between Monkey and Crocodile were blurred, and I did not like that. When my grandfather died, I was relieved. I viewed my grandmother as a Monkey, constantly berated and admonished by my grandfather. Why, then, did she cry at his funeral?

I branded myself a Monkey, too, but I couldn't figure out what in my life was a Crocodile. There were so many things that bit and clawed at my flesh. Monkey. Stupid, ugly Monkey. A juvenile insult that took on more weight in its words than it could carry. I lived with the knowledge that my skin would always be bitten raw—and my red skin imprinted with teeth would be visible.

The first time I recognized a Crocodile was when I was fifteen. It was a simple thing to happen. My boyfriend at the time said he wanted to have sex. I said I didn't. He twisted my arm behind my back and asked again. I said okay. In a way, I was relieved. It felt good to be able to put an obvious Monkey-Crocodile label on us. It was better than being a Monkey and having to pinpoint foggy abstractions like "circumstances" and "situations" and name them Crocodile. For once, it felt easy to know exactly what, or who, was biting into my skin.

I married a man who had no problem with being a Crocodile. It was not a loveless marriage, but one that expressed its love differently. I had had years of practice being quiet and situating myself in the corners of boxes and on the sides of the railway tracks and he, being the train that ran at full speed, a boisterous sun at the centre of my solar system. It fit right. It didn't have to be happy, because it was comfortable.

We lived in a small apartment in Borivali. It was all we could afford at the time. I know he resented me for not working or contributing to our income. There was not much I could do; he'd wanted to marry a young girl, so I left college on his insistence. A woman over the age of twenty-three was too old to bear children, he said. I was flattered, of course, and only too happy to leave home. It didn't matter that I didn't love him.

Once, in bed, I told him about the Crocodile Park, and that I saw myself as a Monkey, and he, a Crocodile. "It's

pathetic that you think of yourself as that, you know," he had said to me. But I knew him well enough to know he liked the roles I'd assigned to the both of us. From our pictures together, I used to misconstrue what we had as intimacy. His hands would clamp down on my shoulders, while mine would dangle idly by my side. Only later did I realize how similar this was to how my father held me down and made me watch the monkeys being torn apart.

He was not cruel in the way that you would imagine. He did not hit. He did not scream or throw glass plates around. It was not cruelty as you would expect it. His cruelty was quiet and deliberate, expressed mostly by his absence. If he cared at all about me, he made a special effort not to show it. I, on my part, made a show of not noticing.

There would, of course, be the many nights I spent alone. I never asked where he was, or what he did. He never bothered to tell me. My days would revolve around making breakfast and dinner, and making do with leftovers for lunch. It hurt, of course, but what had I expected? How could I say I deserved any better? I sometimes wished he'd hit me. It would feel better than the long silences that stretched out the corners of our house.

I was not angry. Perhaps I was even relieved. Perhaps it would have angered me if we expressed our love differently. If, say, he listened to me and cared for me, what then would I be expected to do? No, the idea of love the way it was advertised made me very angry. It was facetious; love was obviously not supposed to look like that.

We had a daughter seventeen years after we got married. By then, I was a battered old woman. My mandibles hung loose around my neck. My breasts, which had never taken on a youthful exuberance to begin with, sagged low. The skin around my eyes folded, even when I didn't smile. Most importantly, seventeen years into my marriage, my brain had atrophied. It was around this time that it struck me how far behind the world had left me, and my Monkey-Crocodile ideology. I saw my friends become first lovers and then parents, and I watched their children grow up to be kind without being quiet. It was infuriating that the world hadn't retained its monochrome, but as I aged, I saw it in an even sharper contrast.

My daughter came out of the womb rosy and wrinkled. At the age of three, her face bore some resemblance to mine. Although I loved her, I could never look past this. When I looked at her skin, I saw the raw red of the Monkey's flesh. I saw my own skin. She was stupid, too, like me. Stupid and quiet. Needlessly kind. An easy target. The first time I hit her, her nose bled. She could barely walk. There was nowhere she could go.

"Stupid fucking Monkey," I said to her. "You're just like me."

God, it felt good to be a Crocodile and bite into flesh, especially if it was my own. I loved her, though, and it was the only way I knew how to show her.

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Whale Woman

Alyssa Osiecki

In the beginning, the whales were Lena's secret. The first spout declared itself on a Monday morning, shooting up between the vine-green waves, there and gone so quickly Lena wondered if she'd imagined it. It might have been a bird bobbing for fish, a seal splashing, or her eyes playing tricks on her.

It was early spring and the wind still had sharp edges. The beach was deserted as far as humans went. Sandpipers needled the water's edge for insects, scurrying back and forth with typewriter-like precision. Gulls circled above, but lost interest when she failed to drop food. Lena walked shoeless, sinking her feet into the sand where it met the waves. The cold water felt good against the stiffness that had started to creep into the bridges of her toes that winter. She kept moving just to spite it.

Since autumn, the empty hours had sagged shapeless, with little to fill them. Outside was the only place she could breathe. It was the only place she didn't feel suffocated by the memory of slipping beneath a quilt to keep vigil of the raspy breath that rose and fell irregularly—then rose and didn't fall—then reaching for a hand beneath the covers, still as wood when she found it. Outside she didn't need to wonder if it was time to put Tom's things away for good now, then wonder how to fill all of the empty spaces.

Lena was learning there were rules to being widowed, ones nobody told her, but there nonetheless. She was expected to grieve, but for heaven's sake, not to be too morbid about it. Lighting candles at Mass, placing a suitably dour flower arrangement on Tom's grave—those actions were acceptable. Taking walks at odd hours and allowing her long silver hair to hang uncombed and free from her usual stately braid was cause for raised

eyebrows when she arrived at the post office once a week to collect the mail. Whatever she did, she must never, ever, fall apart.

Lena was sure her falling apart was what others feared the most. It was the reason people spoke to her now in the same careful tones they used when approaching a strange animal. The lines between Lena and those she used to be able to speak to had been pulled taut—uncrossable as razor wire. Now when she went to answer simple questions her voice remained trapped in her throat like a stream of water struggling against a kinked garden hose.

Lena learned to communicate in tight-lipped smiles and clipped sentences, placing a heavy stone atop the garden hose to prevent her voice from gushing out. After a while, there was no pain—only numbness. She grew used to the feeling that although people rarely talked directly *to* her, they'd done plenty of talking *about* her. Yes, they had discussed it amongst themselves and made an appraisal of her situation. There was something unseemly about Lena living so far out of town on her own, in a place where the nearest neighbors were summer folk who didn't even roll up their storm shutters until May. It came as a relief when the phone calls stopped, when the invitations to dinners and church socials ran dry. Mustering appreciation had been exhausting. Lena moved within the tight sphere of the bluff overlooking Nantucket Sound, everyone else in their own. She was at peace.

It had been thirty-some-odd years since Lena and Tom moved into the gray clapboard house, a house that clung to the edge of a dune like a stubborn barnacle, gazing off over Nantucket Sound. From there, Lena watched the rhythm of the years move with the tides. She had seen summers of spilled wine sunsets that dissolved into starry nights spent on the beach watching the Perseids meteor shower streak across the sky. She had seen Nor'easter storms that rattled the windowpanes and washed the road out. She had seen white, silent winters so cold that the shallows became encased in wafer-thin sheets of ice. But she had never, not once, seen a whale swimming in the waters beyond the gray clapboard house. Humpback whales swam in the deep water off the tip of Cape Cod, they didn't come into Nantucket Sound.

The spout came again, clearly. Then another one near it, smaller, but insistent, plain as the bluish veins on the backs of Lena's hands. She watched them until the sun drooped and streaked the sky dark mauve. Only then did she go inside.

Lena spent all of the next day watching. She tracked the two whales by their spouts. They moved to and fro just on her side of the horizon, from the far left where the slim peninsula of Monomoy jutted off the mainland and into the sea, all the way over to the far right where Buck's Creek swirled back into shallow marsh land.

She imagined they knew she was watching them. She found herself wondering what their voices sounded like—listening for their calls on the wind. She lowered herself carefully to the sand by the water's edge, lay flat, and put her ear down. She knew it was absurd, listening for whale songs from the shore. Only scientists got to hear those, with sound equipment dangled from great big ships in the open ocean. Yet she listened anyway, for distant sounds of distress, perhaps some reassuring chatter, some long lazy squeaks like a door hinge in need of oiling. There was nothing.

Lena slowly propped herself up to go home. As if on cue, the whales breached, elegantly. Perhaps it was possible they were watching her too. Lena felt the corners of her mouth prick upward for just a moment.

That night as she lay in bed, Lena dreamed of the ocean. In her dream she could inhale and exhale briny water as she coasted beneath the tides. Swimming along, Lena saw the two whales in the distance, a mother and daughter. She swam after them, discovering how to maneuver her body, controlling the depth of her swimming with the rhythmic pulse of her fins. She opened her mouth to call to them. Her voice flowed out in unfettered waves against the obsidian water. Low howls grated like a bow upon the strings of a fiddle, rumbling to the ocean floor. The whales responded to her calls, circling, creating beams of sound—vibrations that met in the middle, twined round each other and repeated in gentle oscillation. Lena and the whales were drawn together, old friends, picking up exactly

where they'd left off, gliding on a current of sound waves they'd created together with their fluent chatter. The ocean was a vast soundscape brimming with life and Lena felt it surrounding her, filling her up.

She awoke violently, tangled in the net of her bedsheets, drenched head to toe in salty sweat. Placing a damp foot on the coldness of the hardwood floor, she padded to the window. Her hair hung in moist silver tendrils, her nightgown was clammy against her skin. Outside, the amber moon glowed, low as a pregnant belly, making bright tracks upon the water. She wished herself sealed beneath the calm darkness of the waves once again, the way she had been in her dream. Lena opened her mouth to call to the whales the way she had in her dream, but all that came out was a dry whisper.

The next day was a Wednesday and Shane Devin came to fish on the jetty. He was an old friend of Tom's. She watched him for a while, trying not to think about the other long shadow that used to stretch out alongside his when he spent afternoons there. He stopped by the house and asked her all the standard how are you doings, which she bristled under. Lena wasn't interested in the hollow how-dos of somebody who still had a spouse at home. On his way back to his truck, as if by an afterthought, he asked, "You seen those whales, Lena?"

Lena felt her voice bubbling in her throat, pushing against the heavy stone lodged there.

Of course I've seen the whales! I've been watching them for days. They're so beautiful, majestic. Tom would have loved them, wouldn't he?

Instead, Lena gave a shrug.

Lena tried to sleep that night. She imagined sinking into her bed like a stone. She took slow, deep breaths the way the doctor in Boston suggested she do when her chest felt tight, picturing each inhale drawing her into velvet-dark waters. Yet Lena's eyes remained open, trained on the whiteness of the ceiling. The walls slid tighter around her, growing closer and closer until they reached her bedside. The ceiling loomed low just above her face. Lena couldn't

see the window anymore, couldn't see the moon over the water. She felt like a small brittle stick shoved into a drawer and forgotten about. She got up and paced around the bedroom.

When sleep came, it was shallow, fitful. In the morning she woke groggy, a hazy bale of static circling her head. She forgot her morning walk. That afternoon, Lena slipped into a momentary nap on the rough corduroy couch in the living room. She was roused by the sound of a station wagon chugging by. It startled her; this time of year, days could pass without a car coming up the road. The car parked just opposite the square gray house, on the last patch of road not consumed by drifting sand and tangled dunes. Shane Devin's daughter piled out of the car with her two school-aged kids, who raced ahead of her to the beach. Lena dipped away from the window, but it was too late. She was seen.

The daughter waved, then came bounding to the front door. Lena opened it, still in her housecoat.

She was surprised to find herself folded into a hug. Tessa probably hadn't hugged her since she was a child and then only reluctantly, on prompting from a parent. When kids from the neighborhood used to visit, they always came to see Tom.

"I was so sorry to hear about Tom," said Tessa. "How are you getting on, Lena? How was your winter? Not too lonely out here on your own?"

Lena knew Tessa was not soliciting an honest answer. So she told her yes, everything was fine. Winter hadn't been too bad, they'd just lost a few shingles off the roof and she'd have Whitely come around to patch it up before the season started.

"Dad says there's whales out in the sound?"

Lena nodded solemnly. There had been whales yesterday. She didn't know about today. Tessa invited her to join in the search. Lena declined. She watched from the window as the two children skirted up and down the beach. One adjusted his binoculars with seriousness, the other brandished a phone.

The family returned to the doorstep of the square gray house an hour later.

"I saw it shoot water up!" the older boy exclaimed, wagging the phone at Lena's face to show the evidence. Tessa sent the boys back to the car.

"Is there anything you need, Lena?" she asked softly. Lena's mouth opened, hollow, dry. There was so much. She felt the stone again, pressing against her throat.

"No," she said with her tight-lipped smile.

"Okay, you take care, Lena." As she turned to walk back to her car, Tessa said over her shoulder, "You know, somebody really ought to call the Coast Guard. It's not good for whales to be stuck in shallow water like this. They could end up beached and die." The way she said it made Lena feel somehow implicated, as if it was her fault the whales had been swimming aimlessly back and forth in Nantucket Sound for days.

The following day the Coast Guard did come and Lena watched it all from the window of the square gray house. She observed the hull of the yellow Coast Guard boat bobbing absurdly like a banana on the waves. She could see men on the decks of the boats in high-vis slickers shouting orders into walkie-talkies. Back and forth they shuttled, trying to push the whales back into the open water. A chopper swirled above, surveying progress. A local news van parked outside the square gray house. It was a slow news day on the Lower Cape and Lena was sure they were looking for a feel-good story. *Whales rescued from beaching by local Coast Guard!* She twitched her curtains shut and stayed behind them until the van pulled away. She didn't want to speak to anyone about the whales. It would be impossible to discuss them without describing the soft ballet of their swimming, the slow-motion echo of their voices.

That night Lena dreamed of TV cameras, of grainy footage hastily spliced together. She dreamed of the whales being caught in special nets, separated, guided away from each other by a human contraption designed to save them. She watched helplessly as a mother and child were forced apart—the distress clicks reverberating so loudly in her head that they punctured her dream. She woke once more in damp, knotted sheets. She gulped for breath, heart clanging against her ribcage. Lena went to the window,

steadying herself with the heels of her palms against the sill. She breathed through her nose the way the doctor showed her, exhales making small pools of white mist against the cold glass.

The ocean was full of tiny crested waves, opalescent in the moonlight. The flick of a fin jutted up between them for a millisecond—then a humpbacked curve—a defiant whip of a tail. She put her palms against the cold of the windowpane and swore she felt a vibration—their voices calling. In one swift motion Lena opened the window. Cold New England air gushed into her bedroom, whipping her silver hair back behind her. She felt the rock lifting from atop her throat. Lena opened her mouth and her voice escaped in luminous ripples, echoing out across the water. The voices of the whales echoed back.

She went to them.

Lena's sturdy frame struggled against the offshore breeze as she walked to the beach in her nightgown. She could see the whales in the moonlight, breaching against the breakers, closer to her than ever before. Their voices drew her to them. She stepped into the surf, water wicking up the edges of her cotton nightgown. Another few steps and the water rose to her chest, her feet lifting from the ocean floor.

Lena thought for a moment how ridiculous she looked. A madwoman swimming in a nightgown on a raw April night. It didn't matter. The water felt like home, swirling around her, spreading her silver curls into a soft fan. The waves held her aloft, ferrying her away from the shore. She looked to the horizon. Where were the whales? She'd seen them so clearly, just moments before stepping into the water, but now they weren't showing themselves to her. For a momen,t Lena wondered if she'd imagined the whales, the same way she imagined the telephone ringing, or Tom's laugh filling up the empty corners of the square gray house. Her heart sank with her foolishness. She was just an old lady, splashing around in a nightgown, about to catch her death of cold.

But no, Shane Devin had seen the whales too, and his daughter, and her boys, and the Coast Guard had been

there yesterday. Whales could hold their breath for up to an hour. The whales were out there, and Lena had to swim to them. It was the only way she and the whales would find their way back to the open ocean.

Lena took a deep inhale and plunged beneath the waves. Her kick became more and more powerful as she swam. She sliced through the water as if she'd always lived there, silver hair streaming behind her, then gently beginning to fall away. She felt her body elongating—streamlining—transforming into a creature who was made to live in the water. She pumped her tail behind her, exhilarated, leaving a froth of bubbles in her wake. For the first time in months, Lena felt buoyant, free.

She carved toward the deeper waters of the sound with precision, searching for her friends. Her voice rumbled low and deep against her vocal chords, no longer trapped in her throat. She opened her mouth and felt it escape in slow, elongated tendrils, echoing all around, vibrating against her skin, trailing behind her in a delicate wake. She was weightless, enveloped in warmth.

The whales didn't answer.

Lena swam deeper now, unsure of where she was. She called and called, experimenting with every register her new voice afforded her. She began to grow frantic. The water around her was growing darker and deeper. Lena was no longer sure where she was. If she wanted to go back, could she? Or was she a whale woman now, destined to swim the length of Nantucket Sound calling out for her pod?

Suddenly, from behind her, a low moan echoed, followed by several high, helium squeaks. Lena paused for a moment, suspended in mid-water, praying her ears weren't playing tricks on her again. She turned in a slow spiral to see mother and daughter swimming toward her, recognizing her voice and moving toward her without fear.

She was no longer a strange animal to be spoken to in careful tones. The whales swirled, gently carving into the space she'd been preserving between herself and all other living creatures.

The sensation of their closeness felt like a door opening.

Lena felt ready to swim through it.

The whales circled, fanning their fins, gliding around Lena in figure eights, infinite loops of delight as she glided around them in turn. Their chatter filled her. It was effortless, familiar, darting from all directions as the whales cartwheeled around her.

We've been waiting for you.

The three companions surfaced together, sending elegant spray directly up at the cold New England sky. Lena dipped back beneath the water, beckoning mother and daughter to swim with her, urging them on with soft insistent clicks. All three creatures were drawn aloft on the tide, sailing around the sandy finger of Monomoy, beyond the sound and out into the dark, churning waters of the open ocean beyond.

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The Hero of POD 2C

Ace Boggess

Who could've expected Jamie Dodds to be the hero of POD 2C? There were better men in here, more reliable men, likeable men, men with crimes, sure, but never a harsh word for anyone. Not twenty-three-year-old Jamie Dodds, the smooth-skinned lanky ginger everyone, of course, called Red. He told played-out Polish jokes and spent fourteen of his fifteen daily minutes on the phone cussing and ranting until the robot voice came on the line to give the one-minute warning, after which Red hurriedly said, "Gotta go, Mom. Love you. Send money if you can. I'll call you tomorrow." Despite his youth, Red had a rap sheet longer than most of the older cons, his NCIC report filled with twenty pages of small-time larcenies, batteries, forgeries, frauds, and the one count of malicious wounding for which the judge finally hit him off with prison time. Red still had freckles, for fuck's sake, and peach fuzz rather than scruff that grew on his upper lip.

Unlike most of us, he looked clean-cut and proper in his prison khakis. He wore clothes well. He had the shape of a store-window mannequin, but not a mannequin's mouth. Just that morning, he had beaten loudly on the POD microwave while shouting "Motherfucker!" after his coffee overflowed its plastic mug, forcing him to clean up the mess before some long-time convict saw it and did the same to him. Those cheap microwaves broke down from overuse about every other month, and this one didn't need the pounding any more than we needed to hear Red verbally abuse an appliance.

The rest of us sneered, shook our heads, then went back to playing cards, watching TV, reading a book, or whatever. We were accustomed to all kinds of childlike behavior in a medium-security facility like Boone County Correctional.

People here were nearing time to see the Parole Board or discharge their sentences. Most wanted to be left alone and go home. Fists didn't start flying the first time somebody stepped out of line. Violence plucked a tight string, though, tense and thrumming, and when it snapped, someone had to bleed. This happened sometimes after inmates were transferred here from Mt. Olive or Huttonsville. Hardened men needed time to adjust to the antics of folks like Red.

Red could take a beating, though. "My old man broke my arm so many times I forgot how to lift without a cast," he said. "Even Mama used to wallop me with a dinner plate or the TV remote or whatever she had on hand. I learned to fight early. I'll take on anybody. Better believe, I'm going down swinging."

We did believe him about his mother and father. The rest was his usual bluster.

The day passed, all of us going about our routines. We made our bunks. We shaved. We went to chow. Some of us showered, some went back to sleep until it was time for morning count and inspection. Then, those of us employed went to our respective jobs. I worked in laundry down in the prison basement where it was ninety degrees and I sweated as if I were back in court standing before the judge. Red worked there, too, but when he sweated, the oils left him glowing like a kerosene lantern.

Red reached, arms wide, into a cart and came back overloaded with laundry bags, not appearing to notice that inside the mesh pressing against his chest and face were the soiled boxers, socks, and undershirts of other prisoners. He stuffed most into an industrial washer with one shove, a couple of bags slipping his grasp and falling to the floor.

The rest of us maneuvered bags one at a time into the machines, knowing that finishing faster didn't mean we'd have less work to do for the rest of the day. Besides, we didn't want to sniff other men's funk, smelling like rotten pears or roadkill.

Red bent to retrieve the ones that had fallen away. "Who are you?" he said, reading the number off a tag.

"Four-six-one-four-nine." He looked at me, then at everybody else. "That any of you?"

No one answered.

Red stared at the bag. "Well, four-six-one-four-nine, you can go straight to hell. You're a whore, and your mom's a whore for having you." Those were fighting words even in medium security.

"Careful," someone said.

Red ignored the man and pretended to spit on the bag before tossing it into the washer. That was Red in a nutshell: always testing, always on the verge of a beatdown.

One of my cellmates said to me once, "I think Red just wants to be loved, and the only kind of love he knows is the feel of a fist against his face."

After work, we returned to the POD for count, went to chow, headed back to prepare for evening rec or cards or whatever shady business we might have planned. These were our routines—what kept us safe and sane, dumb to claustrophobia of the mausoleum in which we were interred.

That evening, C.O. Mayfield was the floor officer: four hundred pounds of man-boy squeezed into a thin midnight Polo with silver-badge stitch-work on the front. The knit badge was supposed to be over his heart, but it looked like a massive pale nipple. Mayfield's arms resembled thighs that got mislaid. His baby face mostly burned a crimson candle.

Whenever Mayfield worked the POD, we didn't worry about him catching us smoking, gambling, or tattooing. He only walked the length of the dayroom once every hour and didn't look in the cells except during count. He stayed at his desk, sitting safely inside the red box painted on the floor. We got along with Mayfield. He seemed like a nice guy. He chatted with us about movies and sports, and he didn't hassle us when we asked him to call a counselor. He even gave us a heads-up if he knew the Security Team was planning a walkthrough. Mayfield wanted to put in his eight hours and go home without any trouble, and we respected that. We wanted the same thing, except that our time would be longer.

Red was the exception. He talked shit to Mayfield at the desk or mocked him from a distance. He called him *Lard-field* and made *whoomp-whoomp-whoomp* sounds under his breath whenever the C.O. walked past. He spit out a perfect Eric Cartman impression, saying, "Respect my authorit-ah."

One of the other cons leaned his face against the blue steel mesh of his cage and whispered through it into the dayroom, "Give it a rest, man."

I shook my head and continued to throw spades on the table. Mayfield was cool and all, but I wasn't sticking my neck out for one of the guards. Red may have been a doofus, but in the *us-against-them* of our lives here, he still counted as part of the *us*.

Mayfield passed our table on the way back to his desk. He smiled at us. He grinned at Red, too. I doubt the comments shocked him. He had heard them before—I mean, I had heard them directed at me, and I weighed a buck-fifty less.

When he reached the desk, Mayfield sat down and stared at the control panel as if it were a television. He could open the cell and POD doors from there, access the intercoms, or send an emergency signal down to the control room with a press of a button. He didn't do any of those things. He stared, exhausted, his face lit up like a flashlight shone through fingers in the dark.

Red went back to being Red. "I was going out on the rec yard tonight and, you know, lift some weights." He mimed pushing an invisible bar toward the ceiling. "But I didn't want to have to fuck nobody up. Some of those guys get testy when you lift more than they can. Next thing, one of them tries me, and I gotta throw down." He punched the air several times as if he were in a boxing movie. "Blam," he said. "Blam blam. Game over."

"Sure, Red," I said.

"You want to try me, Big Head?"

"Not today," I said. "I'm winning."

"We're winning," said my partner, nicknamed Shepherdstown.

"Not for long," one of the others said, laying the ace over Shepherdstown's king.

I glanced at my partner. “What? You thought I had it?”

“You said ‘I’m winning.’ I thought that was a signal.”

“You all are some cheating motherfuckers,” Red said, “and you’re not even good at it.”

It went on like that for the next hour. The four of us threw cards, and Red stood nearby, talking smack as if he were playing. He wasn’t, though. He never did. I think he knew his mouth could get in people’s feelings during a card game, especially with money on the line.

“Rec change,” Mayfield shouted, leveraging himself out of his chair. He wearily eased his way across the dayroom to the rear POD door. He spoke a number into his shoulder-mounted walkie to let folks in the control room know how many inmates were lined up to go outside.

The back door buzzed open, and a handful of men, most covered in rust and sweat, came in, while another half a dozen left.

“Last call for rec change,” Mayfield said, more of a cough this time than a shout. It was as though the first call had winded him.

“Close the door,” Red shouted. “You’re letting all the air out.”

Mayfield pulled the door halfway and let it fall shut on its own. He turned, took two steps, and collapsed to his knees like a shot cowboy in a western. He opened his mouth, but from our distance, we couldn’t hear if he spoke, gasped, or whimpered. His hands twitched as if he wanted to lift them either to his mouth or the shoulder mic. They didn’t rise, instead going flat as his weight carried him backward toward the floor, leaving him wadded in an unnatural ball that caused almost all of us to cringe.

The POD went silent. Cards stopped slapping tables. Conversations died. It was as if we had watched a snitch get shanked and now didn’t know what to do with ourselves. This graveyard of lost voices vanished inside a revival tent of murmurs.

Several men spoke up, saying “C.O.?” as if asking Mayfield whether he was still alive.

"Get up, fat man!" Red shouted across the dayroom from over my right shoulder. The suddenness and volume made me flinch as if to dodge a punch. "Come on, Mayfield. Pick your ass up. You're embarrassing yourself."

When the C.O. didn't move, those of us seated rose from our chairs, plastic scraping stone in a squealing chorus. We stepped away from the tables and headed for the doors of our cells. We knew what would happen next. The Security Team was already on its way. Someone in Control had seen Mayfield's collapse via one of the dayroom's closed-circuit cameras. Or maybe not. It was rec change, after all. The guards in Control might have been busy watching inmates gliding through the stairwell, carefully trying to hand off contraband cigarettes or boxes of Little Debbie cakes. If so, when the guards in Control spotted Mayfield's broken lump on the floor, they'd assume one of us had done that to him. Either way, the Security Team was coming. We had to be ready to lock down so none of us would get pepper-sprayed. With even the smallest discharge of that stuff, everyone on the POD would be sick for an hour as we retched into the shirts we used to cover our mouths and noses.

Only Red didn't go to his cell. He turned and ran twenty feet to the guard's desk, crossing the red line although it was a class-one write-up that could mean two years' loss of good time. He went around the desk, scanned the control panel, and pressed the big emergency button with the flat of his hand.

"What are you doing, Red?" one of the inmates shouted. "Get your ignorant ass out of there before they see you and hit you off."

Red ignored him and kept staring at buttons on the panel.

I heard a voice on the desk speaker say, "Mayfield, what's going on up there?"

Red pushed another button. "Send the nurses up here quick," he said. "C.O. Mayfield's down."

"Down? What do you mean *down*? Who is this?"

"This is inmate Dodds, sir. The C.O. fell over. I think he had a heart attack."

"Get away from the desk, Dodds. We see you on the camera."

But Red already had left. Now he raced the length of the dayroom, running a gauntlet of jeers and insults from the cons. When he reached the C.O., he squatted and tried to pull Mayfield's legs out from under his torso. When that didn't work, he patted around on Mayfield's chest as if searching before his hands forced compressions over the heart. He stopped every so often to breathe into Mayfield's mouth.

C.O. Hervitz, the floor officer on 2B, arrived first and found Red in that same position, still doing CPR, while the rest of us stood around with our mouths open. Hervitz was a smaller, older man, with scrawny arms, curly hair, and what seemed like permanent purple bands around his eyes. He talked into his shoulder mic the whole way, reporting what he saw to Control. "What'd you do, Dodds?"

"CPR," Red said.

Hervitz stopped, as surprised as the rest of us. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

"Lifeguard training. Two summers at the public pool in Kenova. They teach you this shit." He bent down and gave Mayfield another breath.

The POD turned into a chaotic blur after that. Correctional officers and medical staff stormed through both doors. The greasy-haired sergeant led the way, waving his foot-long can of pepper-spray in front of him, ready to blast anybody, prisoner or guard, in the face. Two officers grabbed Red's arms and braced him against athe wall, while one of the nurses took over chest compressions on Mayfield. We were locked down as expected, along with the rest of the prison. Outside paramedics were called. They arrived with a stretcher and, after a group effort plus extra help, managed to lift Mayfield onto it. They rushed him off the POD, speeding him on his way to the nearest hospital. We watched, waiting to see if he gave the thumbs-up signal like a football player being carted off the field, but Mayfield disappeared without a sign.

Red was escorted out, too, his hands cuffed behind his back with a zip tie. As he and the officers passed my cell, I heard the sergeant say, "You might have saved that man's life."

"That makes me King Shit, huh?" said Red.

"But you touched the panel, so I still gotta write you up for attempted escape."

"Bullshit," Red replied.

"I'll tell the magistrate what happened. Maybe he'll drop it down to a class-three for violation of procedures. Slap on the wrist."

"You ever see him do that before?"

"No," said the sergeant, and I thought I heard him laughing.

"Motherfucker," Red said, the last thing before he was guided out the main POD door and off into prison legend.

Ace Boggess *is the author of six books of poetry, including* Escape Envy *(Brick Road Poetry Press, 2021),* I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So*, and* The Prisoners*, as well as the novels* States of Mercy *and* A Song Without a Melody. *His writing has appeared in* Michigan Quarterly Review*,* Notre Dame Review*,* Mid-American Review*, and other journals. He received a fellowship from the West Virginia Commission on the Arts and spent five years in a West Virginia prison. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble.*

Two Flash Fictions: Entanglement & Cass

Chloe Hogan-Weihmann

ENTANGLEMENT

At the pet store standing in front of the betta fish, rows and rows of little plastic cups are stacked one on top of the other. Each one full of brackish water, the cloudy yellowish colour of a bad tooth. The fish, half-dead, hover lethargically: their scales dim, their fins tattered. Two aisles over, the budgies twitter cheerfully, oblivious to the gloom that has fallen over us.

I lean in to inspect a red fish near my eye level. I can detect no hint of life: not even the gentlest motion of gills, the barest quiver of fin. Its muscular body has an irregular twist to it, its eye is filmed over. "Well, this one's for sure dead," I diagnose grimly.

You ignore me, your eyes travelling back and forth, settling on each forlorn fish in turn. You step back, slide your hands into your pockets. Then, to my surprise, you break into song: "If I *had* a million dollars—if I had a million dollars—"

You would buy an Olympic-sized swimming pool, you tell me, and fill it up with the freshest, cleanest, tastiest water, and then you'd empty them all in. All the betta fish from all the pet stores in the city. Thousands and thousands of them.

We stop to imagine it. Scales flashing in the light, a kaleidoscopic blur of fins in every jewel tone, their tiny iridescent bodies: emerald, opal, aquamarine.

"It would be beautiful, wouldn't it?" Your tone is so earnest now. You're taken with the splendour of it, fake and imaginary and ludicrous as it is. "Just picture it. All the different colours..."

I open my mouth to say what I know, or what I think I know. What I seem to recall—what I may have read

somewhere—is that betta fish are aggressive and territorial, that you can't put them in a tank together at all, or they'll rip one another to bits. Your swimming pool paradise would be a bloodbath.

I open my mouth to tell you this.

But I hesitate, the words caught in my throat.

Is it worth taking the myth out of it?

Remember when we were lying in your bed that night after the movie, and someone downstairs turned on the tap? That rush of phantom water in the walls?

Seashell, you murmured, half-asleep. *Sounds like a seashell.*

I made you explain.

You meant that the rush, the sound of water in the pipes, reminded you of a seashell cupped to the ear, the sound someone once told you was the ocean. You marvelled at how the shell echoed its birthplace, kept the song of its home humming in its atoms. You marvelled, until it was spoiled for you: you learned it was not the ocean at all, just the blood pumping in your own skull.

Oh, but I wanted—your voice, so groggy now. You were drifting off. *I wanted it so badly.* What, I asked. What did you want. *Wanted it…to be the ocean.*

Then it was quiet. You fell asleep.

Is it worth taking the myth out of it?

There's something I'm in with you. It doesn't have a name yet.

It's not love.

What should I call it? How can I tell you?

Where are all the missing words?

We've already borrowed *Schadenfreude* from the Germans. Now let's take *Weltschmerz* and *Waldeinsamkeit*. What else are they keeping from us?

Is there some foreign word for it, then? For this—no, I know. I've got it.

Entanglement. Call it *entanglement*.

Because it's the way things wind themselves together

when no one's watching.

Like earbuds in the dark blue warmth of your pocket.

Like Christmas lights in a July attic.

Like your life and my life, when we both stopped paying attention. We let it happen even though we said we wouldn't.

And now we're standing side by side at Fins & Tails, facing a wall of sad little fish.

And you're looking at me, eyes bright and brimful of gentle questioning, and you're saying, "Just picture it. Can't you just picture it?"

And I'm picturing you brushing your teeth, and I'm picturing you paying for parking, and I'm picturing you stirring sugar into your coffee. And I'm thinking of being there. And I'm thinking of you and me, and I can picture it, I can just picture it.

And I say,

Yes.

I can see it.

I'd like to see it.

CASS

Her name is Cass, and she will be famous. She will step out of her apartment sometime around midnight in December, and close the door behind her. In her pocket, she has two bobby pins, one piece of spearmint gum, and $5.37 in change. She wears sweatpants and an oversized red parka. She walks with a shuffle, angled shoulders, hands in pockets. She is ordinary. Her skin does not glow and her eyes do not dance, but her unremarkable face will grace TV screens across the country. Her name will be spoken, whispered, exclaimed; recognized and memorialized for years to come. But right now, she needs milk for tomorrow's coffee. She steps gingerly

onto the icy sidewalk. Her breath blooms from her throat and she tugs her fur-lined hood up over her head. The convenience store is three blocks away. Parked cars line the street like hibernating beetles, blanketed with fresh snow.

A chime will sound as Cass steps into the store and stomps the snow off her boots at 12:07am. She will spend a total of six minutes inside. In opposite corners of the ceiling, perched like roosting pigeons, two security cameras are always recording. From 12:07am until 12:13am on December 8, they record Cass. They record the way she pauses at the magazine rack, the way she swishes open the refrigerator door, plunks the milk jug down on the counter. They record her as a red blur, a six-minute smudge on the timeline. They do not record the polite way she thanks the cashier, the birthmark on the second knuckle of her left hand, or the expressive way she moves her eyebrows as she talks. These are the things that Cass's little sister will remember most fondly, but these are not the things for which she will be famous.

Cass will leave the store carrying the milk jug. She will pass beneath another camera, mounted above the sidewalk outside. The lens is obscured with frost and the picture is unfocused, but there she is: our Cass. This camera will record her as she pauses to adjust herself, pulling her coat sleeves down over her mittens. This camera will capture the white flank of a van idling just behind her. It will not capture the cold feeling that comes over her as she hears the rip-roll of the van door opening, or the way this harsh noise punctures the air. She is seized with the impulse to run. A cloud of heated breath escapes her mouth. Her feet skitter on the ice, wasting precious forward momentum. She kicks, she cries out, but she is thrown into the back of the van. The milk jug falls from her hand and hits the pavement hard. The thin plastic breaks and the milk begins to seep out as the van drives away. The jug will sit abandoned on the sidewalk until morning, when all the milk has drained out and frozen around the plastic husk in a bone-coloured puddle. The camera will record all these things. It will not record the way Cass pleads, the way she struggles, the way she is taken apart in the back of the van.

These are the things that will make her famous. These are the things that will make her into a headline; breaking

news, top story. A city shaken, papers will say. A girl taken, reporters will state.

"I just—I can't believe she's gone. Can't believe...that this happened. To her—to Cass," Cass's younger sister will say tearfully, in stops and starts, into the microphones thrust toward her. Her voice is tight and hoarse, as if there were a hand around her throat.

She will check the locks six times before she goes to bed, and she will leave all the lights on. And she will not sleep, and will not sleep, and will not sleep. She will burrow under the covers and wait for daylight. She will curl up into a ball and wait for a dark figure to burst through the door, or smash through the window. It will be weeks before she sleeps through the night again, and it will be years before the nightmares stop.

It's a certain type of girl that gets taken, we've all thought. We're never sure exactly what type it is, but we have a general idea. A hitchhiking blonde in cutoffs, waiting by the side of the road in some long-dead decade, before our time, back before the girls knew all the things that we know. A prostitute standing on the corner with stiletto-blistered feet and lipstick outside the lines. The girl who was just too trusting, who got into cars with strangers and never questioned intentions. The girl next door, the one with the neighbours that stammer, "We didn't know her very well. She was quiet." Quiet girls. Girls with soft hair and soft voices. Flower-wreathed Persephones, dragged under and swallowed up by the dark earth, buried under strata of myth and urban legend, fossilizing into cautionary tales told with curtains shut and voices lowered.

We've always thought, whatever type of girl it is who gets taken, it is not us. Not our sisters, not our daughters. We are the type of girl who lives. We are the girl who always makes it home again at nightfall. We are the heroes of the stories in our heads.

A former resident of Vancouver Island, ***Chloe Hogan-Weihmann*** *now lives in Melbourne, Australia, where she grows tiny fruit trees on her balcony and drinks too many flat whites. She has placed first and been long-listed, respectively, in two national short story competitions.*

Interview: Martha McPhee in conversation with Kristin Fields & Robyn Gertner

Transcribed by Victoria Carrubba

Martha McPhee is the author of the novels *An Elegant Woman, Dear Money, L'America, Gorgeous Lies,* and *Bright Angel Time*. Her work has been honored with fellowships from the National Endowment of the Arts and The John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation; in 2002 she was nominated for a National Book Award. She lives in New York City with her children and husband, the poet and writer Mark Svenvold, and teaches fiction at Hofstra University. In September 2020, Hofstra's Great Writers, Great Readings hosted McPhee in conversation with Kristin Fields and Robin Gertner, from which the following interview is adapted.

Kristin Fields: I know it took ten years to write *An Elegant Woman*, and it is based on some family history. What was it about your family history that captivated you and made you want to capture it in fiction?

Martha McPhee: I could say that it took a lifetime because this is the book I was meant to write. Even as a child, my grandmother would tell these stories to my sisters and me, and I was captivated by the fact that she would tell me these stories. This was the first novel I wanted to write, but I wasn't prepared then because I didn't have the skills yet. The book is sweeping because it covers a lot of time and geography. It spans the country, it spans the twentieth century, it even goes into the nineteenth century, and before.

I was captivated because they were always stories about women and there were very few men. The women were always doing heroic things like getting out of the civil war.... I was interested in why she was telling these stories to me because they were obviously embellished. She didn't adhere to the truth, she adhered to what would make the story better. It was the fact she cared enough to give these

stories to me and create a narrative sense of where we came from and where we're going.

KF: There's this great line in the book from Grammy, where she says, "The more I see of other people the more I like myself." If your grandmother was reading this today, what would she say you got right and where would she maybe want to correct some storytelling?

MM: Oh, she wouldn't. She would be so proud and so happy. She would just say "I've died and gone to heaven" or "mission accomplished!" She would be so thrilled.

Robyn Gertner: You created layers of fiction led by a reliable narrator who sometimes says unreliable information and sometimes reliable information. How do you make that work and also make it compelling for the reader?

MM: That is why I had to wait until I was into my fifties to get this novel done. It took so long to write because it was very hard to understand how to layer it. It took time, patience, and a lot of tears and frustrations. But the thing about the book is that there was a first draft that was very different in nature; it was longer and more experimental. When I revised that experimental version, it ultimately didn't work and I had to revise it. It took me a couple years and I wasn't sure what I was doing, but I was pointing in this direction of having an overarching narrator, Isadora. Much of the book is not from her point of view but it all hinges on her point of view and she goes into other points of view as well.

The writing of this book took eight years, and a couple months before I turned it in to the editor, a friend of mine, Mona Simpson, suggested I read Carol Shields' *The Stone Diaries*. I read that, and two months later this book was done because she uses a similar narrator and gave me license to understand what I was doing. Mine is different of course, but I think it is important for students to understand you can be so stuck and then once you read the right thing, and boom, you're unlocked.

RG: There's a line when you are talking about the character Laura Ann that says: "A blip of a woman. Does god exist? Does anyone care? Lifts were designed for the soles of her left shoes, but it didn't entirely correct the problem. Someone is about to shoot himself, someone else is not. Does anybody care?" It reminds me of this journey of writing and being in the publishing world. We want to do these great things in our work but sometimes we ask ourselves "does anybody care?" How do you avoid feeling like a blip when you have those moments when things don't go the way you want them to? How do you persevere and keep going?

MM: You have to push through it. I put this book down for months on end. We're all blips, but I think my grandmother was trying to say something by connecting us back to Mary Queen of Scots. It wasn't whoever her husband was, it was Mary Queen of Scots and many women down from there. I think she was trying to put us in a context of continuity. We're here just for a nanosecond but there's this other larger thing that is our ancestry, where we come from, and where we're going. But in terms of the writing, there's this great novel [in-progress] by Robyn [Gertner] *"How to Rewire a Family Tree"*. She's had some struggles with it that are so reminiscent of the ones I've had with *An Elegant Woman* that you push through. Don't be afraid to take it all apart when you get yourself back up off the floor. Don't be afraid to put it apart and rewire the structure if that is going to serve you, or at a certain point, put it away and write something else, which is what Robyn has done. But you just push forward. The only way through is through

KF: This reminds me of two of the most important things you taught me as a student. The first is that writing is rewriting. To not be afraid to throw whole sections and pages away and just trust more words are going to come. The other thing you taught me was to just go out and live my life. I'm not sure it was what I wanted to hear at the time, but it was the best advice.

RG: When you were a student, who was your "Martha"? Who inspired your writing?

MM: Maybe Mona Simpson. She was never a teacher, but she was a really good friend that my father introduced my sisters and I to and she became an honorary McPhee. She is seven years older than I am and she had already published her first novel, *Anywhere But Here*. I looked up to her so much. We would have long conversations, and we still do. But really? My mom. I don't have that anymore because she has dementia, but I had her support for a lot of the writing of this book. She was always encouraging me from a very young age to write. In our family, I was the least likely to succeed. I was not a good student initially in elementary school and she would tell me to keep journals and write stuff down. The novel, my life as a fiction writer, my life as a mentor, and my life as a journal writer are all things that I feel she gave to me.

KF: I want to ask about your family. I know your family's very close and it's not easy to write and interpret family history because sometimes there's different opinions on that. I'm wondering how your family felt about you tackling a project that was very near and dear to everyone in a different way.

MM: I'm blessed because I come from a family of artists so they all get it, they get what I'm doing. I care most about my process as a writer. Running this series [Great Writers, Great Readings] and being a part of it for seventeen years and listening to writers talk about their process makes me understand how everyone has their own. I found most of my stories right in front of me in my family. Most of them, a couple of my novels didn't, but my first two and *An Elegant Woman* certainly did.

When I was in my journal writing class, we were reading David Sedaris, and he said, "People are people until they hit the page, then they become characters." It's true, there's an immediate translation along those lines. This book may be based on my grandma, but I wasn't in Montana in 1910, so it was my imagination taking these little breadcrumbs that she'd give me about a fire or the flu epidemic and I'd follow them and do the history to discover the context for it. I'd read other people's journals from that time to understand what it was like out there. In the

process of the story becoming fiction, it moves further away from the family and becomes something else.

KF: When you were writing about your family, did you ever feel that pull of wanting to have it stay true to what historically happened or just let it run and be fiction. Where did you find the line between the two?

MM: Since this is the fifth time I've done this, I don't experience that anymore, though I definitely did with my first novel which was about my parents' divorce and my mother's remarriage to this hippie. It was very much about the 1970s and transition in America, so I was worried about that. I was also worried about my dad because he's a public figure, so I thought he would get upset. But he read it and said, "Martha, you have egregious spelling errors," and then he took me through it with this special pencil and showed me the errors as he was reading and corrected them all. Thank God for spell check. He never mentioned anything about the divorce or any of the similarities, and that was a painful time in our family's history. So I felt it there, but now, five books later and all of us old and developed in our artistic fields, we all get it and understand, and my father already understood what happens in the process back then. More of my concern is if I'm getting the story right. There I feel the pressure. I want it to move people, and I want the language to be great, and I want to be saying something.

RG: You mentioned that this is the book you were waiting to write. When you were writing your first four books, in the back of your head, were you waiting for this one and to unlock what you needed to make it work?

MM: It was always there. I looked back at some of my early journals recently for a different purpose and I could see that I was starting to draft this story, poorly, when I was at Columbia a long time ago. I just didn't have the grasp, and then I didn't think about it when writing the second or the third novel. But when I sold the third, it was a two-book deal and *An Elegant Woman* was unwritten and only one sentence about a woman's life across the twentieth century,

so I wrote *Dear Money* instead because it just fell into my lap. I got there finally, though. Just don't give up on it. If I had written this book first, it probably would've needed to sit for a while to get it right.

KF: We all know that the publishing world is finicky but what made you feel really 100 percent confident that this is the book and this is the way that it needs to be?

MM: Well, I struggled enormously, as you can imagine, since it took all that time to write. But I knew even with the first draft that the first third of the book was going to be from the grandma's point of view and then it'd go into these other points of view because her life was more interesting in the beginning. Once she becomes an elegant woman, she becomes bourgeois and a lot less interesting. Along the way, she's mythologizing herself. She's sort of turning herself into a myth and I wanted that mythic side of her to be seen kaleidoscopically by these other people, her granddaughter, her daughter, and various other characters. I knew I wanted to look at it that way.

Risk is important to try and to do. I have a friend who is a really great editor, Elizabeth Schmitz at Grove Atlantic, and she recently told me she had to turn down an author of hers and said, "Writers can forget that it's a business." We have to sell books, so you sort of do have to be aware, but you also don't at the same time, because if I were to be thinking, "what does the publishing industry want?" I would just give up because I would have no idea. You do have to be aware that it is a business, but I wouldn't know how to marry that to what it is that I feel like I am needing to create.

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