

Transitions

Spring 2024



DANDELION REVOLUTION PRESS

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MESSAGE FROM DANDELION REVOLUTION PRESS

We launched Dandelion Revolution Press (DRP) in 2020 and published three anthologies of short fiction within three years. We had a wonderful time discovering the publishing process, especially the championing stories that featured memorable, dynamic female characters.

2024 marks a change for DRP. We've expanded our editorial team so we could produce two online collections of creative works. We remain committed to our mission of sharing female-forward stories with the world. Now, we've diversified the type of pieces we publish — short fiction *and* creative nonfiction.

Our own changes have led us to choose the appropriate theme "Transitions" for our inaugural online issue. We selected pieces from global contributors that have interpreted the theme in different styles, genres, and voices. For our creative nonfiction, these are insightful stories centered around real-life experiences. We will always publish stories with complex female characters and narrators, providing you, the reader, with stories that are soulful, humorous, powerful, and unforgettable.

For this Spring 2024 issue, we've dipped a toe into the sea of poetry in honor of National Poetry Month in April. The poems included capture the theme of transition through snapshots of growth in nature, culture, and fantasy.

We're also proud to introduce this issue's featured artist, Niki McQueen, whose work resonated so well with the spirit of our stories. She creates captivating visual narratives, blending the human experience with dashes of surrealism. We selected compositions with female figures at the center that are evocative and ethereal, austere and whimsical at the same time.

We hope you enjoy this collection. And we would love to hear how this journal found its way to you!

DANDELION REVOLUTION PRESS TEAM

Co-Founders	Editorial Team
Ashini J. Desai	Natalya Bucuy
Paige Gardner	Jessica Kaplan
	Jules McLaughlin
	Swapna Padhye
	Scarlet Wyvern

Cover Art: Sorrow's Gift

Featured Artist: Niki McQueen is a visual artist from South Africa who has pioneered a technique where richly colored, finely detailed and otherworldly artworks are created from digital composites which are painstakingly hand-printed and hand-drawn onto heavy archival papers and finished using a variety of materials. Passionate about art from a young age, Niki has an MSc in Marine Biology and background in corporate marketing. Unable to work since 2022, due to chronic illness and disability, Niki has found meaning and purpose in her artmaking which she sees as cathartic, therapeutic and a lifesaving passion. Her work expresses powerful and emotive personal symbolism and worlds of magical realism, exploring realities beyond reason and the familiarity of everyday existence. Themes include psychology, archetypal and societal interplay, eroticism, mythology, innocence, decay, and rebirth. Her work can be found on her website: nikimcqueen.com and on Instagram at @nikimcqueenart.

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Fiction



More Than Words by *Niki McQueen*

Fairy Godmother's Wish for Herself *by M. Weigel*

To Whom It May Concern:

It is with a heavy heart that I surrender my wand.

("I wish." "No, not now. I can't respond anymore.")

I have been a fairy godmother for two thousand years now. I earned all of the certificates in wish granting. I have taken additional classes on mindful curses, gentle character assessment, encouragement of the hopeless, etc., and I never would have guessed that I would ever end up here, surrendering my capacity for magic. My wand, once full of glitter, is somber and ugly now. The luster wore off long ago.

("I wish." "Of course. Let me grab my wand.")

When I started, granting wishes was easy. I'd disguise myself as a dewy old lady and wait to see who offered a bit of bread or a kind word. Back then our interventions did not need to be as dramatic. A kind word to the right villager meant everyone told ole Mike to shush when the King approached. He'd say that his daughter could spin even straw into gold ten minutes later and a young man who valued spinning would marry the miller's daughter the next season. No one had to be imprisoned. No odd deals. Just shushing a proud dad who wanted to see his eldest daughter find a good husband.

("I wish." "On my way.")

All the tales were like that. The Beast had a birthmark, and he asked a man who regularly stole his roses to work off the debt. The man fixed up the stables and the garden, and his daughter brought him lunch. She was gentle with animals and sang sweetly. Her first born inherited the birthmark and a local bard invented a story that the heirs to the land were born carrying the signs of their innate heroism.

("I wish." "Gladly.")

A word here, a gesture there. We were constantly busy making a difference. Most of the stories were small. A girl who looked eerily like her mother would badger her father until he remarried. She would help design dresses for her future stepmother who would see a gown that looked like the sun and moon and stars and feel welcomed and loved. The new wife would give her new daughter an expensive and beloved mirror. The mirror had an inhabitant who offered advice, helping the girl run her new home. Everyone knew the queen was fair, and she did not need to constantly hear that she was worthy based on her looks.

("I wish to go to the ball." "You will look great in gold.")

Big displays of power were considered wasteful. Magic ran out at midnight so that a prince would see a girl he might easily overlook. When he did not care about his lover being covered in ashes, her entire family prospered, and the desperate stepmother soon treated all eight of the children in the household well.

("I wish." "Could I have a minute to myself?")

But just as power corrupts and kings start to believe they are gods, the ones who make the rules started to think that we spent too much time chatting with peasants and not really working. They said we were being too generous with our magic. So, we had to look for the virtuous who met set criteria. They had to already be good or clearly in peril. Just offering a bit of food was no longer enough.

("I wish." "Keep trying. I can't help yet. You are almost there.")

This change hurt. Before, a rivalry between sisters could end with each one smiling, married to royal brothers. A word in a servant's ear and a king would not ignore his eldest or youngest sons. The boys who did not know fear got jobs loading boxes, but now we had to let them get cast out. It was even better if we let them go hungry for a few nights before we appeared.

("I wish for food." "I know child, but all I can offer is a dream of food and making your stomach hurt less.")

We also had to tend twice the number of supplicants each. Thus, sometimes that boy starved a bit not because we weren't watching but because we lost three days taking the enchantment off a mirror. It was supposed to help advise a queen, not label the appearance of every woman in the kingdom.

("I wish to be beautiful." "I'm not granting that one. You do not want to be the fairest in the land at thirteen.")

We stopped being everywhere at once. Sometimes we arrived breathless and late to find a furious stepdaughter had stolen a dress and had already gone dancing, but other times, we found a girl sitting at the hearth and weeping. More of our magic went into cleaning up the latter and convincing her to go dance. Her stepmother was also meaner now. The girl had starved as her stepsisters had grown plump. That girl forgave her sisters reluctantly. We routinely talked despairing supplicants down before they traded their voices or made deals with devils, but we couldn't be fast enough to stop ole Mike, and now his daughter was imprisoned. We spent a year researching names and saved her child, but she was never the same carefree girl after marrying into royalty. When grumpy and tired fathers asked why their daughters were not spinning enough to catch a king, young women in her village began to hate all handcrafts.

("I wish to rest." "Look, can you help? We'll be three women: one with a distorted foot, one with a distorted lip, and one with a distorted thumb. The girl will never have to spin again. I know it is disrespectful, but what else can we do?")

We adapted. We made do, but soon the experts demanded that we prove that we had helped enough. Supplicants were complaining that their wishes were going unheard. We spun in circles to make silver gowns and seven league boots, but it was never enough.

("I wish to go home." "Who lets their son climb in a sleigh with a random woman?")

Worse, families started assuming we would always be there to save and aid their worthy children. They sent girls with baskets into the woods and encouraged them to talk to wolves. My

friend, Parsnip, had a wolf skin cloak from saving so many girls, but when she diverted yet another huntsman to cut out a girl and her grandmother from the wolf's stomach, she didn't see that a story spiraled out of control. When a man steals rampion for his wife, the annoyed witch is supposed to become the girl's godmother and help educate her; instead, the witch took the child and was already drawing up plans for a future tower.

("I wish I didn't have to write up an analysis on why that witch locked up the girl and how all of us failed the girl. Why are we evaluated on the mistakes of others?")

We all got messages about being negligent and not being mindful of our supplicants' needs after the witch locked the girl away. Mind you, twenty girls in red cloaks were not dead, but everyone just expected that as part of our duties. Rescues were just part of the job. We were told that keeping up was the reality of the godmother. We all read books on how different cultures wish to make sure we did not miss anyone, and we had training on how to spot a desperate prince to avoid losing as many as we could to the new briar hedges that started surrounding sleeping maidens. We helped girls learn to eat with their new silver hands and helped young women wear dresses of animal skins to escape their fathers' lust. No one listened to us when we wanted the fathers prosecuted since they claimed we would not exist if the maidens did not wish.

("I wish I was not in a wolf's stomach." "Child, so do we. Where is the nearest huntsman?")

The stories got darker, but still we endured. Then, the supplicants changed. Gone were the lost soldiers and girls who had nothing better to do than dance. When a horrible young man got aggressive with a maiden, I turned him into a frog until he could learn to be gentle. My supervisor wrote me up for not fully considering the young man's perspective and the hardships of living in a pond. I stood my ground. Magically escaping predators is better than rape.

("I wish I was not a frog." "Tough. You earned that curse.")

Our assignments came too fast and too often. Stepmothers became cruel. They started fearing their children, and their punishments became worse. We had to start offering workshops on removing shards of ice from sleeping maidens with extremely pale skin. The higher ups gave us dwarves to protect particularly traumatized supplicants, but that meant training them in how to help calm a girl who knows her mother wants to murder her and devour her heart.

("I wish my mother did not hate me." "There are no words. Try to sleep.")

When the princes started being blinded as they fled a Rapunzel's tower, we were told that we were not doing good enough. No prince should be blinded while seeking love, but no one asked us about preventing maidens from being locked in towers.

("I wish they would stop seeing girls in towers as ideal lovers. At least bring a ladder for the girl." "Quiet. Do you want another speaker on finding our inner magic being?")

Again, the supplicants weakened. We would arrive to find listless Cinderellas who did not want to go to the ball. They were so terrified of the world that we had to magic them into their gowns and coaches and cause them to lose their slippers. They would marry and seem happy, which was all my superiors wanted. It seemed cruel to tell a starving, bruised girl that she had to prove

herself worthy of help, but anyone caught sending helpful doves or talking frogs had to explain themselves in copious reports.

("I wish I could leave." "You know the door is unlocked, right? There is a bag of coins sitting to your right. Just go. Why are you waiting for a ball?" "Because it is easier.")

The superiors did not seem to care that more maidens than ever were covered in furs and running away from terrifying fathers. We would dress as a flower seller and tell a girl to run between confirming if Jack had finally climbed up the beanstalk. It meant that we definitely could not always help childless couples wish for an infant the size of their thumbs. Crying maidens gave up and sold their voices and then turned into sea foam, but as long as the survivors spoke of the value of their fairy tales, all was well. Their satisfaction and assessment of virtue was enough for those who supplied our magic.

("I wish I had not sold my voice." "That ship has sailed. Let's work on healing your feet.")

More magic and more energy became required. Jacks lacked the strength to climb, Rapunzels needed netting to prevent them from throwing themselves from their towers, and the Beasts needed to stop holding women captive until threatening suicide in lieu of a proposal. None of us liked these new stories, but we could not do anything to stop them.

("I wish more of them were kind. Do you remember how we looked for signs of gentleness, not just being summoned?" "One demanded to speak with my supervisor.")

Some of my colleagues turned to malicious compliance. They gave every girl in a tower an enchanted spoon and taught them to dig themselves free. It saved a few, but no one would talk about the princes starting to accost sleeping maidens and how the dwarfs were finding maidens who had been victimized by huntsmen.

("I wish I didn't have to give them enchanted cutlery but at least they are alive.")

Just tonight I have been told that my last Cinderella is unhappy that she had to wear blue in her ball photos. Never mind that I found her shaking and covered in blood. Never mind that the pink gown she wanted would not have turned the prince's head, and never mind that Cinderellas who stay at home die of despair. Instead, I am at fault for saving a girl in a less optimal way.

("I wish my gown was not blue." "You have a gown, and I have less magic than ever. Just go dance.")

My superiors recommend that I learn more about salvation styles to offer more individualized wish-granting while also saying that I need to use less magic. They were not happy that I told a mermaid to get a life last year and sent her to a convent school instead of to a beach. She has a degree and did not turn into sea foam, but that is not enough now.

("I wish a different life for me, one where I don't grant wishes. Wait. What did I just say?")

I can't do this anymore. I can't find another maiden face down in a lake because her donkey skin cloak caught on the reeds. I can't keep from sneaking food to a boy until he learns what fear is. Isn't learning that no one cares about him bad enough? I cannot keep telling captive maidens that they will learn to love the man who imprisoned them.

No more. I must wish for something better for me.

("I wish." No, no more wishes. I must save myself now.)

Here is my wand. How about you see what it is like to grant wishes? You can start with mine by setting me free.

Sincerely,

An exhausted and heart sick fairy godmother

M. Weigel retells myths and fairy tales and explores science fiction, fantasy, and horror. When not writing, she researches stories in their oldest forms to see how they survive and transform into today's tales. Her work can be found in *The World of Myth Magazine*, *Partially Shy Literary Magazine*, *Litmora Literary Magazine*, *Cosmic Daffodil Journal*, *Carmina Magazine*, and *Pickled Press Poetry*. She can be found as Martha Johnson-Olin on X (Twitter) @Peronelle2014, on Mastodan @Peronelle@mas.to and on Bluesky @peronelle.bsky.social.

Like That *by M. A. Dubbs*

I can tell something's wrong by the way Mom twists the phone cord. If it's one twist around the finger, it's a telemarketer. If it's wrapped around her arm, it's one of her friends. The cord wraps around her body like a feather boa when she talks to Dad whenever we do the dishes. But right now, the curls of the cord are clamped down in her fist, like a python squeezing prey, so I know it's one of those bad things. When she calls me and Dad into the kitchen, it's confirmed.

"Grandma fell. It's bad this time."

So, we pack into our worn, tan Pinto and start to head south. The landscape changes as we leave Indiana, the soil turning into an amber clay instead of loose black. My ears ache and pop as Dad speeds through rust-colored cliffs and hills. I guess Alabama is kinda like back home, except the people down here talk with long vowels and they ask me if I want a Coke instead of a soda. We don't make this drive very often; usually Grandma comes up to us, but the drives were getting so much harder and much farther in-between. Mom kept saying, "We need to get down there to see her before something happens," but I never quite knew what that meant.

Sometime between my video games and naps, we finally arrive in Birmingham. Grandma's house isn't right when she's not there. It's a time capsule of fancy dark cherry furniture and porcelain dolls and white cats with painted pupils watching as I walk from room to room. It's so pristine, so sterile. My grubby jelly sandals don't belong in this living museum as I shuffle from room to room, and the adults send me out so they can talk. I usually run along the bluegrass and make bouquets of dandelions, but my long legs feel limp, so I sit on the concrete stairs out back. I roll pill bugs with a stick, gently guiding them back and forth as ants begin an angry march over my toes; even the ants down here are red. They know this isn't my home and they bite me with a hot sting to show me so. I feel tears start to well, but I bite the insides of my cheek and instead fill up a water can with warm water from the spigot. I pour it all over everything, flooding the red ants and the pill bugs and anything else caught between sidewalk and garden edging. They sweep away, seeping into the cracks between concrete and dirt.



A few hours later, the adults finish their conversation, and we are back in the car and heading to a hospital. I have a handmade card for grandma and look forward to a hug. Once we get there, a nurse pulls my mom aside and whispers in a low voice while they look back at me. I'd think I did something wrong, but I haven't done much of anything since we got here. Maybe they know about the bugs? I know from Sunday school that killing is a sin, but I'm not sure if bugs count? Do ants have a soul? But before I can confess to homicide, Mom then tells me with a frown that they don't let kids back in the ICU and she doesn't want me to see Grandma "like that." I don't really know what "like that" means, but if it's like the compressed and twisted phone cord, it must be bad, too. I correct Mom, "I'm not a little! I'm almost nine! I'm in third grade!" but my appeal to authority fails. I then ask if Grandma is going to die, but no one answers. It's quiet and everyone unanimously decides to talk about something else. Something that adults always tend to do.

My family leaves the waiting room in twos and when they come back, they tell the next pair to go. They don't look happy when they come back. Instead, they look sick and pale and scared. Maybe they shouldn't have seen Grandma "like that" either. I can feel an anger rising within my

small chest which I take out by pressing crayons until they break into my coloring book. Dad notices and yells at me to quit breaking my things, so I spend the rest of the day watching cartoons on the waiting room floor wondering if someone will answer me. No, they'd rather talk around things. Make comments on the snacks in the vending machine and the cafeteria hours and the cost of parking in the garage. They ask each other: "Did you eat? Have you eaten? Have you drank anything?" instead of the things I need to know: Is Grandma going to die? Do ants have souls? Do you go to hell for killing them?



Grandma dies two days later on Halloween. Mom's a mess so Dad is the one who tells me, but I already knew by the wails and whispers I could hear before I got out of bed. Between Mom's crying spells on Grandma's pink satin fainting couch, Dad asks me if he should buy me a costume at the store so we can try to Trick or Treat through Grandma's neighborhood. My aunt yells from another room that "this is a Baptist neighborhood, and we don't do that here." I tell him no, I don't want to Trick or Treat since it's for babies. I also remind him that this isn't Grandma's neighborhood since she's dead. Dad just tells me "sorry" and leaves to buy candy from the local pharmacy.

While Dad is out some random people come over. I don't recognize them, but I guess they're family. Everybody tells me how big I am and asks, "Do you remember me? Probably not, you were very little when I last saw you."

"That's right!" I puff up my shoulders and stretch my neck. "I'm almost grown!"

They chuckle and pat my head, ruffling my hair like dog fur. They offer brief condolences, patting my mom's and aunt's backs with sad faces, and then start to dig through Grandma's closet and bags. They pull out vintage shoes, hats, and gloves. Someone pulls out a porcelain doll in a blue dress and a white apron, "Looks just like you!" they tell me as they toss it in a pile of fabric. They finger pearl necklaces that Grandma used to let me play dress up with, but they do offer me some plastic beaded ones to take home or at least amuse myself with for the time being.

The house feels too big right now, so I decide to build a fort between Grandma's kitchen chairs and peek out occasionally to check on Mom. Dad comes back with some king-sized candy bars which he slides into my fort. He tries to crawl in, but I tell him to stay out since the entrance is too small for him. He kneels next to the makeshift blanket door to tell me about his favorite candy as a kid, but the dull hum of conversation from the closet has turned into screaming and cursing. He then helps break up a fight over who gets what jewelry. I can't hear much, but a woman cries out, "...but I'm the oldest!" I see Mom's legs rush across the room as she mutters, "I can't believe they're acting like that!" The voices grow louder and angrier with words I'm not supposed to hear. I pull out my headphones and my cassette player, drowning out the noise with a read-along story though I've long since lost the book.



At Grandma's funeral I realize that sometime during the drive over to the church, I have finally become a superhero and gained a superpower: invisibility. With this new ability, I can do anything! I can weave between the pews fast, full speed like at field day at school. I can use the kneelers as a balance beam like I'm back in gym class. I cram my mouth full of donut holes and apple juice

from a small kitchen. I get melted chocolate on the hem of my black dress from this year's father-daughter dance, but no one notices, and no one yells.

Mom had told me while we were getting dressed in the morning to not go up to the coffin, but I want to know what "like that" looks like. I want to see what it means when they say someone is dead. I want to see Grandma one last time before they close her box and bury her in the ground. With my new superpower, this is my chance. I shimmy between pant legs and tights and slowly make my way up front. I can't see in the coffin from the floor, so I drag an empty choir chair across the floor and up a small set of carpeted stairs so I can look inside.

She looks asleep with her eyes closed and her face relaxed, but her mouth looks stiff and pouted and crooked. Her arms are crossed with pink flowers on top, the huge bouquet looking as if it is crushing her with its mass. Her skin seems weird with her brown splotched liver spots now looking like yellow papier-mâché. There's pink powder circles on her face like she's a doll or maybe a clown. And there's crimson rouge on her lips—

Dad picks me up, huffing with the effort. "You don't need to be seeing all that."

"How, how could you see me?" I ask him, shocked at the failure of my powers.

Dad looks confused, struggling to keep his grip and keep me up.

"Dad, why is Grandma wearing make-up?" I ask as I wiggle in his arms to try to catch another glimpse inside the coffin from over his shoulder. "She never wore make-up or looked like that!"

"They never look right. They always look like that," he tells me as he sets me on his hip to find more comfort.

"Like what?"

He relinquishes my struggle and walks over to let me get a good look. We both peer down at her as I hear Mom angrily calling Dad's name, heels clicking as she stomps up the church aisle. From up here, Grandma looks so odd in her tan pantsuit and her crepey skin draped over it. Things are so different from this height, Dad's height. I feel Mom's hand pulling Dad's arm to take me to the back of the church or at least put me down.

Dad groans as he sets me down, rubbing his shoulder. "I won't be able to pick her up soon enough."

Mom glares at Dad and my power returns as they face off in murmurs and hisses, just a foot away from Grandma. Part of me wants to tell them to keep it down, but I don't think people can hear me when I can't be seen. Luckily, the pastor gently guides them to the pews to start the service. The service is unremarkable and exactly like church back home, just with a bit more crying and a little less mentioning of hell. The whole time I just think about how Grandma is trapped inside a box while we sit around it. I almost ask Dad if she can breathe in there but remind myself that it's a dumb question because I know dead things can't breathe. At the end, they put Grandma's coffin on a cart and shove it into the back of a large black car. Mom tells me that we are, yet again, getting back into our car. We put a flag on our window as Mom tells me that we

are going to have a parade to the cemetery. I'm disappointed when there's no one to watch us drive past, so I just wave to my reflection until I get embarrassed and stop.

Dad and some other men heave Grandma out of the trunk and grunt to a tent and rectangle hole in the ground. I guess in the south they "return you to the Earth," so we grab some soil and toss it on top of Grandma's glossy coffin. But I'm sick of this red Earth, so I grab a small, hard chunk and let it slide from my fist and down the opening. It lands with a loud thud on the lid which startles the crowd, breaking the spell of invisibility. Someone yells at me to not act like that and for my parents to correct me. With a disapproving glance from Mom, I mutter an apology and stand still and quiet as the rest of the family pours dirt into the massive rectangular hole lined with dried plant roots and smooth scarlet mud and little insects crawling on the sides. I wonder if the bugs will get into Grandma's coffin, slip in the cracks, and bite her to remind her she doesn't belong below ground? When it rains, will the water creep in and fill the box to the brim until Grandma floats in a slush of mire and red ants and pill bugs?

Eventually Dad tells me it's time to go but I am lost in looking down the scarlet abyss. I can't shake the feeling. I don't touch my games or coloring books or cassettes or the box of plastic beaded necklaces or the dolly in the blue dress and the white apron and instead rest my head on the window and pick my nail cuticles until they bleed. As I watch the blood pool on my nail beds, I wipe the blood on my dress.

I feel like I'm looking down at the center of the Earth for the drive back home until my mom remembers me. "You're real quiet." She turns around to ask, "How are you feeling?"

"Like..." I raise up my hands to show her. Her eyes widen as she watches the blood trickle to my knuckles and wrist, one droplet racing fast down to my elbow, "...that!"

M. A. Dubbs is an award-winning Mexican-American and LGBT poet from Indiana. For over a decade, Dubbs has published writing in magazines and anthologies in seven countries across the globe. She is the author of three poetry collections: *Aerodynamic Drag: Poetry and Short Fiction* (2021), *An American Mujer* (Bottlecap Press, 2022) and *Limestone Versified: Indiana Haiku and Other Poems* (2024). She served as judge for Indiana's "Poetry Out Loud Competition" in 2022 and performs readings and workshops in her local writing community. Her website is madubbspoetry.wordpress.com and Instagram is @madubbspoetry.

In Other Words *by Su Smith*

Clara Immerwahr (1870 – 1915)

Mrs. Fritz Haber

This is how it feels, now, to be Mrs. Fritz Haber. This is how it tastes. Sharp. Acidic. Like pity, like shame.

It was not always so. Before Mother died and Father moved us to Breslau, there were games: skipping, climbing, catch-me-catch-you. There were stick people, fashioned from dry twigs and grass twine, who became, for a short time, as real to us as the Kowalczyk girls from the village, with their matching dirndls and matching plaits.

There was the way Father lowered his glasses to peer at me intently and would describe the properties of elements and compounds, how their propensities bind together to create something greater than the sum of their parts. Together, we marveled at the magic of possibility, the potential of investigating and directing such fusing and transmutation. And there was my thesis defense, in the University of Breslau's main hall, to which so many townswomen came to crown me *erster weiblicher Doktor*. I confess it: I took pride in being the first female doctor among them and felt such joy in knowing that, surely, I would not be the last.

Wooed by Christianity, I acknowledged my sins: pride, greed for money of my own, lust when Fritz pressed against me in the dance hall. The wrath and envy that, it seems, go hand in hand with womanhood. In truth, I wed Fritz to purge myself of those trespasses, to atone for the constant condition of wrongdoing in which I found myself.

And yet it seemed the sinning doubled down. A woman's place is in the home, but every attempt to conform brought with it extra helpings of envy, more swallowing of wrath that writhed within me like a serpent. I tried to live well. I assisted Fritz in his work, with no recognition. Still, I transgressed. When I grew round with child and birthed Hermann, sloth grasped at me and so did guilt. The child was, perhaps, to be reparation for my ungodliness.

Fritz left us often, for long stretches of time. He took his expanding knowledge and increasing coldness to the other side of the world or merely to taverns close to home but far from domestic responsibility. It became second nature to pretend not to know what he did.

Until the damp, heavy day, nine days since, when his plans came to fruition in Flanders, and I could pretend no longer.

I lay across our bed that day, next to Hermann, and lifted his little, light, innocent hand from my arm, unable to stomach his touch. The unbearable detail in my thoughts was appropriate punishment for intellectual pride, perhaps. Oh, I understood, intimately, this bastardized chemistry.

Diatomic gas, two and a half times denser than air.

Surrounding faces, it would be causing irritation to eyes, coughing and vomiting. In human lungs, the hydrochloric acid formed by reaction with water would be eating at tissue, eroding slowly and unstoppably as those burning bellows made desperate, doomed attempts to breathe, to speak.

Images of countless, nameless men rushed behind my eyes: fathers, brothers — have mercy, sons — bewildered, choking, blood-spluttering, blind. I felt it bodily: Death clutching at each man's throat, unsighting them, suffocating them. I smelt acrid chlorine in my own windpipe, tasted its metallic tang on a swollen, agonized tongue. Horror, incalculable in scientific terms. Inconceivable in human ones. Anguish unspeakable.

I did not weep, nor sob, nor scream; there was no sound guttural enough to release the terror and hatred that pulsed within me. My very blood seemed a different mixture at that moment, as if some venom had entered alongside its basic elements.

Fritz Haber, my husband. Devil incarnate.

The poison flows through my life stream still. Fritz has returned, gladdened by his work, excited by alchemy, glorifying in the gory purposes to which he applies a chemist's calculations and dreams. He will leave the day after next for the Eastern Front, taking his barbarous blend to another battlefield to practice further his murderous methodology.

There is no atomic bonding, no engineered compound, no philosophy, no prayer, no kindness, nor any entire life's work that could atone for the abomination he has unleashed. There is no way to make reparation for the sins I have served. There is, now, only this: Fritz's military pistol gleaming proud, daring me. The sudden, certain knowledge that its retort must be the roar of anger, pain, and abhorrence for which I longed. One final sin to end other sinning.

There is only this in answer, now.

Mae (Mary) Coughlin (1897 – 1986)

Mrs. Al Capone

I was 21 when we married, 28 when my hair turned gray.

I am best left unquestioned about the years in between.

Simone Melchior (1919 – 1990)

Mrs. Jacques Cousteau

My hands smooth over my hip bones and are surprised at the curves they encounter. I am something new, something fluid, no longer the boyish-figured, angular shape I was only yesterday. The scalloped edge of my bodice juts outwards, unfamiliar, and intriguing. Stepping forwards, I cannot feel the floor, nor see my legs or feet; ocean-colored silk swathes downwards and glides before me as I move, like water pooling.

At the party, light enters sideways and rolls in waves across the surface above. I float through murky depths, glimmering green-gold as I drift in Mother's wake. I try to blink, and find myself unable to do so, yet my eyes are not dry.

Chords resound heavy through the haze, rippling away over another note which strikes deep and melodic. Voices whistle and click rhythmically, distantly, an alien language on another

frequency. I move dreamily through these unusual sounds, first allowing them to wash over me and then willing them to seep into me. I can discern no meaning in them.

Men, sleek and powerful in black and white, circle everywhere, their teeth glistening wetly in the dim. They are too large, and too high; their monochrome sharpness is a fright and I dart, nervous, behind Mother, and hang in her shadows, suspended in uncertainty. I do not know if I am breathing, or how I could be, in this airless world. Girls—young women, of course, like me—appear to have grouped themselves by color: a silver shoal on one flank, a red swarm on the other, a bank of yellow up ahead. Each mass shifts restlessly so that first one member then another takes up position on the outside edge. On all sides, these colored creatures' eyes flitter, large and aqueous, hither and thither in the gloom. From behind Mother's draping, fin-like sleeves, my eyes do the same. For we are too bright, too noticeable.

I am gradually scolded, jostled, and maneuvered into open space, where I hang defenseless and wary. My elbows smooth themselves as flat as they will go and my breathing shallows and slows so that I am negligible, almost entirely still. Silent, I wait and watch, while shapes lurk and loop in my side vision.

Simone, says Mother formally, this is Jacques Cousteau.

Older than me, by some margin. Dark hair. As tall as Father, at least. He bows and straightens, regards me seriously. My stomach flutters.

Why, he says, surprised but gentle, you are a mermaid.

Tiny bubbles rise from my stomach to my throat and escape my lips in a silly, coquettish giggle.

Shall we, he says, perhaps dance?

Mother's head inclines a yes.

His hands, interlaced with mine and encircling my midsection, are definite. Their strength makes me buoyant; I am weightless as we float and spin. Light disperses into fragments and waltzes with us, so that we pass through its flickers and flares. We are light, ourselves. I, a sea-nymph; he, Poseidon.

We whirl slowly into an ante-room and drift to a corner cave where emerald green fronds waft outwards in semi-dark, and moments of fluorescence flit over us. We sink to seats as one. I wait, modestly, for his words.

You find this, he murmurs, as curious as I do. He gestures unspecifically, fingers briefly adrift. His eyes are disconcertingly dark; I had expected, I think, to dive into a boundless sea, looking into them, but see only myself in miniature, swaying in blueish light. I am shimmering, otherworldly, there. I cannot tear my gaze away.

I nod. It is all curious indeed.

This world, he goes on, this earth-dwelling life. It is not, I think, for the likes of us.

Slow and steady, his voice is entrancing, unlike any other, offering questions that are not questions. He is effortlessly solid in this ever-shifting space.

There is more, Simone, he breathes, his hand hovering at my waist. Even without touch, there is a slow surge and swell between us. *There is so much more. We are only*, he suggests, *on the surface, here.*

I realize, quite suddenly, why it is that I am not scared; he is not like those circling, black and white, sharp-edged creatures. He is clad in blue, Navy blue, his shoulders tasseled with gold; its flounces rise in the gentlest of billows as he speaks.

He too is ocean-colored, ocean-shaped. We are of the same species, perhaps.

Martha Bernays (1861 – 1951)

Frau Sigmund Freud

Two years engaged, and still mother is painfully difficult about it. Even Minna, ever before a dutiful sister, picks at the idea of our marriage like a scab. Battle lines are being drawn: my family on the one side, my betrothed on the other. I wander a colorless, Hamburg-shaped no man's land between, impeccably dressed, clean behind the ears, minding my tongue. I am neither unhappy nor impatient, yet not quite at ease.

From the Western Front, the letters come and come and come. Line upon line of scribbled longing, blame, changing tactics. Sigmund, in Paris, misses me desperately, yearns for me inconsolably; is not here. He is concerned about my pale cheeks; prescribes me iron tablets, cocaine, a more nutritious diet. Displaces anger at his lack of progress into anger at the slightest thing anyone might have said or felt about me, about us. Strives to make of them all adversaries, to create some manner of external war. Cannot recognize the conflict in himself. Is not here.

He must learn, struggle, change, crusade; begs that I hold steadfast, remain constant, until he can prove himself worthy and provide for us both.

Waves must break upon the shore. The land must let them gnaw. Neither are at fault for that. Sigmund ebbs and flows, driven and pulled by greater forces than I could possibly imagine, needing something solid against which to beat. He is vicious, passionate, wild; lapping, gentle, subdued. Noisy, silent, unknowably deep, he retracts and comes again.

I hold firm.

We are married, at last. Sigmund's moustache curves sensuously over his mouth and beard; his cigar juts proudly from his jaw. He is a model Hamburg man. Noble, in profile.

There is a wedding night, as there must be. He pushes into me gradually, apologetically, as if he cares. Then deeply, urgently, insistently, as if he does not. It is painful, and surprising; ultimately, though, not as terrible as I had feared. His translucent outpouring laces over my skin and dries into a salty crust as he lies across me. I am bloody, one of the fallen; he is the victor, and has claimed me. I wait for words, any sign that he is content. Moments, many of them, hang heavy and slide past slowly until at last I understand that he is sleeping.

There will be no need, no time, for love letters, now.

The baby, our sixth, wails and wails. Milk weeps pathetically from the breast she will not take and becomes cold against my hot, stretched skin. Sigmund sits in his chair and considers us as I rock her from one side of the room to the other. His eyes are pebbles. He is thinking, I know, not of the moment of shuddering passion that produced this child, but of the many nights of impotence since. The cigar clamped in his jaw points accusingly. I know this man; the disappointments of those nights are as much a relief to him as to me, but he cannot allow it so. He must dissect and despise himself for it. I lay the baby down and turn from my husband's gaze to press cool palms against aching nipples.

Sigmund has all he longed for, here in Vienna: a peaceful marriage, a healthy family, a well-ordered home, furnishings, trinkets, a stream of patients, a perfect circle of like-minded acquaintances. Smartness, regularity. Rigor, research, peace in which to write. This dissatisfaction is of his own making. It is with himself, not with us. I must hold firm.

An hour later, the eldest two recount their dreams over dinner. Sigmund carves up and chews upon their words, hungrier for details than vittles. These children, this table, these meals are too real for his taste. He feeds on illusion, fattens himself with fantasy. I grow thinner and am among many not to notice.

I clear the dishes; he takes a walk. When the brood are settled to bed, I brush and lay out his clothes, add toothpaste to his toothbrush. Ready myself for sleep and allow my racing mind, briefly, its say.

She is my sister. *My sister*. But must I care, if he dips his wick in another's wax, when I know that the flame inside him burns ever for me? I close my eyes and force behind them the image of his beady-eyed, ugly addendum; I see it standing tall for Minna, thrusting toward her. Can all but smell the cigar he lights afterwards, his jaw sliding as he masticates thoughtlessly. I attempt to feel injury, or spite; feel nothing but a bored kind of sorrow.

I do not speak a word of my own dreamings. Those, he could never hope to analyze.

Sigmund's cigar, a little sodden at the top, dangles permanently limp now, unlit. It is impossible to remember the desperation of his early passion, to imagine him plunging lustily into me, discharging himself with abandon. But remember and imagine I must, if I am to believe such an existence was ever ours.

Cancer devours his jaw cruelly, unstopably. His pain is unconscionably real, consciously felt. There is no space for fantasy, now, and I am sorry, so sorry, that he must be destroyed in this unholy fashion, robbed slowly of speech and faith. I gather family, drape blankets over his frail, disappearing shape, hold beakers steady at his whitening mouth and tip them slowly. Drop by drop, I attempt to refill him, until it is clear he can take no more and must be released from this final struggle.

When he is gone, truly gone, I pull a soggy, flaccid cigar from his lip and kiss his brow, dry-eyed.

So many theories and analyses; such relentless battering at the boundaries of knowledge. It has been a lifetime's work, allowing the waves to crash over me, and I am, I confess, somewhat eroded. But I see it all, now. The utter hopelessness of a man trying to comprehend womanhood, when he cannot see beyond the end of his own nose or other appendage. The pointlessness of a woman attempting to define herself. Fantasy, frustration, desire, pain, memory: bodily or illusory, these are neither male nor female, neither land nor sea. They are only human, and they must be borne. I wish only that Sigmund, dear Sigi, my toughest, truest love, had lived long enough, or battled hard enough, to reach the same conclusion.

Su Smith has recently completed an MA in Creative Writing at the UK's Manchester Metropolitan University, earning a distinction. She is currently putting the finishing touches to her debut novel and to an anthology of pieces written in the imagined voices of wives of famous 20th century men, from which this short extract is taken. Su is new to writing, has one prior publication in UK literary magazine *Mslxia* earlier this year, and does not have an agent or publisher...yet. She lives in a quiet village suburb just outside London, UK. As well as being an avid reader and writer, Su is an animal lover, nature enthusiast and music fan. She is on Instagram/Facebook at @Su_Smith_Author.

Balibkayan *by Susan Evangelista*

When Jenny was visiting home in Lucena, she tried to push from her mind all thoughts of her "other life," her life in the land of dark shadows and cold, drizzly rain. When she was here in her province of Quezon, she basked in the sun, happy to be warm again, happy even to be too warm, to sweat. She gave in to total inertia, sitting with her feet up, accepting icy glasses of calamansi juice, squeezed fresh just for her because they knew she couldn't get the Filipino citrus in Belgium.

"Oh, well," she'd say, "we can get lemonade; it even comes frozen. So, you just add water, but it's really not the same. No one else in the world has calamansi."

She felt like a queen here at home, where she was known respectfully as *Ate*, the older sister. "Ate, shall I make some leche flan?" "Ate, shall I put the fan on?" One day, her brother Rico even offered to treat her to a massage; he could invite the neighborhood masseuse, Perla, the blind woman who lived nearby but usually went to work in the enclaves of the rich. Well, he had said, it really didn't cost very much, and Jenny must be tired from her long trip, so maybe she'd like the woman to come.

Jenny winced. She knew Perla, but she didn't want to tell Rico that. She had tried to forget the hurt of that day long ago when they had met. Jenny had never told a soul about it.

It was nearly five years since she was walking home on a stormy morning from the club where she had been working — head aching and sinuses clogged. She had turned the last corner before heading down the narrow passage into her own neighborhood when she saw the frail masseuse, aged way beyond her 32 years, put her cane directly into a pothole, slip, and collapse into a heap on the dirty street. Jenny ran to help her up, collecting her belongings, the beat-up brown bag with a towel, the lotion, the oil, and the worn old wallet. She turned the blind woman towards her own house and had been ready to go on her way when Perla's mother came bustling out the door.

"Ay," she shrieked, "what did she do to you, Perla? That *puta*, that whore?"

Is it a crime to help a blind woman? Jenny thought. Why wasn't her busybody old mother out there to help her when she fell? Too delicate to come out in the rain? Jenny bristled and spat in the direction of the stupid old woman. What had *she* done to help Perla?

Jenny's eyes burned as she turned towards home. *Puta!* Well, that's what she was, Jenny thought. Why not say it? Everybody else did. Even Rico had called her that to her face when they had fought over the money for the rent. She was a *hostess*, she would tell herself; paid for flirting, for keeping the drink orders coming. Sure, she went out with some of the customers after hours, and yes, she would have sex with them. But they would pay her, and had Rico ever been sorry to see her come home with extra money? The day they fought it was because she hadn't had any extra! He had finally been angry and called her a whore and ran from the room in tears, shocked at his own audacity. *Putá!*

Jenny had cried and cried that afternoon, until the house darkened into evening. She promised herself she would find a better way to earn money to help her family.

And then of course the rest was history. One of the men at the club had invited her to a party. There were eight or nine men from Belgium, and they wanted to meet Filipinas, looking for women to marry. Since there were about twenty women present that night, it felt like a competition to Jenny. She was outgoing and friendly, and she knew enough English to flirt with the men. She considered herself ahead of the others.

She met Heinrik that night, and thought he seemed kind, if a little shy. He was old, of course, more than forty, she thought. He was in business, some kind of selling, and it seemed like he earned enough. He took her out to eat two days later. They enjoyed a gorgeous, expensive dinner right in his hotel, and she spent the night with him. He was very straightforward in his needs, nothing kinky like she heard the other girls describe foreigners wanting. If only they could have talked more easily, Jenny would have been completely comfortable.

When Jenny returned home the next morning, she asked her brother exactly where Belgium was.

In the end, she married Heinrik and went with him to his cold, rainy country. It was okay and she couldn't complain. He didn't beat her or anything. But he became taciturn, made no effort to help her learn Flemish, and seemed himself to have forgotten all his English except command words. She knew from the start that his mother and sister did not like her, and thought she was some whore he had picked up in Asia.

And that was strange because he never made love to her anymore, at least not anything she'd call "making love." He "used" her two or three times a week. That was all. Jenny didn't care; she didn't even want "passion." What she really wanted, she often thought to herself, was someone to hug her, hold her tight, comfort her, shield her against the pain she felt from being so far from home. She so missed the familiar voices, the chatting in her native Tagalog, the familiarity of her mother's usual sour expression. Sometimes she really felt like a whore. Sometimes as she walked to the little market nearby, the neighbors she passed, the gossipy old housewives, looked so hostile toward her. She knew what they thought of her. Sometimes she even imagined she heard them taunting her in her own language: *Putá*.

Belgium was cold.

Heinrik gave her more household money than she really needed, and he allowed her to go to church on Sunday, where she met other Filipina wives and learned how to send money home. She started shopping, buying little gifts, jewelry, cosmetics, silk scarves, blouses and putting them away for a future trip home.

After nearly three years, when she knew Heinrik was feeling good and his business was doing well, she asked to visit her family. "Heinrik," she pleaded, "my brother Rico is begging me to come home. Mama hasn't been taking her meds and they think I am the only one she will listen to."

"Really?" he asked. "I thought your mom gave up on you years ago."

"Oh no, no. That's just her way of acting. And she's self-conscious because she doesn't write well. She needs me, Heinrik!"

Heinrik looked like he'd been struck by lightning, like he'd never thought of such a thing. But two or three days later he told her yes, he thought she should do that, go and maybe stay for a month, no longer.

So here she was, home, with her mother and two sisters and two brothers. Home in her old neighborhood. Only the family house was not as she remembered—it had been remodeled, fixed bit by bit, a little more every time Jenny had sent money. She had her own room now, well, at least during her visit. Rico slept in it when she wasn't there. Of course, he was the eldest after her, and he was earning a bit now too, so that was his privilege. The two girls crowded in with their mother, and the youngest, a boy, either slept with Rico or out in the *sala*. Now, both boys were using the living room, but that was okay with them, they said, because they were so glad to have their Ate home! They were all glad, even Mama, who had regarded Jenny with such sad eyes every time she saw her, every day of her life, from when she had quit school to work at the club at the age of seventeen to when she married Heinrik at the age of twenty-four.

In fact, the whole neighborhood was glad to have her home. Children — she was sure there were more children now than when she left — came by the house, laughing and giggling and begging for chocolates. "Gimme chocolate, Joe!" Jenny wondered who they thought Joe was.

In the family, no one could do enough for Jenny – running to fetch things, cooking for her, turning the fan on, or playing music. Of course, they wouldn't own the sound system, or even the stove, if it hadn't been for her. She loved the food and the comfort, basked in the neighborhood gossip and in speaking Tagalog again. She wanted to feel whole-heartedly "at home." But somehow her past and her other present far away in cold, rainy Belgium weighed her down.

In the end she decided to accept Rico's offer for Perla's services, and thus on the seventh day of her visit, Perla came over to massage her. Perla looked haggard when she smiled towards Jenny. She said, "Yes, I remember you." Jenny suspected Perla knew She knew now: Jenny had helped her once when she had fallen on the street. Perla's Her voice seemed to catch, as if she wanted to say more, to apologize for the hurtful comments from her mother. For she must have understood.

Rico guided Perla into Jenny's small room and left. Jenny stripped to her panties. Never mind that Perla was blind, it still wouldn't do to be completely naked. She laid on her stomach on the *banig*, the handwoven mat covering her rattan bed. Perla pattered around, feeling for a tabletop to place her oil, and tucking her old brown bag into a corner. Then she approached Jenny gently, lining up her two hands on Jenny's shoulders and running them straight down her back to just below her waist. She arranged Jenny's arms so that they laid straight alongside her body, poured oil on both her hands, and started in earnest. Jenny relaxed against the pressure and released a deep sigh. Perla's hands made long sweeps down the length of Jenny's torso, straightening her, aligning her muscles, warming her skin. Her fingers began probing the muscles of Jenny's neck and shoulders, pushing, smoothing, feeling for nodules of tension.

"There," she said. "Oh my! So much tension. So many knots!"

Jenny felt defensive in spite of herself. Was she tense? Was that a fault? What did it mean?

"I think it's cold in Belgium," ventured Perla after a few minutes. "Is that it? Is that why you are all pulled in, contracted?"

"Hmmm. Maybe," said Jenny. She didn't want to discuss it. All contracted? Could she explain what it was like to walk the streets of Henrik's neighborhood, their little town of Bruegel, feel the eyes upon her, hear the tongues wagging in that irritating, incomprehensible country Flemish? Could she ever explain that to anyone? Cold. Yes, she'd settle for that.

Jenny could never explain what happened next. Perla continued to work in silence, smoothing Jenny's knots and muscles, plying her skin with sweet lavender oil. Then she said soothingly, "Relax, Jenny, relax. You're home now."

And cautiously, slowly, Jenny released some of her tension, relaxed her muscles, her hold on herself, and submitted herself. She started to weep, wordlessly, silently, but from her depths. She felt as if she would go on forever.

Perla didn't speak for a long while, and then said, "It's okay, Jenny, it's okay."

When Jenny's tears stopped, she fell asleep, only half feeling, half appreciating the rest of the massage, the work Perla did on her lower back, legs, shoulders. She turned over to her back and slept again while Perla did her arms, upper chest, stomach. Perla moved to stand at the head of the bed and placed her hands on Jenny's face, which was slightly salty with the tears, but dry now. Jenny sighed again — her jaw loosened up and her forehead smoothed and relaxed.

"Sleep now," said Perla, reaching for a light blanket folded next to Jenny's head. She covered Jenny gently from her feet up to her breasts, and silently wiped the oil from her hands, put both the oil and the towel back in her bag, and left the room. Perla didn't want Rico to pay her, telling him she owed it to Jenny. But Rico insisted, so she suggested a token amount. although truthfully what he finally gave her was not as much as she usually collected.

Jenny awoke in the semi-darkness of twilight. She felt as if she were on the bottom of an ocean, oppressed by water weight in the dim light. She laid with her eyes closed for some time, more feeling than thinking. She was home and she was warm. If she didn't like her lot in life, well, she just had to keep doing the best she could, like everybody else. That was how life worked. But for now, she was home on vacation, she had come from far away with gifts for everyone, and she was queen of the household. That was something, at least.

She stretched as she sat up and reached for the house dress on the side of the bed as she stood. She felt a bit timid as she stepped into the sala, as if she were somehow changed, had a new hairstyle or something, and everyone would notice. The light assailed her eyes.

"Ate! Ah, good, you're awake. Let's eat!" said Rico. The two girls jumped up and started bustling around, setting places at the old wood table, scooping rice from the blackened pot on the stove, turning the heat on under the pork adobo.

"Ate," said the youngest sister. "Shall I squeeze some calamansi for you?" The girl reached for a pile of the small green fruits and started cutting into them before Jenny had a chance to answer.

"*Anak*," said her mother, calling from her old chair by the doorway. "Come, sit down, child. Uncle Max and the children want to see you. I told them maybe tomorrow. Your sisters can cook, but you tell us what you would like the most."

"Okay, Ma," she said, feeling for once that it really was okay. Her mother could accept her. She wasn't just happy about the gifts that Jenny brought or the money she sent. But her mother understood how hard her life was and why Jenny was choosing to live that life.

"Ate, come. It's ready now. Adobo and fish and fruit salad — your favorites."

"Okay, okay," she said. Finally feeling a little spark of gratitude, she said, "Thanks."

* Balikbayan is a Filipino term meaning Return to Country, the home country. Filipinos who work overseas often make Balikbayan trips or yearn for them. At the other end, in the country, people welcome Balikbayans joyfully, and feel obligated to entertain them lavishly, just as the Balikbayans feel obligated to bring generous gifts.

Susan Evangelista was born in Michigan, studied Philosophy and Literature in Swarthmore College, joined the Peace Corps immediately after college, and was sent to the Philippines – where she has now felt at home for 60 years. She married Oscar Evangelista and mothered three remarkable children. She taught Literature and Writing in the Ateneo University for 30 years, guesting in schools in Nigeria, Japan, Cambodia, and more informally in a Burmese refugee center in Thailand. Her PhD work centered on Carlos Bulosan, and she published *Carlos Bulosan and his Poetry* (University of Washington/Ateneo University.) She and her husband retired to Palawan in the Philippines in 2000 and taught in Palawan State University. With her daughter, she founded an NGO which promotes Reproductive Health within a framework of human rights in schools and communities in Palawan. Her short stories and essays have been included in many anthologies, including her own book, [Growing into Asia](#).

What Comes After *by Paige Gardner*

People always pointed out how lucky Georgia was that she never had kids with him. As if *that* would be what tied them together for life. As if without kids, the thirteen years they shared together somehow weren't as meaningful, as real.

These were well-intentioned people, mind you, like her mother when she heard the news. At times when sorrow permeated every pore, her mother would wrap her arms around her daughter, her one and only, and tell her to forget him. What kind of man catches another woman's eye with a ring snug on his left hand? Because kids weren't involved, perhaps it could be like a switch. Flip that switch, Georgia! Turn off that old life and turn on the new!

The switch was flipped, the light off. Now two years without him, Georgia was certain he could no longer hurt her. Fury and humiliation had turned his betrayal into a dull ache that occupied the quiet parts of her life, so she filled it with as much noise as possible. She climbed her way up to Senior Project Manager at work, and filled her nights with pottery making, salsa dancing, book clubs, and wine nights. The new Georgia had no time to slow down and be still—just the way she liked it.

One rainy Tuesday morning in spring, Georgia opened her apartment door to head out for her post-divorce daily run and spotted the newspaper sitting atop her welcome mat. She paused. She never got papers delivered, let alone to her actual doorstep on the ninth floor of the apartment building. Eyebrows furrowed, she finished tying back her long auburn hair and bent down to pick up the newspaper. It laid with the obituaries staring at her.

Him. He was staring at her.

It had been over two years since she last saw that face, a face she had once known as well as her own. Georgia had deleted her social media accounts when they split, part of her "flip the switch" method. She had moved in with her mother across town that first year, before she finally felt steady. She found a new place, and slowly began to build up a new set of familiars: a new grocery store, new gym, new go-to bar, new hiking trails, new restaurants. New, new, new. Only Georgia knew the lengths she went to avoid the west side of town. She looked for him everywhere, so that she'd never be caught off guard again.

And yet she found him, here, in the one place she never expected: "Gabriel Edward West, 33, passed away on Tuesday, May 3, 2022."

The rest of the paragraph grew blurry as Georgia's heart hitched in her throat. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no," she muttered, frantically patting down her body in search of which pocket held her cell phone. With a shaky hand, she called her mother.

"Did you know about this?" Georgia demanded. She moved back to the wall, steadying herself against the cold surface, and slid all the way down.

"Oh, honey." She heard her mom exhale on the other side. "I'm so sorry. You know how quickly this kind of news spreads..."

"And you didn't tell me?"

"I didn't know how you'd react."

Georgia closed her eyes, massaged her temple. "Of course I'd find out."

"Of course you'd find out—"

"But you'd just rather I found out like this." Georgia felt her chest tighten and untighten, sobs threatening to erupt. "Alone."

"I just..." There was some rustling on the other side, the sound of an alarm beeping and being shut off, and Georgia's eyes flickered to her Fitbit. 6:15 am. "I wasn't sure what you'd do about the funeral."

It was Georgia's throat that tightened this time. "Funeral?" Gabe's funeral. An impossible image.

And yet.

"It was wishful thinking, but I thought maybe you wouldn't hear of the news by then and you wouldn't feel any pressure to go." A few seconds passed in silence. Her mom's voice was barely a whisper when she asked, "I mean, do you think you'd actually go?"

"Mom, we were married for *13 years*," Georgia said through clenched teeth. "What kind of person would I be if I didn't go?"



By the next week, Georgia had decided she was completely fine with being the kind of person who didn't go to her ex-husband's funeral. No way could she stand to be in the same room as her dead ex-husband, his mistress-turned-wife, and their sickeningly cute one-year-old daughter. Georgia could just imagine all the people swarming the family, placing hands to their hearts, lamenting to his perfect wife and his perfect baby how horrible it was that perfect Gabe would never get to hear the coos of "Dada," or teach his child how to ride a bike. What a tragedy, what a loss.

At least with this ending, his wife gets the comfort of hundreds of strangers and the illusion that her husband is a good man. Georgia could not say the same.

Still, the day of the funeral brought a strange stillness to her morning. She went for her morning run, her mind numb. She took a too-hot shower, her body numb. Throwing on an old pair of jeans and flannel shirt, she shopped at the Farmer's Market, something she never did with Gabe. She prepared an extravagant brunch for herself consisting of fried eggs, a bowl of colorful fruit, and blueberry lavender jam spread on a fresh baguette.

But when everything was plated and sitting in front of her, she couldn't pick up the fork.

There was a knock at the door. Georgia took a deep breath. She hadn't spoken to her mother since the morning she found out about Gabe's death, and she had purposefully ignored every text and call since. It made sense that her mom would make her way over to the apartment eventually.

Georgia pushed herself up from the kitchen chair. She pressed her forehead to her front door and looked down at her feet, her hand hovering over the handle. "Sorry, I just don't feel like talking right now, Mom."

"Georgia?" An unfamiliar voice answered.

Curiosity won and Georgia opened the door, finding a stranger in the hallway. The woman was tall and slender, her skin the lush color of rain-drenched earth with eyes warm and twinkling. Georgia had the absurd thought that this woman could not possibly exist in the same sphere as her, no. This woman's beauty deserved to be captured with paints and oils, behind glass on a wall, away from all harm and the tainting of humans. Her hair was long and intricately braided; each black strand ending in a soft tassel that hung to her waist and moved when she tossed her head back. She wore a plain white dress, the light fabric a perfect complement to her dark skin, with an off-shoulder neckline that showed off defined collarbones. She smiled easily, her teeth holding the same brightness as her eyes, and when she spoke again, Georgia moved aside to let the woman into her home.

"I am sorry to bother you when you do not feel like talking," the woman said, brushing past her, her eyes doing one sweep of the apartment before landing back on Georgia. "But today is an important day. I wanted to check on you."

Georgia blinked a few times, wondering if this was really happening. She had never had a visitor before, outside of her mother.

"I'm sorry, you must be looking for someone else," Georgia said. Not quite wanting the woman to leave, she asked, "What is today?"

Again, the woman smiled. "Well, I am certain you know."

Heat began to creep up Georgia's chest, neck, cheeks. "I am certain I don't?"

"Gabe West's funeral is today," the woman said, clasping her hands in front of her. "Did you not see the paper?"

Georgia swallowed, her face very hot now. "You're the one who left the paper at my door?"

"I am," the woman said with a nod. "I am surprised you are not ready."

Taking a very deep breath, Georgia turned around and hurried back down to the kitchen table. She sat and willed her eyes away from the woman, focusing instead on her plate. She wondered if her eggs had grown cold. "I am not ready because I am not going. Thanks for stopping by."

The woman took a seat across from her, and Georgia tensed. She did not look up.

"I think you should go," the woman said softly.

"Well, you don't know anything about me, so what you think doesn't actually matter, does it?" In one scoop, Georgia stuffed one of the fried eggs into her mouth. Yep, cold.

"I know more than you think," the woman said, and when Georgia finally looked at her, she found that the woman's eyes were still, somehow, twinkling. Irises that rival the Milky Way.

"Who are you..." Georgia said slowly, with mouth full of egg.

"Be still, child," the woman said, reaching out a hand and grabbing hold of Georgia's forearm. Her skin was soft, her touch gentle. "I am Love." As she spoke, the walls of the kitchen grew hazy, the colors softening, the hard becoming soft, up becoming down, the light becoming dark.



It happened as fast as a blink. One moment, Georgia was sitting in the kitchen with this strange woman in front of her, the room melting around her, and the next, a warm breeze tickled her nose as she stood atop the hill of a cemetery. The woman — Love? — was no longer beside her.

Georgia lifted a hand to shield her face from the blazing sun. Her heartbeat raced in her chest as the rest of her body tingled. None of this was possible. She was still in her apartment. Maybe she was dreaming? She pinched herself to wake her up but winced at the sharp pain. Squatting down to the grass, Georgia felt the blades between her fingers. Strange, how real it all felt. Prickly yet soft.

Squinting into the distance, she noticed groups of people dressed in black filtering into the small white church in the middle of the cemetery. The sight was like a cold breath on the back of her neck.

Gabe's parents, his siblings. Those who had been her family. Those whose weddings and baby showers she attended with armloads of gifts. Those with whom she had traveled, laughed, and dreamt of the future together. All they had to do was turn their heads left and they'd see her. Oh God, oh *God*.

Spinning around, Georgia spotted a large oak tree with a bench in the shade below. As quick as she could without running, she made her way to the bench. It looked discolored and she was sure the wood was rotten, all forgotten and lonely on this cemetery hill, but she didn't care. She sat, leaning forward to rest her head in her hands. At least this bench was far enough she could no longer recognize the faces that streamed into the church.

The church that held Gabe's body.

She had spent years trying to get as far away from him as she could, and it took one stranger to bring her to the exact place where he'd spend eternity.

No, she told herself, no. This is a *dream*, remember?

Still, she realized this was the closest she had been to her husband's body in two years. A bubble of air got caught in her throat. She put a hand to stop it, but it still came. Impossibly, Georgia let out a laugh.

"What's so funny?" came a calm voice beside her, and she jumped. She straightened up and noticed a man was sitting to her right at the other end of the bench — was he there before? — but he wasn't looking at her. He was staring at the church.

His arms stretched out so that his elbows hung off the back of the bench, as if he were lounging on his sofa at home and not a public bench in a cemetery. Like every man within view, he was dressed in a black suit. His undershirt was black too. But the man himself was whiter than snow — blinding, even in the shade — with hair that matched, despite being young. No older than her, Georgia decided. His hair was slicked back so that she could clearly see the white hairs of his brows and lashes. When he turned to look at her, she refrained from gasping. His eyes were such a light blue that they almost appeared not to be any color at all. She got the eerie feeling that he could see right through her. "What's so funny?" he asked again.

"I — uh — I was thinking about how I spent the last two years putting as much distance between myself and my ex-husband," she paused. "And... I guess I wasn't very successful."

The man huffed some air out of his nose. A laugh too?

"It's not very funny," Georgia said after a moment, wondering if this strange man was here for Gabe's funeral. She shifted, debating if she should make a run for it.

"Oh, but it is," he said calmly. "Sorry Love had to get involved in all of this."

Georgia's face snapped to the man. "You know Love?"

"We all know Love," he said, a cheeky grin appearing on his face.

Georgia shook her head, suppressing her own smile. She tried to look away from the man but found she didn't want to.

"We should also all know Death, too." He stuck out a hand in greeting.

She couldn't speak for a moment. "*You?*"

"Me." His hand hovered in the air, but she didn't budge.

"Sorry. I... I feel like I shouldn't shake Death's hand." She gestured to the cemetery with a frown. "You know?"

Death did not challenge her. He merely slung his arm back over the back of the bench, relaxed. A few moments passed. "Why aren't you in there? Love brought you here for a reason."

Georgia shook her head, still trying to comprehend that Death was sitting behind her, watching her with those misty eyes. This dream was growing more and more ridiculous. She crossed her arms. "Love *forced* me here," she said. "I didn't want to come."

"Why not?"

"Because he's my *ex*-husband. I don't know if I want to hear a highlight reel of his life. Or watch his new wife cry for an hour." She sighed. "Honestly, I don't know if I could stand to see the faces of his family again. It's too much."

"What if they didn't know it was you?"

Georgia turned to him, trying and failing to read his expressionless face. "What do you mean?"

Death snapped his finger, and Georgia felt heavier. She glanced down, her eyes meeting a body she did not recognize. A black dress hugged large curves; her long legs crossed with thigh-high leather boots. Her view was partially covered by a combination of blonde curls that framed her face, a snug round hat that shielded her from the sun, and large sunglasses that sat at the edge of her little nose. Georgia took the glasses off and raised a finely shaped eyebrow at Death.

"Ummmm... this mysterious woman attending his funeral is bound to start rumors... Let's not."

Death's lips quirked. "No? You are a much better person than I."

He snapped his fingers again, and Georgia once again felt strange. Her limbs were lighter, but her neck hung lower toward her chest. When she looked down this time, she found wrinkled hands dotted with age spots. A long black skirt fell to her ankles, her feet adorned with modest flats. She patted her head, feeling thin hair pulled back into a bun. The skin of her face was papery thin.

"Did I just make a deal with you? Am I stuck like this forever?"

"I'm Death, not the Devil," he said with a cluck of his tongue. "You can go to the funeral disguised as an old woman, and no one will know you. When you return to me, the illusion will be reversed. You'll be yourself again."

Georgia's heart hammered in her chest. Just that morning, there was no part of her that wanted to attend Gabe's funeral.

And yet, and yet.

"Thank you," she managed, pushing herself up from the bench. Death gave me a small nod, and she could feel his pale eyes on her as she began the slow descent down the hill.



"Do you need help?" someone asked as she entered the church, and Georgia realized immediately it was Dillon, Gabe's brother. He was five years younger than Gabe, but the resemblance was always striking. Even now, meeting his hazel eyes and dimpled chin, that face transported Georgia back in time, back to when things were so much simpler.

"Yes," she practically gasped, and Dillon held out his bent arm for her to grab. Georgia let her mind float to the summer nights when she and Dillon would drive to the movie theater together, windows down so they could listen to the crickets chirping and cicadas buzzing. Unlike Gabe, Dillon was a movie-fanatic like her. They'd decide what to watch based on the box office worker's recommendation. They always bought the biggest popcorn to share and would sit outside the theater on the hood of her car, discussing the movie until the workers locked up and kindly told

them they had to leave. To Georgia, Dillon was the smell of hot butter and the sound of summer nights.

He gently escorted her towards a pew in the back. "Here you are," he said. She noticed, looking at him now, that his eyes were red.

She patted his arm. "Thank you, Dillon."

He nodded, and a flicker of confusion flashed in his eyes. Only for a moment. "Of course," he said, before returning to the door to assist others.

Georgia found herself immediately looking to the front row, searching for the new wife. She'd seen the wife in pictures, late at night when she couldn't sleep and would comb the web, but never in person. When Georgia's eyes landed on the woman in the front row, she made two immediate observations. One: Someone must've done her hair, for the curls cascaded down her back like a luscious waterfall, tied nicely with a big, black bow. Two: She was younger and skinnier than Georgia, qualities that instantly made her less likable. Georgia grew angry with herself for even noticing.

She gritted her teeth. Coming here was a mistake.

But each time Georgia built up the courage to push herself up out of her seat and leave, more people would be coming down the aisle, and she couldn't. She locked eyes with his grandmother — an avid reader who shared books generously with Georgia. His grandmother always underlined her favorite parts and jotted down reactions in the margins, asking Georgia to do the same so they could hold secret conversations with each other through ink. The old woman smiled at her, a total stranger.

And there was Gabe's sister, Rebecca, bouncing his baby, her niece, on her knees. Georgia's heart clutched at the strength it must take to smile for a baby who was now fatherless. Rebecca worked at a daycare and dreamed of starting a family of her own one day. Georgia wondered vaguely if she was dating anyone yet.

Everything started soon after. A whirl of music, familiar faces. She recognized all of the pallbearers. Georgia felt as if she was floating outside of herself, floating to the top of the church, watching it all from a different point of view. She couldn't seem to come back down.

That is, until the wife stood up for the eulogy. Down, down, down Georgia crashed. Every eye in that church was on Gabe's widow. Her face was swollen and red and beautiful. Her breathing came in quick bursts, one hand clutching tissues and the other a piece of paper. Dillon appeared at her side, guiding her to the pulpit, and Georgia's blood grew cold. She imagined, then, the trips to the movies those two might have taken. The talks on summer nights. And suddenly every memory Georgia held with Gabe and his family morphed, starring his new wife instead of Georgia.

She inhaled sharply and held it, waiting for his wife's words.

When she spoke, her voice was deeper than Georgia expected. She thought she'd sound younger, more naive. But she cleared her throat and began. She referenced lyrics to Gabe's favorite songs, songs Georgia didn't know. She talked about how Gabe had reacted when he found

out he was going to be a father, what books he kept on his bedside table, how he left work before her yet always made sure to brew a pot of coffee for her before heading out. The trips they had taken, the concerts they had seen. Places and artists Georgia never heard before. She talked about what their last conversation had been about. And when his wife described Gabe, she used words that Georgia never would have associated with him — humble, radiant, contagiously optimistic.

It wasn't until his wife finished and returned to her seat in the front pew that Georgia realized tears had been streaming down her own face.



When Georgia returned to the bench on the top of the hill, Love was sitting beside Death.

"Hello, Love," said Georgia.

Love smiled. "Do you hate me?"

Georgia took a seat in between the two of them. A shiver ran through her as she returned to her normal form. She fiddled with the bottom of her flannel shirt, her eyes lingering on the church. "No, I can't say I do."

"But you're wondering why we brought you here?"

"We?" Georgia said, turning to look at Death. "You were working together in all this?"

He shrugged, a sly smirk forming. "We're a pair. You can't have one without the other."

"In death, you'll find love," Love said, returning Georgia's attention back to her. "All of these strangers were brought together in this church today simply because they crossed paths with Gabe in their lifetime. Now, they'll spend time in the basement of that church, sharing memories over potluck meals, crossing paths with one another for the next few hours. Love is always present in death."

"And death is always present in love," Death was quick to add. Love laughed and reached over to slap his knee, rolling her Milky Way eyes.

"Well, obviously," Georgia said. "All love has to die, right?"

Death hesitated, his mouth twisting to the side. "There are many deaths with love, but they're not always bad. There's the death of expectations; necessary for any thriving love. There's the death of pride, of selfishness, of envy." His eyes met hers and softened. "There's the death of who you thought you were going to be."

She took a deep breath. When she fell in love with Gabe in high school, who was she? Who was he? The Gabe she fell in love with was the Gabe she sat beside in senior year English class, who stayed up until the early hours sending her goofy jokes on instant messenger and whose hands shook when he put her corsage on at prom. The one who followed her to college, who felt unfulfilled in every job he tried, who grew angrier each time he failed while Georgia succeeded. Over the years, Georgia had to shrink and contort and fold herself to fit inside Gabe's heart. By making herself smaller, she made herself 'not enough' for him.

No, she was not the person she was when she fell in love with Gabe. By letting that love go, she transformed into so much *more*.

Listening to his widow's speech, Georgia realized the same happened to Gabe. A calmness washed over Georgia. "It's true. The person I was with Gabe left when he did. Is that a bad thing?"

"It is not good or bad. It just *is*," Love said, placing a soft hand on Georgia's forearm. Goosebumps traveled up and down her body as Love leaned over and whispered, "Go easy on your mother, Georgia. She was just trying to protect you."

Georgia nodded. "Another form of love."

The three of them sat together on that bench, their faces illuminated by the vibrant streaks of orange and pink that painted the sky, the sun disappearing below the horizon. It wasn't long after that Death and Love stood up from their spots, their hands intertwined. Georgia watched them stroll down the hill, watched for as long as she could before their figures disappeared into the distance.

Soon, the church and trees transformed into shadowy silhouettes against the darkening sky. The leaves and grass and gravestones were washed in a dusky haze. Love's words echoed in Georgia's mind. *It's not good or bad. It just is.*

With newfound lightness, Georgia rose up from the bench, no longer afraid, no longer hiding. She felt finally ready to embrace the promise of what comes next.

Paige Gardner is a lover of all things fiction. She enjoys writing novels, short stories, and flash fiction. Paige grew up in a small town outside Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and currently lives in Europe with her husband. When Paige is not writing, she loves teaching English to adults, exploring and traveling through her new home in Europe, enjoying a drink with close friends, and laughing. Her work is published in Dandelion Revolution Press's anthologies, *Not Quite As You Were Told*, *The Secrets We Keep* and *Every Breath Alight*. She's not sure how you came across her story, but she's glad you did. You can find more of her writing on [Substack](#) or at paigegardnerwrites.com.

The Subway *by Ashini J. Desai*

14th Street

An empty seat on the E! You dive onto the gray bench and squeeze beside the tall, blond European tourists. They peer at you through sharply styled specs with icy blue eyes like drops of antifreeze. They give you space, as you make yourself smaller in gratitude. They pause for a moment before resuming their staccato conversation. It's 7:35 on Monday morning and you are thankful not to stand. The doors close. You take a deep breath, inhaling the jumble of scents – a clash of colognes, stale coffee, and general bodily aromas. Is it better than the musty, mechanical, and feral smells on the subway platform? It is debatable.

You let your black leather briefcase bag fall through your knees, allowing it to rest atop your white sneakers; you always leave heels under your desk in the office. The Commuter look of the 1990s. You hope any microbes and other bacteria thriving on the E train seats will not cling to your new suit (is there any color better than moonstone gray?) And if you have collected those microbes, maybe you can redirect them to fly onto the men who sit on the ledges around the CitiCorp building, sipping their blue and white cups of coffee, and leering at the women walking to work.

Penn Station... Times Square...

The European tourists rise to leave, and your body relaxes to a natural state. Is it time to get a manicure? Your classic color *Ballet Slippers* looks dull now. You must go at lunch tomorrow. You crave a new color, but you know you won't switch; you've found something that works for you. You aimlessly glance around the subway car. Ads for dermatologists and English lessons line the top row. The Brook Brothers-suited bodies firmly clutch the steel bars overhead, lest they topple on the Hilfiger-clad youths.

There is a young man in a black turtleneck and black jeans standing on the side. You can't see his face but know it's a moody artist from the West Village channeling James Dean. Doesn't matter what he looks like, your body releases an involuntary sigh. He's your type, but you know it'll never work. It never did.

Across from you now is a young Latina in an oversized red windbreaker and tight black jeans as she searches through her knapsack. With no makeup, except for the cherry lipstick, she looks young and vulnerable. Her black ponytail is slicked back so high and tight that you see blue lines at her temple. You notice the arresting similarity of her veins to the adjacent NYC subway map poster.

Through the cloudy windows across from you, you see a downtown train ramble by. You stare through the spaces and wonder about the passengers aboard the train going the other way. What have they seen on the side you're going to? What happened over there? What are they seeking on this end of the track? You lock a gaze briefly with the vacant eyes of an Indian man in an olive sweatshirt holding the overhead bar.

He watches you. He sways with the momentum.

You watch him ride away. Very surreal.

Now in the darkness of the tunnel, you catch a glimpse of your reflection. The fullness of your face, the one you knew so well, has diminished; your cheekbones protrude gently. Even in the dim shadowy reflection, your toasted brown lipstick glows brightly. Your hair lies flat against your head, so you run your fingers through it, mostly out of compulsion, knowing it won't make a difference given the humidity in the subway station.

You suddenly realize you have just a few moments to finish *The New York Times* Financial Section that you tucked into your bag this morning. You quickly scan and memorize the headlines, since they will come in handy for chats with the clients later. People are moving around and now there's a nondescript beige trench coat in front of you.

Suddenly, you have that charged feeling. Someone's watching you. A quick scan of the car reveals nothing unusual. Everyone in the car is occupied with their own business or has adopted the unfocused stare into oblivion. Does anyone care? When you glance above, you see a pair of black Ray-Bans staring down. Why do people wear shades underground? He doesn't look away. Not yet.

Now he does.

You put your head down to read your paper, but your mind is whirring, muddling the rows of words, making them incomprehensible. He's standing remarkably close to you. You notice the neatly pressed tan khakis, the uniform of the upwardly mobile.

You take a furtive glance at his face again. A goatee – must be a weekday broker, weekend beatnik. Or thinks he is.

The crowd jostles a bit and there's an open pole. The Beige Trench Coat with Tan Khakis releases his grip from the overhead bars and leans against a newly vacant pole, grounding himself against the jolts from the train. He tilts his head up to read the "Poetry in Motion" signboard. You know he's pretending, since he couldn't possibly read those tiny words with dark shades. Now that he stepped out of your personal space, you can get a better look at him. Miss Manners echoes in your ear, telling you not to stare. You hush her. You know you are allowed to stare. It's only considered bad manners if you are caught.

You spot his well-buffed black shoes. Did the shoeshine boys at Penn Station do it? Your speculation leads you to believe yes and that he would tip well only if someone were watching.

The train jerks forward and stops. You know there must be an F train in front. There always is. They announce, "There's an F train in front." Now you have the time to keep reading, though you're tempted to read the Arts and Entertainment section, find out what's playing at the Angelika this weekend. Not that you would go.

Seventh Avenue... Fifth Avenue...

Bodies line in anticipation on both sides of the doors. Some are eager to enter, while other are edging to leave. Unspoken words: My way is more important than yours, so move your body for me. The crowd herds itself out. You hear voices excusing themselves. But their pardons fall upon

ears plugged into headphones, into another time and space. You watch the rote choreography of commuters. The shuffles. The sidesteps. The jabs.

You notice a window on the left side with graffiti now that the space has cleared. The word “Amoeba” glows in white paint against the scuffed window.

You hate that word. Your heart starts hammering against your chest. Your eyes dart about the train. How did this appear on your train, your everyday train? Blank faces return your questioning glares.

Harsh memories manifest to appear in front of you. The Amoeba, they called you. “You have no shape just like an Amoeba” the boys yelled. The chanting, the crooning in the vicious singsong tune of schoolchildren – Amoeba, Amoeba.

“You’ll have to reproduce yourself” taunted the girls, turning into their tight huddles. Pages were torn from science books and scattered across your desk. Blobs were drawn on the board as you walked into classrooms. You would sit down and fight the tears, often putting your head down on your desk. Closing your eyes. Closing your ears. You sank deeper into isolation, into an abyss of loneliness. Until you finally decided to leave, seizing the power and courage back.

The recollection of the mockery becomes tangible. Your skin pricks with humiliation, and bitterness lies thickly on your tongue. You tug at your suit jacket for freedom.

You look around the train and see a dismembered throng—heads, arms, legs, and backs. Mouths open and close, releasing only indiscernible noise. Bodies encircle the vertical bar in the middle of the car. Naked hands grip the shiny metal, one on top of each other like ribbons circling a maypole. Clenched fingers, careful not to touch, grip the bar for support.

A bag brushes against your knees. On its way to the shoulder, a knapsack is about to graze your face. You save yourself by dipping your head to the side, a move mastered through muscle memory. You realize people are converging by the door.

You quickly stand up and brace yourself against the stream of bumps, as the train skids to a halt. You seize the steel bar over your head. The metal bar is warm. You must get off. Your legs must carry you off the train.

As you get closer to the window you see the lettering up close. It reads “Sheeba.” There’s no Amoeba.

You realize you must put the past behind you.

53rd and Lexington. Last stop in Manhattan.

You rush for the exit, but you can only go as fast as the slowest person in front of you. You see the longest escalator in the city; the heights are always daunting. But you don’t look up because it’s overwhelming. You look down at your feet as you take one step at a time.

Don’t look back either because it’s just as scary to see how far you’ve come.

The streams of people step off the escalators to merge into crowds, shuffling towards the exit doors. Once you step outside, the subterranean world will be left. The past, the hurt, the person you used to be—but you were *never* that person. That is who *they* thought you were. Now, you feel a little sorry for those people who never got to know the real you. And the betrayals are long gone.

The familiar New York City air hits your face. You take a deep breath to release the emotions your body has been holding. The time is now.

Ashini balances creative writing with a family and a technology career, given a BA in English and MS in Information Science. While she does not write for a living, she writes to live, especially coming from a family of writers and readers. Her work is published in Dandelion Revolution Press's anthologies, *Not Quite As You Were Told*, *The Secrets We Keep* and *Every Breath Alight*. Her poems have been published in anthologies *Cities*, *Overplay/Underdone*, as well as various literary journals. Her selected poems are found on AshiniPoetryBlogspot.com and on Instagram as @AshiniWrites.

Poetry



Growth by Niki McQueen

Second Bloom *by Yamini Pathak*

On her birthday, she filled a clay pot, a mix of mud and water that took on an opaque river color. A sand-colored pot, generous swell in its belly, which she could feel under her palms. Was it bewilderment or lostness or pleasure, this gentlest uncovering of ecstasies? Of earth and body? All afternoon, spring rains gushed into her upturned mouth. While the drops wept into the pot, in widening circles from the center, youth aged into silted *kanjeevaram*, a temple silk. The pilgrim and her peregrinations. Into the vessel she planted 3 transparent sprouts. Not beans, they were lotus saplings: they contained sleeping flowers.

Yamini Pathak is the author of chapbooks, [Atlas of Lost Places](#) (Milk and Cake Press) and [Breath Fire Water Song](#) (Ghost City Press). Nominated for Best New Poets by SWWIM and a finalist for Frontier Poetry's Global Poetry Prize, her poems have appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *Waxwing*, *Tupelo Quarterly* and other journals. She is a Dodge Foundation Poet in Schools, teaching artist for Arts By the People, and a poetry editor for Bull City Press. Yamini holds an MFA in Poetry from Antioch University, LA and has attended VONA, Community of Writers, Tin House, and Kenyon Review Writers Workshop. She's on Instagram @yathakpoet and on X(Twitter) @Yaminipathak.

Sapodilla – the soap apple seed speaks *by Anu Mahadev*

In the Gita, there is a verse that says that just as a person casts off his worn-out clothes, and puts on new ones, the soul takes on the form of a new material body after it discards the old dying one. It is eternal and indestructible. Just like the black, smooth, dicot ellipsoid seed of the sapota fruit. Like all ignorant fools, I was tempted by the exterior cover of the juicy fruit, and gave in to its sensory delights, discarding the essence of what created it. I spat out the unsuspecting seed into the ground, unaware that within it lay the cradle of the entire creation. As it germinated into a new sapling, a bush, a flowering tree bearing new fruit, I heard the muffled chant of that all-knowing seed, buried inside the flesh – know me, recognize me. Don't be taken in by false appearances. I am the truth, the real, the source, the light. From me emerges the brilliance of a thousand suns, the power to feed humanity, the energy, the force. Forget the external, the ephemeral. Hold me in your palm, close your fist. You will find what you seek.

An amalgam of a left-brained ex-engineer and a right-brained creative writer would be the best way to describe a lyrical storyteller like Anu Mahadev. Originally from India by way of Bahrain, Anu is a New Jersey-based poet, and a 2016 MFA in Poetry graduate from Drew University. At present, Anu is Poetry Editor for [The Wild Word](#), and was previously Editor-in-Chief for *Jaggery Lit*, and a Senior Editor for *The Woman Inc.* Her latest collection of poetry, [A Mouthful of Sky](#) was released in April 2022 by Get Fresh Books LLC. Her work has appeared in many literary journals and anthologies and is a 2023 alumna of the Kenyon Writers' Workshop. She can be found on Instagram @amahadev and X (Twitter) @AnuM920.

The Return *by Ashini J. Desai*

When the mermaid returned to the ocean's edge,
she beheld the openness, the foreverness.
She smiled at the perpetual dance of the lively white waves,
crested with sea green curls of foam,
spilling from the deep blue waters.

But she felt fearful.
She had legs now.
Would they know what to do?
She raised her right foot, and tenderly
set it upon the damp sand and the clear salt water
greeted her toes with a kiss.
The iciness was a shock –
pins speared themselves into her sole.

She would need to go deeper to find the warm pool
that lay in the heart of the ocean.
She inhaled deeply and leapt into the water.
The waves, with the force of mountains, pushed her backwards.
She gasped for air, her senses muffled; she flailed her limbs against the sand,
trying to clutch the waves for support.

She finally stood up.
Won't you obey, she asked her awkward and bungling feet.

She noticed silver and blue fish scales shine on her calves,
glistening under the sunlight.
She understood.
I had to let go of this part of me, but you didn't let me go.
You were always here, but inside me.
She beamed with joy.

She raised her arms and exhaled.
She dove into the ocean with a splash.

Ashini balances creative writing with a family and a technology career, given a BA in English and MS in Information Science. While she does not write for a living, she writes to live, especially coming from a family of writers and readers. Her work is published in Dandelion Revolution Press's anthologies, *Not Quite As You Were Told*, *The Secrets We Keep* and *Every Breath Alight*. Her poems have been published in anthologies *Cities*, *Overplay/Underdone*, as well as various literary journals. Her selected poems are found on AshiniPoetryBlogspot.com and on Instagram as @AshiniWrites.

Creative Nonfiction



Swansong by Niki McQueen

De-portation Day *by Natalya Bucuy*

The white spotlight shines from the fixture in the ceiling and makes me the star, which I am, as two nurses and a doctor crowd around me. Sterile barriers surround the center stage—the area just below my collarbone.

There, last July, eight months ago, a little plastic piece with a tube for a tail went into my body. Sewn in place under the skin, the chemotherapy port provided easy access to my bloodstream. We went on an adventure, this craft gadget look-alike and me. Today, it is coming out.

“Look at your Bob Ross socks!” Nurse Smurf-Head says. She gave that name to herself, referring to the giant head bump her bunned hair created under her blue surgical cap.

“A gift from my boyfriend,” I say. “I will think of happy little trees as I lie here.”

I lie underneath a plastic barrier in the operating room. The nurse called it “a tent.” I search the corners of my mind for a campfire joke but can’t find a good one. Making jokes is my favorite defense against feelings. I mention aloud that if there is a fire and the sprinklers come on, I’ll stay dry under my tent. I should just lie here and be scared. Nurse Smurf-Head will forever carry that name in my mind. I don’t want to stay as the Girl-With-Annoying-Jokes in hers. The Girl-with-Bob-Ross-Socks is fine.

Speaking of socks...

I mended a sock this morning. I figured I’d extend its life with a little love, care, and a gray thread, if only for a couple more wears. While I can’t feel the poking of the sharp needle the surgeon is moving along the edges of my numbed skin, I can feel the vibration from the medical thread. I feel like the gray sock. Being mended.

I close my eyes, growing weary from the lights and the action. The heart monitor beeps, and beeps, and beeps, the sound of me, alive. I’ve heard many hospital beeps over the past year. For cancer patients in active treatment, life happens between beeps.

A persistent, sharp timer sounds at the end of a medication infusion cycle. It starts the countdown to the aftermath side effects—three hours, maybe four. The ding of the elevator that always goes to the same floor, week after week. The warning sounds of a snowplow backing up in the hospital parking lot as the white powder crunches underfoot—a snowstorm means nothing to the treatment schedule.

As the journey from diagnosis to the last doctor’s visit moves through unfamiliar landscapes, details like the beeps, sights, sounds, and smells hop into the cozy coach cars of the memory. I take them along to recovery and beyond.

The exact Bayern blue shade of a truck parked in front of me. After a nurse called with the results of the biopsy at 4:48 pm on a Thursday (do they save the bad news for the end of the day?), I stopped driving to breathe, cry, and call my dad. The color of that truck will forever serve as a thumbtack of that moment in time.

Smells are the strongest memory keepers. The chemo room has a distinct scent of sterility and medication, with a hint of despair. It tickles a newcomer's nostrils, offering a first glimpse into the new world. It agitates a seasoned patient, foreshadowing what's to come. It stops existing toward the end of the treatment cycle as if one gives a damn at that point. On a return follow-up visit, it hits as a surprise, a strange nostalgia dancing in the fumes.

And I can't forget Henry's shoes. Henry, a man in his seventies, showed up to his radiation treatments early. So early that he would always be in his seat in the waiting room already when I came rushing for my appointment, which was scheduled before his. Every day, as I ran into the locker room, I saw Henry's shoes peeking from around the corner where he sat. Once changed, I joined Henry in the waiting room, and we engaged in our daily conversation about the weather, the parking situation, or the silliness of the television show that happened to be playing. Henry told me about his childhood in New Orleans, the rural farm he bought in the sixties, and his career as a theater set designer. I only got to speak to him for two minutes each day before I had to face the terrifying metal teeth of the radiation machine moving above me. Every morning, I looked for his shoes peeking from behind the wall, a sight of comfort.

On my last day of chemo, a few weeks before Christmas, I brought a December cactus for the room. I hoped the pink flowers offered some light to all those who came after me. I knew well that at times when we felt broken, remembering the light felt like an impossible task. Pink flowers are exactly what we need in the midst of dark December.

The hard things in life gift us the ability to look at our weakest moments and see our incredible strength. And when we can't, perhaps a pair of shoes from behind the corner or the beeping of your own heart can carry us through.

"Happy De-portation Day!" Nurse Smurf-Head smiles as she wheels me out of the operating room. I'm kind of mad I didn't think of that one.

I leave the hospital with a fresh bandage where a piece of plastic used to protrude from under my skin. Yellow daffodils sprinkle bright colors across the black mulch of the gardens along the hospital walls, swaying in the breeze. A Russian superstition says that yellow flowers signify departure. My love for yellow flowers always led me to dismiss the old saying. Today, I welcome it. The daffodils honor my goodbye to this place. Their blossoms stand strong atop delicate stems, celebrating their own growth from a dormant bulb, through the soil and towards the light. "We've survived the winter!" they sing.

"Yes, we did," I say.

Natalya is a Siberian human. She was born at the top of the world and after moving around a bit, she has settled in Bucks County, amidst Pennsylvania's rolling green hills, inspiring art scene, and never-boring seasons. She's been a writer since the day she was born but did not truly write until Journalism school. (Temple Univ proud!) Over the years, she has dipped into various forms of writing and publishing. Her short stories have been published in Dandelion Revolution Press's anthologies, *Not Quite As You Were Told* and *Every Breath Alight*. Natalya's one rule in life is to say "yes" to new experiences since she believes they sculpt the inspiration for good writing. Non-fiction and memoirs bring her joy in life! Her website is nowwehaveastory.com.

The Sock Factory Incident *by Meg Groff*

After graduating from high school, I swore off any more schooling. I thought graduating from high school was accomplishment enough when it came to a formal education, and given how many classes I had cut, it really was an accomplishment. With classrooms finally behind me, I just wanted to get a job.

Unfortunately, my efforts to remain gainfully employed were markedly ineffectual, likely due to the fact that I had no marketable skills. But I kept trying, and was gradually constructing a résumé of short-lived, low-paying, joy-killing jobs for which I failed to show even a glimmer of ability. I was, for example, the worst waitress that ever lived. Not that I was sullen or inattentive. It was just that I could never remember who ordered what, didn't know one salad dressing from another, and could somehow trip over a smudge on the floor.

During one inexplicable spurt of ill-placed ambition, I applied to be a taxicab driver. It was a venture doomed from the start because it was years before the miracle of GPS, and saying I have a poor sense of direction is a colossal understatement. I am directionally dyslexic. Faced with a choice, I never fail to turn left when I should turn right, or vice-versa. Maps can't help me. They look to me like impenetrable mazes. Consequently, my career as a cab driver lasted exactly two days, both of which I spent getting hopelessly lost searching for my passengers' requested destinations. I still recall my last passenger, who sat patiently in the back seat as I drove down one road after another, looking in vain for any clue that would tell me where in the world we were going. When he finally fled from the cab, he gently suggested that I had not yet found my niche.

But nothing compared to my job at the sock factory.

I saw the Want Ad in the local newspaper, where a neighbor claimed it had appeared unflinchingly for sixteen years. I probably should have pondered whether this was a bad sign, but I was in need of employment and saw no reason to rush to judgment. Maybe they got a discounted rate for a lifetime ad. Was that any business of mine?

I went to the factory and filled out an application. For my previous work experience, I put down "varied." The boss raised an eyebrow at this. When he got to the part that asked why I wanted the job and saw my eloquent answer ("I'm virtually penniless"), he looked reassured and hired me on the spot.

He took me to the top floor of the three-story building, where, in a gray, cavernous room, the sock-making machines were making socks. The machines were large, ominous contraptions, crashing and bellowing and drilling out the most unattractive socks I had ever seen. The socks were white and stubby, with a tight band of elastic at the top. It was the day-shift, and the women employees all looked hunch-backed and in their late sixties. Each woman was in charge of a long line of machines, and went trudging up and down her line, turning the socks inside-out and trimming and stacking them. Bins beneath each machine caught the socks as they plopped out, and the women leaned over and grabbed them as they landed. Their hunches made the leaning seem almost effortless. It was all very tidy.

After one day of instruction and supervision on the day-shift, I was sent to work the graveyard shift from 10:00 p.m. until 6:00 a.m. There were only three people on that shift, despite room for

many more, and we were a motley crew. Two of us –a middle-aged co-worker named Bonny and I -- had the task of trimming, folding, and stacking the socks as they coughed out of the formidable sock-making machines. Bonny and I, by coincidence, had applied for the job on the same day, so we were inexperienced together. The third worker, an eighteen-year-old boy, was supposed to keep the machines in a semblance of repair.

The teenaged mechanic was a slacker. He spent his nights in the basement, reading girly magazines or sleeping on a pile of rejected socks. We rarely saw him. Bonny was in the late stages of depression, so her name did not suit her much. Her work-record was spotty. She showed up only two or three nights a week and started crying about ten minutes into the shift. She was usually still crying when the bell rang for us to leave. She managed to combine working and weeping with a certain desperate flair.

Bonny and I each ran a row of twenty machines. The machines looked like hulking life-forms, with huge spools of cotton and elastic protruding from their torsos in sundry places. The slightest breeze could influence the tension on the threads, causing them to break, so despite the oppressive heat of summer we had to keep all the windows closed. The air was thick with lint and dense with humidity.

Each machine made a complete sock every 58 seconds. Each sock had to be turned inside out, trimmed at three places where the threads hung loose, and then folded and stacked into piles of two dozen. Each pile of two dozen socks had to be tied together with a string. Eight of those piles then had to be bundled securely with a rope, carried to a chute, and dropped through to an unseen place below. I often wondered, as I watched the bundles disappear, my hours of mindless toil plummeting forever out of sight, exactly where they went. I never did find out.

It was a harrowing job in many ways. The machines were dangerous, unbearably noisy, unceasingly productive. We had to lean over them periodically to add new spools of thread, and we heard horror-stories about people losing fingers. The factory was a fire-trap. The building, an old converted barn, stood by itself at the end of a dusty dirt road on the outskirts of town. There wasn't a tree in sight. It was summertime and sizzling. But I was getting good at the job. I showed genuine promise, for a beginner, and the boss commended me on a number of occasions when he arrived with the dayshift at 6:00 a.m.

My only real problem was the cigarette habit I had at the time.

We were not allowed to smoke in the building. With all the lint in the air, a lit match might have set the place ablaze. To smoke a cigarette, you had to leave the building. To leave the building, you had to dash down three flights of stairs and out the door. It wasn't the exercise I minded. It was the sock machines.

The sock machines could only be turned off at a certain cycle in their performance, or they would break. For all their imposing bulk, they were fragile (we were told) and broke easily. Each machine reached that cycle at a different time, and it took at least fifteen minutes to turn all of them off. There was an emergency switch, hidden away somewhere in the manager's locked office, but neither Bonny nor I had access to it. So, the machines had to be left on, had to be churning out socks, had to be plopping them into their little bins every 58 seconds, while I ran down three flights of stairs and out of the building, smoked my cigarette, and ran back up.

It was not something one did idly.

No matter how rapidly the cigarette was inhaled, the socks always accumulated beyond all reason. But I was an addict and found it impossible to get through the long night without the comfort of at least one cigarette. I timed that cigarette to the minute, mid-way through the shift, and I spent half the night ruminating about the pleasure it would bring me. The night was thus broken up into two four-hour periods, with a cigarette in the middle, and the thought of that cigarette, the sweet promise of it, like a carrot before a donkey, kept my spirits alive.

Every night I took my cherished cigarette break, and every night I had a pile of untrimmed, unfolded, un-stacked (and unattractive) white socks waiting for me when I returned. A brief moment of bliss, and then reality. It took the afterglow out of that cigarette, you can believe.

The socks had to be dealt with, and there was no time to do it. I might have been inclined to stuff them in a trashcan or hurl them down the devouring chute, but management had a way of accounting for every sock (or so they said). So, I did the only thing I could do, under the dire circumstances. I stuffed them in my pocketbook and in my clothes, sneaking out bloated with socks every morning at the shift's end. At home, I trimmed and folded and stacked, and I smuggled them back every night, in my pocketbook and in my clothes. I looked suspiciously malformed, both coming and going, but every sock was accounted for, and my lifesaving cigarette got to be smoked.

I had everything down to a system, and the boss was satisfied with my work. He even commented that I had a future with the factory, which was a frightening thought. But on one very hot, very humid summer night, my future came to a sudden end.

The shift began uneventfully. I punched my time-card at exactly 10:00 p.m. (I am a punctual person) and climbed the creaky stairs to the third floor. I did this clumsily, because underneath my shirt I was loaded with contraband socks, all neatly trimmed and folded. Bonny wasn't there that night, as was often the case. I was always relieved when she didn't come. Crying upsets me. One by one I turned on my row of twenty machines, while the mechanic made his way to the cellar, some *Hustler* magazines under his arm. It was a night like all other nights at the sock factory.

Now that I was alone, I quickly removed the socks from my pocketbook and from my plaid shirt, letting the shirt-tails hang loose, and began the tedious task of walking endlessly up and down my aisle, lifting the limp socks from the bins as they landed, trimming, and folding and piling.

I reached over a machine to change a spool of thread, a motion I had completed many times, when my shirt-tail got caught in its teeth. In an instant, I was sucked up against the clanking monster as it ripped past two buttons and came to a sudden impasse at my body. As I crashed into the machine, my small trimming scissors flew from my hand, landing out of reach on the floor. I tried desperately to rip myself loose, but I was held fast. The huge needle continued to pound up and down, inches from my rib cage.

I didn't know what to do. I was ensnarled in such a fashion that I couldn't reach the machine's turn-off switch, and I knew the mechanic would never hear my shouts above the iron racket. He was in the basement, four flights below me, enveloped in adolescent fantasies. I struggled in vain to free myself, frantically observing that the machines were each methodically spitting out ugly

white socks at the rate of one every 58 seconds. The bins filled quickly and began to overflow. I watched the scene helplessly, impaled to my machine. My prayers for the heroic return of the phantom mechanic went unanswered. Time passed, horribly. At last, I understood that there was only one thing I could do. I unbuttoned the remainder of my shirt, disentangling myself from it carefully, and jumped out of the way as it was snatched by the sock machine.

I never wore a bra to work because of the intense heat, so there I stood, nude from the waist up, surveying the situation. Socks were everywhere. They seemed to be cloning on the floor. The machines were undaunted; they pressed on. It would take at least fifteen minutes to turn them all off. The mechanic *might* return (all things are possible), and if he did, I would be standing there, like a three-dimensional girly picture. Naked on the job.

I hesitated another minute. Nineteen more socks plopped out nineteen machines. I looked one last time at the machine that had eaten my shirt. A strange, plaid-colored mass was seeping slowly from its orifice. "*Don't look back!*" I thought to myself, as I fled down the three flights of stairs and raced out the door to my car.

Six and a half hours later, when the morning shift arrived, I was long gone.

My mother called me the next day to bug me about going to college. It was her practice to do this approximately once a week. "If you don't get a higher education," she warned, "you'll be working in sock factories all your life." Suspecting that such employment was no longer available to me, I applied to college immediately. And then to law school.

I never looked back.

Meg Groff is a family law attorney and life-long hippie. Her memoir about the early years of her long career representing victims of domestic violence, children, and the poor (working title: *Not If I Can Help It*) is scheduled for publication in February 2025. Two of Meg's children's stories have been published in *Highlights for Children Magazine* and a story about one of her legal cases is in the January 2024 edition of *After Dinner Conversations*. Meg lives with her husband, a retired carpenter and leather craftsman, and their very good dog. Their daughter, Ruth Groff (the brains of the family), is an Associate Professor of Political Science at St. Louis University.

Under a Fire Sky: A Creation Myth *by Catie Jarvis*

In the beginning, there was neither non-existence nor existence. There was no sky, nor the real of space beyond it. What stirred? Where? Under whose protection? Was there (celestial) water, deep and mysterious?

-Nasadiya Sukta (Hymn of non-Eternity, origin of universe) Rig Veda 10, Hymn 129

Dear Sky,

Before there was you, there was nothingness. Your nothingness and mine – remnants of that vast emptiness before the beginning of “time.” I was not Mother, and you were not Child. I had lost pieces of my family, my father, and sister, my wholeness. I felt like an orb cycling alone. But the universe swirls with beautiful chaos seeking to organize and cohere. What began 4.6 billion years ago with the formation of our universe, remains in motion. Right now. Within me. And you. Creation. From a single cell. Which became quickly two, and then four. The heat builds. The dust particles and gas collide and explode. I want to tell you the story of our creation, our mythical separation, from one into two.

September 8, 2020, 2:11 AM

It has begun. This long night is tinged brown with summer fire. California burning. Your father sleeps peacefully naked in our heat wave bedroom on 2nd Street in Santa Monica. I’m timing contractions in the dark kitchen. Eating cinnamon granola cereal with almond milk. Sweating in front of a beige stand-up fan. The contractions are long but mild, inconsistent, and far apart. When each one lets up, you kick and squirm as if you share my excitement. I step out on the alleyway balcony and gaze up at the rusty brown waning gibbous. *Come soon, Sky. I can’t wait to meet you. Can you hear me?*

September 8, 10:00 AM

I’m crawling around our apartment on all fours in a baggy Nike t-shirt of your father’s, attempting to get you to rotate. You are sunny side up. I want to offer us the easiest path.

As I crawl, I smell the earthy scent of forest fires consuming the dry life around us. On CNN there are videos of forests aflame in Los Angeles, houses burning to the ground. Then, back to the more pressing news. More than 28 million people have been infected with Coronavirus worldwide. Trump is “undermining public confidence” in the vaccine. I mute the news because I’m tired of the death toll, the interviews with exhausted doctors, and the list of ever-changing precautionary measures. The burning.

I remember the words of the renowned Los Angeles birth worker goddess, Doula Patti: “Auspicious souls are growing inside of you,” she said to our Zoom pregnancy group. “They are blooming into being in this time of change, bringing forth the energy of the future.” She seemed so sure.

But isn’t it just bad luck to be pregnant during a pandemic? Isn’t it simply sad to bring a fresh soul into this decay? Wasn’t she only trying to make us feel better?

The word auspicious feels too ethereal, or convenient. Mystical, pre-ordained.

I ask you: *What does it mean to come to life in a burning world? A pandemic? A country spinning dissension and hate?*

Quiet, you say. We will talk about that later.

September 9, 12:00 PM

Your father and I walk slowly, endlessly, around the block, to the ocean bluffs, and back to our apartment. We are still in the opening act, it seems, and this feels too slow a start to our story.

Your father has gentle sex with me from behind, it feels slippery, pleasant, odd. I eat dates and pineapple. We walk again. The contractions hit like a wall of cramps in my center. They squeeze and I must stop walking, lean over, and squeeze back. Call and response. I know the pain will eventually get much worse, but I'm not afraid of that. I'm afraid of other things.

I'm afraid of being forced into medical situations I don't want for us. I'm afraid that your father will test positive for COVID and not be allowed in our birth room. That our doula, Amy, won't be allowed because of the ever-revolving pandemic restrictions. I'm afraid that I won't know how to be a mother.

More afraid that I'll never get to try. That our planetary forces will not be strong enough, will not have the perfect components, to burst you forth into existence.

September 10, 12:00 AM

I know that I won't sleep tonight. I crouch in the dark, holding the bed frame, my head on the mattress. The contractions come and go, they don't seem to be letting up. Still, I decide not to wake your father. Doula Amy says to let him rest because I will need his strength in the hours and days to come. I am not resentful, only impatient.

They say it will be worth it when I meet you.

On my phone, I look up the word auspicious. I find that it originates from the Latin, *auspex*, which means "bird seer." It refers to oracle types in Ancient Rome who would watch the patterns of the birds and from them make prophecies about what was to come.

I like the simplicity of consulting the birds in the sky. *My mother's nickname for me is Bird and you are Sky. Perhaps you are an auspicious soul after all.*

With the next contraction, I let out a deep unintentional howl. At the peak of the thing, there is no thinking, only feeling. When it subsides, I whimper like a puppy, like a sick child. I long for my Mommy, who is across the country in New Jersey, too afraid of the virus to travel to be with me. She watches the news all day and waits for something to change.

My scream has woken your father. "What can I do?" he asks.

"Nothing," I moan, but this is a lie. "Squeeze my hips," I tell him. "Cut me up some fruit. Water. I need water. Stay up with me."

The pain is deep, momentarily unbearable. Teaching me of its strength and perseverance, until I come to know it.

"Should I start timing?" your father asks.

He opens the app he has downloaded and tested. We have a system in no time.

I say, "Start." Some moaning ensues. I say, "Stop."

I sweat, the heat within me building like a supernova gearing up for an explosion. Your father observes and enters data. The differing duties of men and women in creation starkly contrast. I used to think it was "unjust," but I'm beginning to see differently. His steadiness and clarity are needed, as I prepare to enter this portal of change. His hands upon me are the banks that hold the river, so that it may flow. I feel only gratitude that you, Sky, have called me forth to enter.

3:00 AM

A wise woman walks through our apartment door, she has long straight straw-colored hair, big teeth, and warm-wide eyes. Doula Amy is a midwife and a nurse. She has pulled children forth from the womb. She examines me on our king-sized bed, under the painting of your father and me surfing in Hawaii. I'm six centimeters dilated, and one hundred percent effaced.

"Wonderful progress," Doula Amy says, her voice calm and clear. "You are doing everything right." She mothers me as I work my way towards motherhood.

Your father puts on my labor playlist and lights candles. I lay on the couch, on my side, and Doula Amy squeezes my hips and rubs my sacrum when the pain swells within. I breathe in her knowing, her connection to the realm of birth. It fills me.

"We are in the land of Active Labor!" Doula Amy assures me.

I think of the phases of the earth's formation and the stages of labor. Early labor, like Differentiation, sets the stage, the preparation. Active Labor, like Cratering, that tumultuous aftermath of the "big bang." Transition like Flooding, water vapor, and lava rushing forth. And finally, Birth – the baby brought forth into the world to grow, like the long Surface Evolution, a forever changing landscape.

As I move through the pain, I imagine all the women who have birthed before me. Their massive energy pulls me through each contraction to the other side.

Do you feel this pressure too? This pain? The adrenalin of transformation?

As morning nears, Doula Amy prepares us to leave for the hospital so that we'll arrive before shift change.

5:00 AM

We drive down dark and empty Santa Monica streets. A dusting of ash covers the parked cars, but the dry heat has finally broken. I wonder what the earth smelled like in its early years, I'm sure I can't conceive of that molten acrid scent. On this morning of your birth, the air through the

window is smoky and cool. It reminds me of the early dusks of childhood, camping in upstate New York every fall.

A contraction comes on hard as we turn onto Santa Monica Boulevard. I hate this sitting position in the car, the pressure all bearing down. I cry out like a dying animal in the night. The sound frightens your father. But to me, it feels right. Death and birth are so united, I can see it now. They are both ultimate forms of transformation.

I remember an old fear I had of my water breaking in the car and ruining the leather seats. I laugh. I remember fearing the screams of labor, embarrassed by who might hear them. These are not things I care about anymore. Bring on the water, the wild calls of birth!

“Are you still sure of the natural birth?” your father asks.

I nod. From here on out, I never doubt us, Sky.

I think of my mom’s birth story. When her water breaks and my dad gets a stomachache. She rushes him off the toilet and then into the car. She screams at him when he stops at a red light. “Don’t stop! She’s coming!” Her scream is warranted, for I came out only one hour after they arrived at the hospital!

My water hasn’t broken. Your father and I stop at red lights.

5:15 AM

We arrive at the Maternity Ward entrance in our N95 masks. I walk slowly now; you are so low and heavy.

A bold lady at the door says, “Only one birth person may accompany you in,” annoyed as if I should already know this. “Partner or Doula. You choose,” she says and seems to smirk.

“This morning,” I stutter, “Dr. B told me this morning that doulas were officially allowed into birthing rooms at St. Johns!”

“You must have heard her wrong, Ma’am.”

I grab at my stomach, out of pain and indignation. I shout at her, “Where is your empathy?” and wonder if this is the beginning of everything going wrong.

But when we enter the Maternity Ward, everything feels right. It’s calmly dim and quiet. The nurses in their bright pink garbs are gathered around the front desk expecting me, they know my name. They ask where Doula Amy is. They are expecting her too. They call down to explain the revised COVID policy to the woman at the front door. They tell me that I look too peaceful and joyful to be six centimeters dilated. They make me feel seen and strong.

With so much death filling the hospitals, I can sense how the energy of birth excites the nurses, excites the very air. This is the balance our world creates.

5:30 AM

A red-fire sun rises magnificently through the birthing room window. I feel like we are on another planet, Arrakis or Hyperion, in a future time, a dream. I look around to locate a cross or a creepy crucified Jesus. St. John's is a Catholic hospital, so I'd anticipated religious symbols and decided I would take them down or cover them up. I didn't want other people's religions imposed on me, on us, in our moment of birth. To my surprise, I find no crosses in this room, only a large photograph of a blooming white lotus in a pristine pond.

The lotus is a symbol I feel comfortable around, one of purity, enlightenment, and rebirth. The lotus rises from dark muddied waters into the light, and blooms to pristine beauty. It is your story, baby Sky, our story, all of our stories.

Beside the bed, there is a clear plastic bassinet. Where they will place you. It seems impossible that on this day, in this room, you will come to be.

5:45 AM

Things get "hospitably" right away and I'm longing for my peaceful living room, for a time when birth was not clinical. And yet, I am so grateful to be cared for with modern medicine, for the privilege of birth in this private hospital room. The dichotomies of the world.

We take our Covid tests and pass. A huge relief.

The hospital requires I get a hep lock, and when the nurse administers it, she blows my vein out. It swells, an immediate giant bubble and spreading bruise. I think it looks like a small planet forming on my arm, rather the opposite of a Crater. It hurts. The nurse apologizes profusely but I don't have the energy to forgive her.

They put an uncomfortable baby heart monitor around my belly. It's wireless so I can move around, but I don't want it there. Doula Amy fidgets with it because it keeps sliding off the correct spot as I move around. Once, I slap her hand when she goes to adjust it.

"Sorry," Doula Amy says. "But we don't want them coming in to bother you about an irregular heartbeat."

I imagine women at the beginning of time, birthing in nature, the dirt beneath their writhing bodies, under the blue of the sky. I close my eyes to find them and be with them.

The contractions are full now. This is Transition. I have long wondered about this mysterious and magnificent pain that pushes a human from the inside, out. A big one comes on like a wave. I can feel it on the horizon. I throw my face mask to the floor. *I will not be laboring in a mask. Let them try and make me!*

The wave moves closer, and I have no choice but to catch it. So, I paddle to the best position, set up on my board, and power through the rising wall of water the best I can.

THE RISE feels like cramping and a deep pain in the pit of the pelvis. I stand up off the yoga ball, sturdy my feet to the earth, lean forward onto the bed, and make sure that someone has me. Doula Amy is near, I look at her and nod.

THE PEAK comes on like a strike of lightning. It's take-your-breath-away pain. It's hard to contextualize. I jumped into ice-cold water at the Ithaca Gorges during college in the spring. That took my breath away. This is like that, and much more. It's like jumping into a gorge of pain. The most excruciating pain I've known before this was shattering my right heel bone. This pain has the same strength but instead of destruction, it vibrates with creation. The pain feels right instead of wrong.

I sigh a deep low "ahhh" that reverberates in the depths of my belly. Moaning the pain down and out. The moaning helps me to soften, and open. I relax, against my instinct, for tensing makes me feel like I am fighting the pain, and I am not here to fight with you, my Sky. I'm here to let you in. The peak of the wave lasts twenty to thirty seconds.

THE FALL lowers me gently down. I'm still submerged but the seas have calmed. There's an aftershock, as your father rubs my back and I pant and shudder. Then, an elation. One more passed. One step closer. I emerge, sip water. Breathe. Talk. Smile. Look out at that blazing red sun, the cars passing through the LA morning streets having their regular days as my life prepares to so drastically change. I lay my head down and close my eyes for a rest. My contractions are still generously spaced, seven or eight minutes in between. These minutes of reprieve are essential.

The hours pass this way. Your father, Doula Amy, and me. Dr. B has yet to arrive. I'm waiting and wondering why she has not come. Wondering how much longer it will all go on.

Your father texts relatives awaiting news of your arrival. I sneak bites of a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and granola bars, though eating in the hospital is "forbidden." The food gives me strength. I lean on a rocking chair and rock it back and forth with my hands while a particularly hard contraction comes on. Some water trickles down my leg but not very much. I wonder if this is my water breaking. It's not at all like the movies.

8:00AM

My doctor finally arrives.

"You're looking great, and so happy!" She tells me before even examining me.

I make her wait until right after a contraction to give me an exam so that I don't have one unexpectedly while lying flat on my back on the bed, which sounds dreadful.

I'm almost eight centimeters dilated, head position zero, one hundred percent effaced.

"I'll be back at Noon!" Dr. B says, as if this is the most wonderful news.

My heart drops.

I thought you were going to come fast. Like I did.

I've already been here, doing this, for three hours. To labor for four more seems an eternity. I feel like I've failed in some way.

Why haven't I opened? Why aren't you here? I've been trying so hard?

Think of the Universe. You say. Think of laboring for millions of years.

12:00 PM

Dr. B returns to find that my water sac is still intact. It must only have punctured, rather than burst, hence the trickle. She reaches in with a hook to break the water, and my primal waters flow. I feel the warm clear liquid spread beneath me on the bed, and like the mythological earth-diver, I long to plunge into the depths of this water and rise with the primordial sand which will create a world where you lay healthy and safe in my arms.

I think of how Mother Earth must have felt when her waters burst forth with life.

I wonder how she must have felt when some of her creations evolved into men with creation envy, who wrote their tales of how it was a singular male God who had created the world and then pulled woman from the rib of a man. How obvious a power play, a turn of truths.

"The contractions will get stronger now that your water has broken," Dr. B says. "This will be the hard part."

She leaves. I cry with pain, joy, anticipation. Your father and Doula Amy hold me.

1:00 PM

You drive down. At the peak of each contraction, I have the urge to push, it's so hard to hold back. But Dr. B says that I'm only nine centimeters dilated. "If you push now, you're going to rip. Don't push yet. You need to wait."

This is the worst news. This next hour is the worst part of our labor.

The contractions come more closely now. I can no longer relax into them for if I do, I know that I will push you out. So, I must resist your pressing down. I must hold you in. The pain of this is unbearable. Like holding in a lightning storm, the bolts explode inside.

I scream "Noooooo...", one long sound that lasts the entirety of the contraction peak. I'm determined not to tear, not to let you out too soon, but I don't know if I can control it.

"She wants to come now," I whisper to Doula Amy. "Will you stay close; in case I can't stop her?"

"I'm here," she says. "If she needs to come, let her. I've got you."

Doula Amy has her catching hands ready as I scream, and grab my vagina with both hands as if this may help to hold you in.

I've never done anything as hard as withstanding the next half hour. *Oh, how I want to push you out. But we must both be ready. I fight for our perfect timing.*

"Do you want another exam?" Dr. B asks, finally.

I scream, "Yes! She is coming! Now!"

“Fully dilated. Let’s have a baby.”

2:25 PM

There is labor. There is everything that came before. Then there is birth. Me pushing you out of my body and into your particular and unique existence. Your induction to life.

It happens fast. Dr. B and the nurses take off in a frenzied cyclone of tasks. A well-perfected costume change. Suddenly, they stand before me in full scrubs, with shiny metal trays and supplies neatly arranged. People are holding my legs, nurses, Doula Amy, and your father. It’s like they all knew where to go, but that can’t be right. No, I can see that Dr. B is conducting her seamless orchestra. She beats a strong pulse with her baton, and I trust her. Doula Amy got me through the labor and now it’s the doctor’s moment. I feel lucky to have two trusted women, two mothers, to guide you out of me and into the world.

“Push out your baby,” Dr. B says.

This is the best thing that anyone has ever said to me!

I push with all the pent-up might that’s been building inside of me. A monstrous push. Your father holds my hand along with my leg. I squeeze him tightly as I bear down. The same way my mother squeezed my father’s hand when I was being born. My dad said it hurt for days. He said it was worth it.

I scream. A classic heart-wrenching pregnancy scream. My eyes are closed, I go to a place of darkness. A deep, hot, vibrant place. I could stay here. Embedded with sensation. But then, the contraction is over. It is only then that I realize that you didn’t simply fly out of me. That I’ll have to keep doing this pushing until you do.

I open my eyes, my heart speeds up, and I think it may explode. The doctor rubs oil on me as a lubricant to prevent tearing. It feels like she’s rubbing sandpaper on a fresh fiery wound.

Another contraction, already! They are close now and I’m ecstatic. This is the finale. I engage my core and squeeze every muscle in my body. I start to scream again but Dr. B interrupts me.

“Try to put the energy into the push instead of the scream,” she coaches.

I don’t know if I can do this, but I try. I focus my energy on my abdomen, I give it all my strength. It does help. I feel focused and strong. I get in a series of good deep pushes before the contraction ends.

“What does it feel like?” your father asks.

Another contraction comes on so fast I can hardly think to answer, I eke out, “I don’t know.”

I push. I push.

“Oh my god, she has so much hair,” your father says.

He pulls his phone out of his pocket, and I swat it down violently, flinging it across the room. I thought he was going to text someone and tell them I was pushing the baby out. And I'm so annoyed by this. I can't believe he is going to look at his phone right now.

"I thought you said I could take pictures," he says, meekly, as he releases my leg momentarily to pick up his phone.

"Oh yeah, I did. Go ahead," I say with a laugh that turns to a cry, and then back.

We have one picture of your head emerging out of me, and I'm so grateful for this picture.

I push. I push.

"Feel her head," Dr. B says.

I reach down and there you are. The sensation of you jolts, almost scaring me. Your head is so soft, like a peach gone past ripe. The crown of it is stuck there in my blooming vagina. So warm and slimy.

"So much hair," your father says.

"Why do you keep saying that?" I yell.

He laughs. He is giddy with excitement to meet you.

"Deep breath," Dr. B says. "Now push!"

I push from a place that feels cosmic, the universe itself. I push with the strength of all the women who came before to build our world. Waves of energy and sensation wash over me. My eyes are squeezed so tightly closed; I am covered in a powerful inner darkness.

"Open your eyes," Dr. B says. "Look!"

It takes me a moment to comprehend her directions, I'm so far inside. I pry my eyes open, and they fill with light as I witness your arrival.

Dr. B reaches in and twists out your shoulders in this graceful and fast maneuver. There you are. Out of me, all at once.

I don't recall hearing you cry, but your father says you let out one perfect call into being.

You are so human, so slimy, your features are big, dark, and perfect. You have slate blue baby eyes and so much dark hair!

They place you on my chest. You breathe air and see the blur of light and shape, all for the first time. This new world must feel strange upon your skin. I thought you would be screaming, writhing, scared. But you lay so quietly, calmly upon me. I am still your home. You trust me. You know me. I don't yet know you, but I know that you will teach me to.

I don't cry in these first moments as I expected to, but rather chant through fractured breaths, "Oh my god. Oh my god." I have never had a god, but you invoke this word from my lips. As I gaze down at you, I tremble — a wild, hot, shaking. The moment of Earth's creation.

2:41 PM

You are born under a fire, Sky. Smokey brown haze and a deep red sun hanging like a foreign star on the horizon. You are born in an unprecedented time: global pandemic, racial unrest, the most abysmal governing body our generation has seen. You are born on a Thursday in September, a Virgo like your mom.

Your vernix body lays upon me, miraculously earthside as your father cuts the cord to disconnect us, that last pulsing of our shared blood come and gone. You find your way to my nipple for the new sustenance that I have made you. Dr. B massages my stomach aggressively, to get the placenta moving, but it doesn't matter. Nothing matters but your warm body on mine. Your magical being.

Out the long glass window, the palm trees sway and the gulls and crows caw, heading out to sea for cleaner air, spreading the word that the world must change, making way.

Your omen.

I know, at once, that you are nothing like the burning world.

I know the secret — that mothers, collectively, are the creators. It seems so obvious now, that *this* is the creation story, this very moment. Every birth is the story of how the world came to be. And how the world continues to be, despite it all.

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In A Different Life *by Sarena Tien*

The cashier says something to me. I freeze as I try to process the words, but she spoke too quickly for my rudimentary language skills. Unlike with English and French, no one ever assumes that I'm not a native speaker of the language.

"I don't speak Cantonese," I finally say in English, as if admitting a terrible truth.

"Oh," the cashier says, switching to English with an ease that I envy. "Do you need a plastic bag?"

"No thank you," I say as I hand over the money, feeling even more like a tourist as I pull the bills out of one of several red envelopes of money that I'd received from my mom's family and friends.

It's been nine years. Hong Kong hasn't changed, but I have. The last time I was here, I was twenty, still in college, with a brother and a father.

Despite my awkward interaction with the cashier, I'm grateful for the language barrier. Nobody asks what it's like to be an unmoored sister without a brother, and I can't confess that I'm relieved to be a daughter without a father.

But these losses aren't visible, so in a way, I've been frozen in time with the city. Everyone thinks I'm the same age I was when I last visited. My mom's friends all exclaim in Cantonese, "So tall!" upon seeing me, giving me whatever the opposite of a Napoleon complex is—until they ask how old I am and are shocked to hear I'm not 17, 18, or 19. I don't know if they think it's typical for teenagers to be a year away from graduating with a PhD.

The day after my mom and I arrived in Hong Kong, we went to visit my grandparents. I munched on snacks and texted my friends back home while my mom caught up with her parents in-person instead of over the phone. At some point, I gathered that they were talking about me, because to my mom's family, I've always been *mui mui* or "little sister" in Cantonese. This time, though, the label felt like a lie creeping across my skin. I've spent more than two-thirds of my life as a little sister, but I've since aged past how old my brother was when he passed away. *Mui mui* is an identity lost to time, buried with my brother in a cemetery in Virginia.

I didn't know exactly what my grandparents were saying about me until my grandfather pulled out a photo album from beneath the coffee table. My mom, laughing, turned to me and said, "Gung gung said you is not look like 29."

I scowled. It was like I'd somehow managed to de-age even though my cheeks have lost their baby fat and I wear glasses permanently now. They're no longer just a shield from when I'd forgotten to put them on one day at work and a bald old man had told me that I had really pretty eyes—I can't see faraway words and faces and details without them.

Still, it's strange, getting a glimpse of what life could've been if I'd been born here. As my mom's family and friends pay for everything—food, clothes, public transportation, and even gifts for my own friends back home in the US—I quickly learn to stop pointing at various foods and asking what they are because my oldest aunt immediately buys them for me. She only somewhat

assuages my guilt when she tells me in Mandarin, “Order whatever you want. America doesn’t have good food, right?”

If I’d grown up here in Hong Kong, I probably wouldn’t have had to worry about money. As the only girl among my brother and four cousins, I also would’ve been spoiled. My oldest aunt had already tried giving me several of her bracelets, only to mutter in bewilderment, “Why are you so small?” because I have child-sized wrists that defy one-size-fits-all jewelry.

But I don’t know if a life here in this bustling island city is one that I would’ve liked or even wanted. Sure, I wouldn’t have had to grow up second-generation or low-income, but without any of those foundational experiences, I have no idea if I’d be the same person today.

As an Asian American woman, the intersections of racism and sexism have shaped me in indelible ways. I move through life with a lot of rage and salt and distrust, which can be alternately energizing and exhausting. I’ve experienced violence that I wish I could forget. I’ve been called slurs, stalked, and fetishized by men who view me as an exotic land to colonize (“Once I had Japanese conquest”), by men who are old enough to be my father (“Asiatic girls, they have one feature. Face always looks young”), by men who have not been told “no” often enough (“You have a boyfriend? Can I give you my number?”). But I’ve also made lifelong friends who understand or share my anger, who are as constant and comforting as the weight of the watch on my wrist.

In Hong Kong, however, I wouldn’t even have known what a model minority or an Asian fetish were. I would’ve grown up surrounded by people who looked like me. In fact, as part of the majority, I would’ve benefited from racism. Worse, I might even have been complicit in perpetuating it. Hong Kong has a huge colorism endemic, exploiting Southeast Asian and Muslim women from countries like Indonesia and the Philippines as underpaid domestic workers and nannies.

The prejudice against dark-skinned Asians is so prolific that I’ve been nicknamed *xiǎo hēitóu*—literally, “little dark head,” or metaphorically, “little dark child” because I tan very easily. In the US, umbrellas are almost universally used for protection against the rain, but here in Hong Kong, women also use umbrellas as protection against the sun. When my aunts take my mom and me to Cheung Chau Island, they repeatedly ask, “Where’s your umbrella?” either unaware or unfazed by how annoying it is to have to balance or close an umbrella every time you want to take photos of the scenery. Eventually, I pull it out of my backpack, but only because it provides respite from a sun so relentless, half our lunch consists of ice cream. At the beach, I learn to sift through the sand one-handed, pocketing porcelain, shells, and sea glass in my swim shorts.

If only languages were as easy to stash away. My mom accompanies me to the hair salon to serve as my translator, only to have the hairdresser ask, “Why doesn’t she speak Cantonese? Is her father American?” People who didn’t grow up as second-generation immigrants can’t imagine life in a colonial country where maintained monolingualism is used as an assimilation strategy, where people of color are shamed for speaking a language that isn’t the dominant tongue. When I was little, my “l”s sounded like “n”s, and today, words like “linoleum” and “colonialism” are still tongue twisters despite the fact that I’d long ago abandoned my mother tongue for a pristine American English, unsullied by bilingualism and stripped of an accent’s musicality. Mandarin became a lingering legacy, and Cantonese wasn’t even in the picture, as my father didn’t speak it.

Had I been fluent in Cantonese and English, I wonder if I'd ever have turned to French. In Hong Kong, nobody would've asked where I was *really* from, much less attempted to flirt with me by guessing my ethnicity. Or maybe, given that Hong Kong had been a British colony, choosing to learn French still would've been an act of resistance against learning English as my country's colonial language.

At the Hong Kong Palace Museum, I stand next to my mom, trying to look as innocent as possible while the lady at the ticket window glances between me and my Cornell student ID. According to the sign, full-time students can get discounted tickets, but nothing specifies whether international or graduate students are included in that category.

"She studies in America," my mom volunteers.

I don't say anything—partly because I don't know how to say "yes" in Cantonese, partly because any Cantonese I do say would give me away as a foreigner—and instead, offer a disarming smile, hoping the fact that everyone has so far mistaken me for an eighteen-year-old works in my favor.

It does. The lady nods, handing my ID back to my mom and prints out discounted tickets for both of us, one for a student and one for a senior.

While my mom didn't technically lie, a half-truth was also the only explanation she could offer. She could've said that I was American, which is true according to my passport, but that clarification excludes the other half of my identity, the part of me that doesn't know the English names for certain vegetables and dishes, the part of me that America tries so viscerally to render invisible while paradoxically subjecting to hypervisibility.

As my mom and I head toward the museum's entrance, I fiddle with the bracelet around my wrist. Even though I resemble the majority of Hong Kong's population, I don't fit in here either, and that's okay. My oldest aunt had already given up trying to find a bracelet that didn't fall off my hand and had instead handed me jade beads and elastic string so that I could make my own.

Sarena Tien is a queer Chinese American writer and feminist. Once upon a time, she used to be so shy that two teachers once argued whether she was a "low talker" or "no talker," but she's since learned how to scream. Her poetry and prose have appeared in publications such as *Bustle*, *The Rumpus*, *Snarl*, and *Sylvia*, as well as anthologies such as *Decoded Pride*, *Good for Her*, and *The Secrets We Keep*. She holds a PhD in French Literature from Cornell University. She is on X (Twitter) @sarenete and Instagram @featheredhopes.